

## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SPATIAL PRACTICES OF THE FEMALE LAHU VENDORS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the social networks and other types of tactics of negotiation utilized by the female Lahu vendors in order to survive in their situation as ‘mobile’ Lahu. In the process of carrying out their selling activities, as well as during their mobility, Lahu female vendors face different levels of power. At the marketplace, they belong to an informal sector which is based on individual work, and experience little state control or social welfare; they are vulnerable in the markets in urban Chiang Mai, as they are a minority<sup>69</sup> in terms of ethnicity, as well as the contestation for power, they do not own any selling space, and some of them do not even have Thai citizenship. The power relations that exist between the female vendors and other individuals, households, ethnic groups and the nation state, sometimes mean that control is imposed over them. In such situations, they depend a lot on their social networks in order to survive at the marketplace and succeed in their business, as well as to maintain their households.

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<sup>69</sup>At the markets in urban Chiang Mai, except for at the Night Bazaar, northern Thai and Chinese traders are in the majority, while the highland ethnic minority traders are in the minority. Especially at Tonlamyai Market, most of the vendors selling agricultural produce are northern Thai women. Moreover, the number of northern Thai vendors is rather stable, since they regard vending as a regular occupation, while the female Lahu vendors’ lifestyle is much more dynamic, as many of them are temporary traders.

This chapter is divided up by the levels of relations that the female Lahuvendors experience, and which vary since they choose to form different kinds of connection with the others around them. First, I will focus on ties within the Lahu households. While most households of Lahu vendors consist of a nuclear family, ties among the households are fully utilized and they rely on relationships beyond the nuclear family household, due to the fact that they have to maintain the household. Second, ties among the female Lahu vendors will be explored. The Lahu ethnicity and identity is not commoditized directly for sales purposes, but is emphasized for networking purposes, in support of their commercial activity. Third, I will reveal the other connections they develop, those based on their status as traders and as mothers, and those shared between the Lahu vendors and other traders in the marketplace. The female Lahu vendors search out similarities between them and the other female traders from different ethnic backgrounds at the markets, and such notions of similarity also affect their production of social space. Lastly, the ways in which they are differentiated from other vendors will be examined. Their choices in terms of space, language and products are tactically implemented in order to connect with more customers and to maximize their income.

#### **4.2 Lahu Networks - Family, Kinship and Friends**

The household is the principal unit in terms of the social organization of a Lahu village (Walker 2003:106). A Lahu household used to consist of five to seven people covering several generations, as they obtained 89% of the labor they needed from within the household, in support of opium cultivation (Walker 1992:125). Nowadays, the number of household members and generations in the household has decreased to less than five members, with one or two generations

present<sup>70</sup>. Though a household may own large fields in which to cultivate, it is difficult for them to cultivate all as they do not have enough labor in the household, nor the money available to hire labor from other households. For instance, Na Ui (pseudonym-42 years old) cultivate ten *rais*<sup>71</sup> of paddy field, though her household also has a field on the hill, but she does not cultivate that field since she does not have enough labor available.

#### 4.2.1 Support from the Husbands

Female Lahu vendors, especially the temporary vendors, rely on their family and relatives to take care of the house and family members while they work in urban Chiang Mai. If there is no one to take care of the family members and house, as well as their livelihood, the trader cannot go to Chiang Mai to sell. As a result, the husband is the main person who supports the vendor in taking care of the household while she is away from home. However, it is not easy for the husband to take care of small children alone. For instance, Na Nu (pseudonym-19 years old) from Village E in Maesuai District, Chiang Rai, has a daughter who is one and a half years old. She tried to work at Tonlamyai Market several times, leaving her husband to take care of their daughter. However, she found it difficult to let her husband take care of her daughter alone, and she has not been to Chiang Mai for vending again since her daughter became sick once in July 2009. In another instance, when Na Hpui had her first child, it became difficult for her to trade in Chiang Mai. After the first child had been weaned, Na Hpui went to trade in Chiang Mai and let her mother, Na Yaw, take care of the child while Na Hpui's husband mainly worked in the fields and occasionally went

<sup>70</sup> Among the 24 Lahu female vendors whom I interviewed, more than half of them have households constituted of only two family members (husband and wife). Although many of them have children who have not yet married, they live outside the home for study purposes.

<sup>71</sup> 1 *rai* = 1,600 m<sup>2</sup>

to work in urban Chiang Mai. Since the second child was born last year, Na Hpui has again taken care of the children at home, while Na Yaw goes to trade in Chiang Mai. Na Hpui wants her mother to take care of her children once the second child has been weaned.

Some vendors also find it difficult to come and trade because they have to take care of their crops and livestock at home. Normally, when the households raise livestock such as buffaloes, the husband is the one to take care of them in the field or forest over several days. In these situations, if there is no one to take care of the house while he is away, it is the task of the females to do the housework. Na Hkalaw's household raises five buffaloes in a field a long way from their house. She has been able to trade in Chiang Mai over a long period, because her son stays at home while her husband works in the field. In April, which is the time when they prepare their field for maize cultivation, Na Hkalaw trades at Tonlamyai Market, while her husband and son take responsibility for preparing the field.

The husband's support is also important for vending. The female Lahu vendors usually undertake all the tasks, from collecting or buying the products to selling at the market in Chiang Mai city. While they are selling, some of the husbands take care of the fields and the houses, and some work as wage labor in the urban areas on occasion<sup>72</sup>. When they are available, the husbands will help the female vendors to collect forest products. Na Hkalaw's husband, as well as Na Bon (pseudonym-30 years old), collect bracken and bamboo caterpillars for her to sell at Tonlamyai Market.

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<sup>72</sup> Working as wage labor is practiced particularly among men who do not have children to take care of and are free from farming.

In Lahu households, housework, as well as childcare, is the task not only of the women but also of the men. The Lahu vendors are able to rely on their husbands to do the housework, since in Lahu society they do not have a negative view of men doing the housework (Du 2000).

#### 4.2.2 Support from other Members of the Family

Selling at the local markets in urban Chiang Mai has recently expanded among the Lahu Na women from five villages in Thako Sub-district, Maesuai District, as well as one village in Mae Yao Sub-district, Mueang District in Chiang Rai Province. There are also some vendors working there from Doi Saket, Saraphi and Phrao, plus Mueang District in Chiang Mai Province. Such an expansion can be attributed to two networks: kinship ties and friendship networks (see Figure 4.1). In terms of kinship ties, an introduction of vending among the Lahu women tends to flow from the old to the young. Lahu vendors in the age range 19 to 30 start this work having been introduced to it by their mother; though it is not only passed down from mother to daughter, but also from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, as well as from aunt to niece. Several cases below reveal such connections:

##### *Case 1: Introduction from aunt-in-law to niece-in-law*

Na Va now lives in Doi Saket and started selling at Tonlamiyai Market about twenty years ago, when she lived in Village D. Among the Lahu Na women, she was the first vendor at the markets in Chiang Mai. Na Yi (pseudonym-died 50 years old), who lived in Village C, a neighboring village to Village D, was one of the women motivated by the actions of Na Va, and she was the daughter of Na Va's husband's older sister.

(Based on a personal interview: January 2010)

##### *Case 2: Introduction from mother to daughter and granddaughter*

Na Yaw, living in Village C, is one of the women introduced to this occupation by Na Yi. She has been a vendor for ten years now, and Na Hpui, her third daughter, started to trade with Na Yaw after Na Hpui and her family started to live with Na Yaw four years ago.

Na Ga (pseudonym-36 years old), Na Yaw's second daughter, started selling two years ago. She was also introduced to it by Na Yaw. She migrated from Burma eight years ago and now lives near Na Yaw's house in Village C. Her daughter, who is married and lives in Village B, which is located in the same sub-district, went with Na Ga to Chiang Mai in order to start selling in February 2010, deciding to trade since "it's boring to stay at home".

(Based on a personal interview: September 2009 and February 2010)

*Case 3: Introduction from mother to daughter*

Na Nu has been a vendor for seven years, since she started to help her mother at Tonlamyai Market. Now she is married but still lives with her mother. Her mother is too old to sell now, so Na Nu goes to sell at the market by herself; sometimes with her husband and daughter.

(Based on a personal interview: July 2009)

*Case 4: Introduction from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law*

Na Hkalaw is from Village Ain Mueang District, Chiang Rai, and has five sons. One of them now lives in Saraphi, in Chiang Mai. His wife, Na Bon started selling at Tonlamyai Market after being motivated to do so by Na Hkalaw. Each time Na Hkalaw sells, she stays at Tonlamyai Market for more than a month. Na Bon used to work at a factory during the day and then went to trade in the afternoon, to about nine p.m., though she went back home every night. However, she then changed her job from being a factory worker to a wage-laborer, digging holes with her husband. She still goes to trade at the market when she is not working. However, it is one year since Na Hkalaw traded; she does not trade anymore because first she was busy taking care of the field at home and more recently has decided to go to work in Bangkok with her sister.

(Based on personal interview: April 2008 and January 2010)

Support from other members of the kinship group is also important for the Lahu vendors. Unlike the permanent vendors who have a regular income, like Na Va, and spend little on transportation, like Na Fa, the temporary vendors find it difficult to save money for their transportation expenses or for building up capital for their next selling. The income which vendors receive from selling is used to pay their household debts and the children's school expenses. After paying their expenses, the vendors seldom have much left to save for the expenses they will incur when vending the next time. When Na Ha arrived at Tonlamyai Market to sell hill rice for the first time, she did not have enough money for transportation from Village E, where she lives, to



Chiang Mai. When she arrived in Chiang Mai with twelve sacks<sup>73</sup> of hill rice, she asked her daughter, Ma Ta (pseudonym-29 years old), who lives in a village in DoiSaket, to pay the 720 baht transportation fee.

The case of Na Ha, borrowing money from her daughter in Chiang Mai, is rare among the temporary vendors. Most of them seldom receive economic support from their relatives, and so have to rely on their relations with store owners and friends in the village in order to accumulate the capital required to sell. For instance, Na Yaw does not have any relatives in Village C, so she normally borrows small amounts of money from her friend - for transportation and capital accumulation purposes, in order to buy products. Moreover, when she and her family members do not have enough money, they buy goods for both their daily use and the agricultural chemicals they need, from a store, on credit. She is a friend of the store owner in the village and Na Yaw is trusted by the owner, as she pays her debts as soon as she earns enough cash. Being trusted by the store owner is important for Na Yaw, so that her family members can buy on credit again.

When undertaking their vending activity in the markets in urban Chiang Mai, they help each other to sell products in cases where products have been left behind but the seller has decided to go home. One time, Na Ga arrived at the market several days earlier than Na Yaw, then, when Na Ga decided to go home, she entrusted several sacks of hill rice to Na Yaw. Although Na Yaw has her own rice, she sold Na Ga's and gave her the income, without asking for any reward. Similar to

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<sup>73</sup> One sack contains 60 liters. In this case she brought 360 liters.

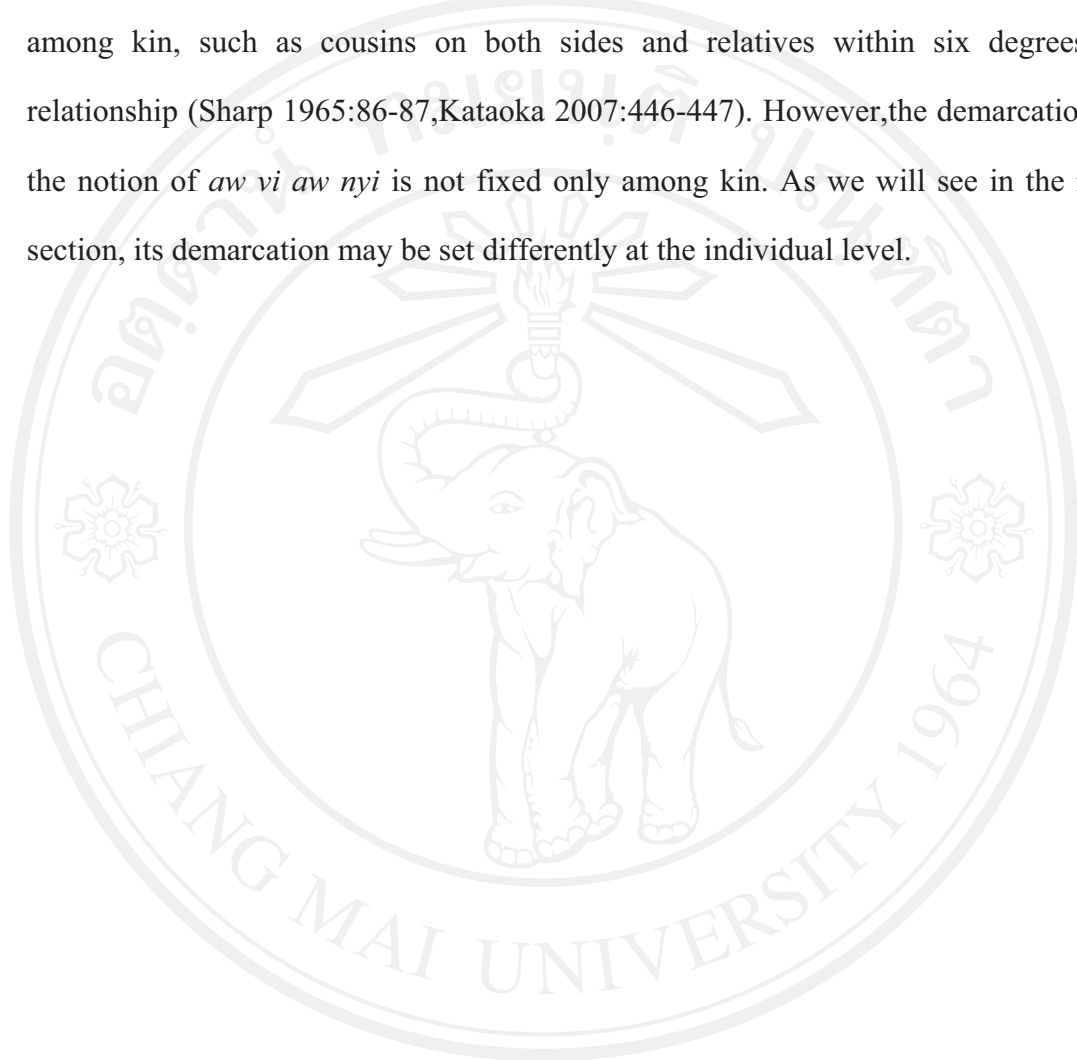
the case of Na Ha's daughter and her transportation fees, the Lahu vendors' kinship relations are based on mutual help, from which they do not expect a reward.

Some female Lahu vendors feel the impacts of state control throughout their everyday lives. One Lahu vendor from Chiang Rai holds a hill tribe ID card. Every time she leaves her village for Chiang Mai to sell, she has to get permission from her district to stay there for a month, and then has to carry the document with her at all times. For a Lahu vendor who does not have the full legal status to stay in Thailand, there is no legal way to move from one place to another. Another vendor moved from Burma eight years ago and does not have Thai citizenship or a hill tribe ID card, and because of this, it is very risky for her to leave her district. She mentioned to me that she cannot do anything, because she does not have legal status to stay in Thailand and has to rely on her mother and sister to support her family. She has received another type of help from her sister to overcome her statelessness problem. In order to earn cash income for her daily expenses, as well as the school expenses for her children, she borrows her sister's ID card (Thai citizen card) to go to Chiang Mai city to sell. She has used her sister's ID card three times and the income generated has been used to help with her children's school expenses and to help refurbish her house, as well as with her daily expenses. She is also earning cash to help her get her own ID card.

Such kinship relationships are a Lahu custom, one which Sharp (1965:86) refers to as an "unusual kinship system". Kin relations among the Lahu are different from other Tibeto-Burman speaking groups, as they "lack any kind of corporate group based on descent; instead, their kinship category takes a loosely-organized bilateral form" (Kataoka 2007:457). This relationship is called '*aw vi aw nyi*', which



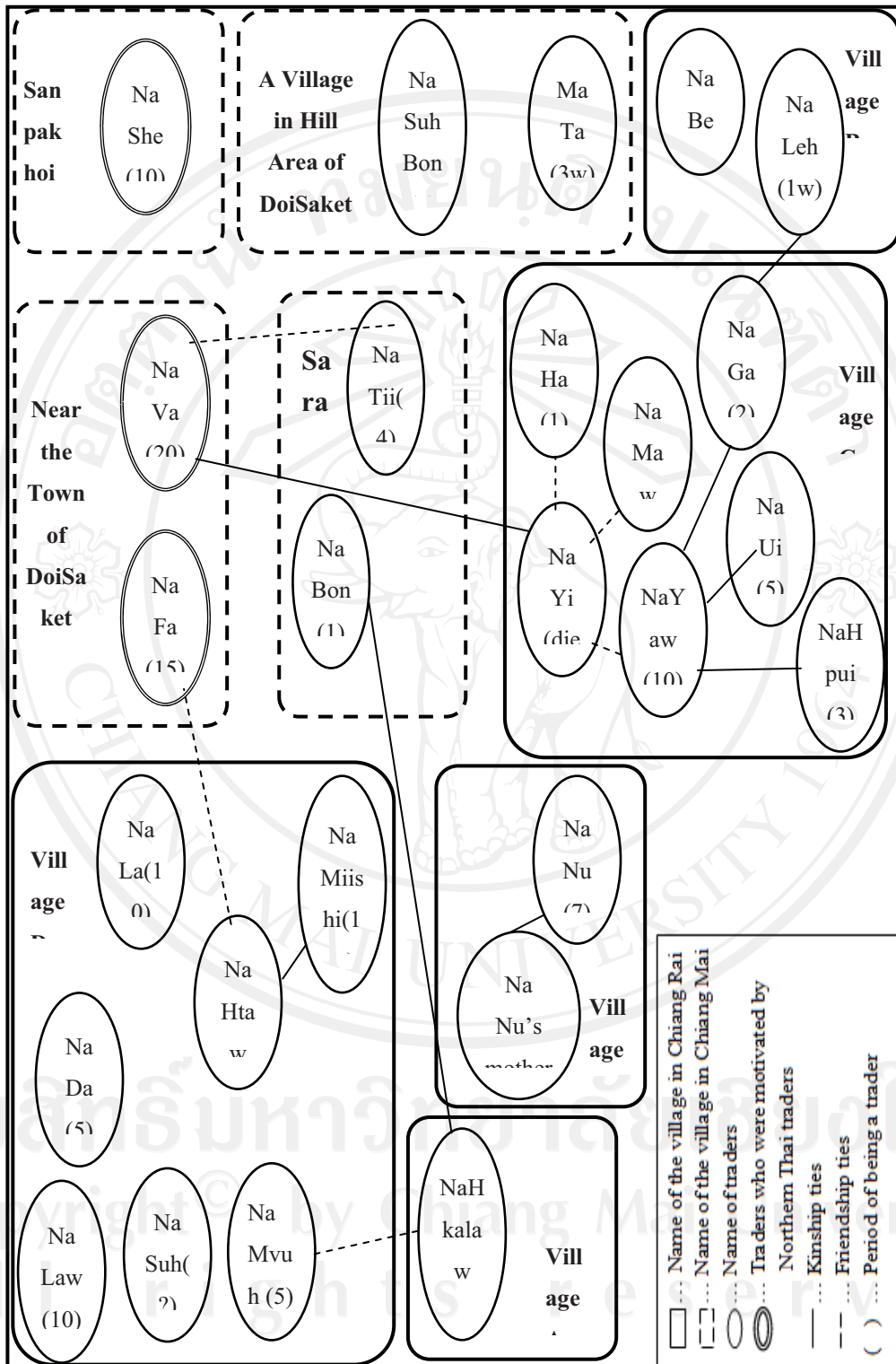
is a term commonly used by the Lahu. This term literally means ‘elder kin and younger kin’, denoting the mutual relationship not only among siblings but also among kin, such as cousins on both sides and relatives within six degrees of relationship (Sharp 1965:86-87, Kataoka 2007:446-447). However, the demarcation of the notion of *aw vi aw nyi* is not fixed only among kin. As we will see in the next section, its demarcation may be set differently at the individual level.



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**Figure 4.1: Social Networks among the Female Lahu Vendors in Terms of Introduction to the Occupation**

### 4.2.3 Ties among the Female Lahu Vendors

While kinship is an important network for the Lahu vendors, friendships are also utilized in terms of being introduced to vending activities among the Lahu women, and their vending activity may be expanded as a result of being introduced to those other than kin. If any friends are interested in selling, the vendors will invite them to do the same, without imposing any rules or criteria.

NaVa and Na Fa started vending by themselves, after they saw Lahu Shi and northern Thai traders selling. It seems that the Lahu Shi<sup>74</sup> was the first group among the Lahu to sell produce at Tonlamyai Market. When NaVa started vending, there were almost no Lahu Na vendors<sup>75</sup>, and when Na Fa started selling produce at Tonlamyai Market sixteen years ago, she also did not see any Lahu Na vendors, so she learnt what produce to sell, and how to sell it, from the other traders:

“At that time I saw the Lahu Shi selling hill rice, so I sold rice too. In the first week I sold hill rice which I had obtained from the Akha nearby my village (Village D). Later on, I saw northern Thais selling vegetables, so I followed them.”

(personal interview: October 2009)

Na Tii (pseudonym-50 years old) was motivated to trade by NaVa. They were friends when living in a village in Burma. After the two of them lost contact for more than ten years, they got to know each other again through villagers in Thailand.

<sup>74</sup> Here, I mean Lahu Shi rice traders. They trade only rice, including hill rice as well as wet rice cultivated at the village in Maesuai District, Chiang Rai. They can be found at Chin Ho Market and other occasional markets in Chiang Mai and other northern provinces. It is rare now to see Lahu Shi rice traders at Tonlamyai Market, and I saw them only once.

<sup>75</sup> Among 30 Lahu vendors whom I interviewed, Na Va is the oldest vendor, as she started vending about twenty years ago. Other vendors saw Na Va already selling at Tonlamyai Market, so they started selling also. However, Na Va saw no other Lahu Na vendors working, only Lahu Shi rice traders.

Na Tii also knew that Na Va sometimes went to sell at Tonlamyai Market from Village D. At that time, Na Tii had just left her job at a factory in Chiang Mai, since she was not comfortable with the time restrictions, so she then decided to trade like NaVain order to generate cash income, without being restricted by others. Now NaVahas already moved to DoiSaket and sells on a permanentbasis, along with Na Tii.

In some cases, Lahu Na vendors introduce this way of life toother Lahu women whom they have met at the market, often for the first time. Na Hkalaw was introduced to the trade by Na Mvuh (pseudonym-50 years old) from Village D, when she went to Tonlamyai Market. Neither of them are related, nor were friends at that time, but being Lahu Na,which they realized when speaking Lahu, through the bagsthey were carrying (with a Lahu design),they then became friends.

More than 30 women have now experienced working as vendors in Chiang Mai city. Though vending is attractive for them, as they can start with a small amount of capital, suffer little risk andgain a good income, this does not mean that no one faces problems in this occupation. When they face hardships in terms of their trade, friendship ties are areliable network for the Lahu women to turn to.

The greatest difficulty which the Lahu vendors face in the marketplace is finding and holding on to a selling space. At Tonlamyai Market, there is no available space for the Lahu vendors to rent, since the market spaces on the side of the road have been all rented by northern Thai traders, including the Hmong traders. This is a problem for the temporary vendors, especially the newcomers who donot know the

patterns of availability in terms of space. Ma Ta revealed the hardship she encounters as follows:

“I have been here (Tonlamyai Market) for a week. My mom came here for the first time two weeks ago. It’s so difficult! We don’t have a certain space to sell. Whenever a trader who owns that space comes, we have to move to another place, so the sales are not good.”

(personal interview: January 2010)

The temporary nature of their stay at the market makes it difficult for the temporary vendors to establish good relationships with the northern Thai traders, the tenants of the spaces at Tonlamyai Market, and to check which trader will be absent on a given day so that they can occupy their space. When they cannot find any space, they depend on their Lahu friends maybe sharing a small space to sell with them. Although it is impossible to avoid competition among the Lahu vendors who share the limited space and who sell the same products, most of them prefer to share sales with their friends. They also entrust their products to Lahu friends for them to sell, if their kin are not available. At the same time, some Lahu permanent vendors are also entrusted with the products of northern Thai traders, and such mutual relationships can be seen when Lahu vendors need to leave the space they have occupied on a given day to go to Mueang Mai Market and Chin Ho Market to buy more produce to sell, to go to get produce that they have kept in the lower ground space, or even to go and carry out their daily activities.

Security problems are another hardship suffered by the female Lahu vendors.

Since the lower ground space is free to enter and no one supervises it, it is risky for the Lahu vendors to leave their possessions in the space, unsupervised. Once, when Na Hkalaw was staying at Tonlamyai Market, she left her Lahu traditional dress on the

lower ground level, with other clothes and produce. She said that her traditional dress had been stolen, along with several T-shirts. Na Ha's daughter also told me that she and her mother have to be aware of theft, as sometimes people try to steal the hill rice kept on the lower ground level. Therefore, the Lahu vendors cooperate and share the same space, paying ten baht per day to keep their belongings, including produce, together. This reduces the risk of the items being stolen, since Lahu vendors go back and forth to pick up their possessions several times a day.

They also help each other out when they sleep on the pedestrian bridge between Tonlamyai and Warorot Markets. They never sleep alone, as they are afraid of violence or theft during the night. If a vendor sells all her produce during the day, she will wait for the other vendors to come back then sleep together with them. Sleeping as a group near the market makes them more secure.

Relying on friendships also occurs in the case of Lahu vendors who decide to look for an alternative job, after facing hardships while vending. Na La is a temporary vendor from Village D and a friend of Na Fa, who used to live there, but now lives in Doi Saket and trades at Tonlamyai Market on a permanent basis. When Na La came to trade at the market one time, there were more than ten Lahu vendors and her sales were not good. After that, Na Fa introduced Na La to a job planting rice for three days at a paddy field owned by a northern Thai in Doi Saket. They worked together and Na Fa invited Na La to stay at her house three days. Although Na La could not gain much cash income from vending, she was able to earn 2,000 baht from planting rice.



Among the various relationships that exist, mutual help, including the sharing of information, can be clearly seen among the Lahu women. Lahu vendors express such relations as “we are *aw vi aw nyi*”. As mentioned in the last section, this Lahu term basically indicates the mutual relations that exist among kin, though the definition of what constitutes ‘kin’ is very broad. The term has been expanded to imply mutual relationships with friends, and even the Lahu ethnic group as a whole; it all depends on the social context for each Lahu vendor. For example, it is difficult for some Lahu vendors to share the notion of mutual help with the Lahu Shi vendors working at the market. NaVa seems to differentiate herself from the Lahu Shi, and has a negative feeling towards them. When an old Lahu Shi woman, who begs, came to ask NaVa to exchange some coins into notes, I asked NaVa whether the old woman is Lahu Na, and she refuted this, saying “She is not Lahu Na. She is Lahu Shi”. For me, NaVa seemed to emphasize the difference between the Lahu Na and Lahu Shi, and it was rare to see NaVa communicate with or help the Lahu Shi traders. On the other hand, NaFa regards the Lahu Shi chestnut and rice traders as her friends. She introduced me to Lahu Shi traders at Chin Ho Market as her friends, and every time she goes to Chin Ho Market to buy vegetables, she talks with the Lahu Shi traders in a friendly manner. The fact that NaFa’s husband is Lahu Shi must be the cause of the difference in attitude towards this group between NaVa and NaFa.

Sharp (1965:87) also discusses the idea of *aw vi aw nyi*, saying “ideal sibling roles involve extraordinarily high standards of benevolent behavior demonstrating, in a wide variety of situations, “brotherly love”.” Such behavior is expected among Lahu friends, especially among the Lahu Na temporary vendors. Anyone who does not help the other vendors is criticized. Whilst I was there, several Lahu Na temporary vendors

complained about one Lahu Na permanent vendor who tends to occupy a large space on the road at the side of Tonlamyai Market, but does not share it with the other vendors.

It is interesting that Na Tii regards her fellow church members as her *aw vi aw nyi*, but her fellow Lahu vendors as *aw chaw* (friends in Lahu). Among the Lahu vendors I met, Na Bon is the only one who is a member of the same church as Na Tii, and Na Tii regards her as her *aw vi aw nyi*. They are thus ‘sisters’, as both are members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. While most Lahu Na vendors belong to the Baptist Christian organization, Na Tii and Na Bon belong to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Though she understands that the other Lahu vendors have the same ethnicity as her and she actually helps them in times of need, she does not recognize them as her *aw vi aw nyi* since they are not members of the same church as her<sup>76</sup>. Since many Lahu converted to Christianity in Burma, it “now carr(ies) overtones of the Christian concept of religious ‘brethren’, those sons who are brothers through sharing the parentage of a heavenly father” (Sharp 1965:89). Thus, Na Tii’s recognition of the notion of *aw vi aw nyi* in terms of Na Bon, is based on their religious affiliations<sup>77</sup>.

<sup>76</sup>For Na Tii, the people from whom she asks for help in times of need are not female Lahu vendors, but members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Once, she was not able to trade for more than three weeks, due to taking care of her daughter who had met with a bike accident. During the time she could not work, she did not receive any income, but still had to spend more than 10,000 baht for her daily and medical expenses. During such a hard time, her friends, who are neighbors in Saraphi, plus members of the same church, helped with her expenses.

<sup>77</sup> However, Na Tii differentiates Jehovah’s Witnesses from other Christian denominations. Although the Jehovah’s Witness faith is based on Christianity, she explained to me that it is not one of the Christian denominations. This is why she does not recognize the other Lahu vendors who are Christians as her *aw vi aw nyi*. However, she regards members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who are not Lahu as *aw vi aw nyi*.

To sum up, the notion of *aw vi aw nyiis* exercised by female Lahu vendors towards those upon whom they can rely in times of need, or those they have a mutual relationship with. Such a notion has no clear and fixed demarcation; rather, it is often expanded to include, not only kin, but also non-kin and even non-Lahu.

#### **4.3 Spatial Practices of the Female Lahu Vendors**

It is crucial for the female Lahu vendors to utilize connections with people other than the Lahu, in order to find selling space and survive in the marketplace, as well as in Thai society as a whole. The permanent Lahu vendors tend to have a secure space as they have a relationship with the northern Thai traders. NaVa always has a selling space, because she has developed a good relationship with three northern Thai traders from Doi Saket, not so far from her house. They come to the market in the early morning, around five a.m. and leave at two p.m. During that time, they allow NaVa to occupy a small space among them. After they leave, the space is largely occupied by NaVa and other permanent vendors who are also familiar with the northern Thai traders. Na Fa, another permanent vendor, comes to the market at nine a.m. and often has difficulty finding a space because she does not sleep at the market and available space tends to be occupied by other vendors early in the morning. Nevertheless, she has a greater chance to obtain a space than the temporary vendors, as she is able to utilize her connections with northern Thai traders, especially with Pa Phorn (pseudonym-60 years old), one of the northern Thai traders who sells mainly northern Thai produce at a favorable space among the Lahu vendors. Na Fa and the other permanent Lahu vendors sometimes ask her and the other northern Thai traders who sit together if they can occupy their space when they do not come to sell<sup>78</sup>. When

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<sup>78</sup> Lahu permanent vendors ask the northern Thai traders about the availability of space, in order to pay a rental fee earlier than the other vendors. Whoever pays the rental fee first, is able to

she does not have a space to sell, she firstly shares space with the other Lahu vendors and later occupies the space of a northern Thai trader.

The formal power relations that exist between a tenant and sub-tenant are less strong between Na Fa and the northern Thai traders. Their close relationship is based more on friendship and the notion of similarity in terms of being a mother. When the Lahu vendors sub-lease a space from the northern Thai traders, they pay them twenty baht per space per day. However Pa Phorn does not take a fee from Na Fa, saying:

“I often have to spend 200 baht on transportation. It’s a lot for me! But I don’t collect a fee for the selling space from her (meaning Na Fa who tends to use Pa Phorn’s space), as she also has to make money for her children.”  
(personal interview with Pa Phorn: January 2010)

Among the highland ethnic groups who engage in small-scale trade at Tonlamyai Market, there are not only Lahu but also Hmong and Akha who work as vendors. Na Yaw shares some sense of companionship with an Akha woman who used to sell bread at Tonlamyai Market during the mornings. Na Yaw used to buy bread from her, and told me that “she (Akha vendor) was a highlander (*khondoi*), the same as me. We helped each other.” One morning when I visited Na Yaw’s house in Village C, Na Yaw, Na Hpui and Na Yaw’s friend, who has also been a vendor, were talking about the cost of a wedding for a young couple, which had been organized at the village the day before, and other village matters. Then Na Yaw shared her news about the Akha bread seller, with tears in her eyes.

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occupy the space on that day. Although there is no formal legal agreement, she is able to tell the other vendors who come to occupy the space that she has already paid the rental fee, so has the right to occupy it.

“The Akha lady died on Friday. Before, she was not good in health and died. It’s such a pity for her daughter; that child is still so small. A northern Thai lady will take care of her. She (the daughter) was asking the northern Thai lady ‘where is my mom? Where is she?’ It’s such a pity...”

(small talk with Na Yaw: September 2009)

Such sympathy towards the Akha bread seller and her daughter is derived from the similar status that the Akha bread seller and Na Yaw shared; highland ethnic women with children and trading products in an urban setting, trying to raise a family.

Although power relations exist among the female Lahu vendors and other traders, the similar status that these two women shared as mothers taking care of children, led them to have more sympathy towards each other, and to offer mutual help. Mutual relationships derived from a similar status are not categorized as being among kin, friends or *aw vi aw nyi*; however, such relationships often give the Lahu vendors added security in their lives at the marketplace.

#### **4.4 Negotiation Tactics**

I have reviewed the kinship and friendship networks of both the Lahu and non-Lahu traders, those which give the Lahu vendors strong support. In addition, the female Lahu vendors also need to differentiate themselves from others using a number of tactics, in order to maximize their profits.

Being a temporary trader at the market as well as moving around to look for a selling space makes it difficult for the Lahu vendors to develop regular customers; therefore, they need to use other tactics in order to increase their sales. It is the differentiation of space, language and produce from the other traders.

Many Lahu vendors prefer to trade at Tonlamyai Market, as many customers pass by this market, the biggest local market in Chiang Mai. Its location, near to Mueang Mai and Chin Ho Markets also makes it easy for them to buy more produce when the sales are good. However, it is not easy for the female Lahu vendors to gain a space to sell at Tonlamyai Market, because availability is unsteady; on some days the Lahu vendors can pick and choose their space, and on other days there are only one or two spaces available for them to occupy. A lack of selling space at Tonlamyai Market also occurs when a lot of Lahu vendors come to sell at the market. On these days, they scatter all over the market to find a space. While the Lahu vendors mainly choose the side of Wichayanon Road to sell their produce, they also sell on the sidewalk next to, at the entrance to and inside Tonlamyai Market; in the area opposite Tonlamyai Market on Chang Moi Road, and in front of the Chinese temple at the back of Warorot Market. Although the area inside the market has less customers passing through, it is still better to sell there than not to sell anywhere. Those vendors with no space at Tonlamyai Market, and do not want to go to other markets, stay in the lower ground level, under Tonlamyai Market. However, some do choose to go to the other markets in Chiang Mai, such as Chang Phueak Market, Pratu Chiang Mai Market, Tonphayom Market and Sanpakhoi Market, using public transportation. However, it costs the vendors more to go to these other markets than when they stay at Tonlamyai Market and they have to carry their heavy produce with them. Nevertheless, some vendors prefer to go to the other markets rather than sell at a market crowded with Lahu vendors. For instance, for Na Law (pseudonym-43 years old), whenever she comes down from Village D to Chiang Mai, she chooses to go to markets other than Tonlamyai, because there are too many traders there. However, this decision is not always successful. One day during my research, Na Law and her



friend from the same village went to trade in front of Tonphayom Market. Even though Na Law paid 60 baht to go to Tonphayom Market by *song theaw*<sup>79</sup>, and stayed at the market from late morning until late afternoon, the sales there were not good, because there were not many customers passing by. Another day she went to the morning market, in front of Pratu Chiang Mai Market. She traded there among the northern Thai traders and her sales were better than at Tonphayom Market.

Although the Lahu vendors who prefer to stay at Tonlamyai Market tend to share their selling space, they do not vend at the Night Bazaar together. In contrast to the situation at Tonlamyai Market, where vendors sit and wait for customers, at the Night Bazaar they have to walk along the street to get customers, and here, their customers are mainly other traders, not tourists. At eight p.m., some Lahu vendors will start going to the Night Bazaar to sell there. If there are any problems selling at Tonlamyai Market, such as a lack of space, poor sales or rain, they leave there earlier than eight p.m. Some go alone and some share the five minute walk to the Night Bazaar together, with other Lahu vendors. When they arrive at the start of Chang Khlan Road, the Lahu vendors who have come together walk separately on different sidewalks, and if one vendor sees another selling on the sidewalk, she moves. For instance, when I accompanied Na Bon to sell at the Night Bazaar, she saw other Lahu vendors who had already arrived there, and were selling on the sidewalk, on the western side. As a result, she started selling from the sidewalk on the eastern side, then sold on the western side on the way back to Tonlamyai Market.

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<sup>79</sup> She paid a transportation fee three times as much as for one person, because she carried a basket of vegetables and a sack of hill rice.

Language is one tactic which the Lahu vendors use to differentiate themselves at the Night Bazaar. Na Tii, a permanent vendor, remembers which traders can communicate in Lahu or Burmese. For those traders at the Night Bazaar who can speak Lahu or Burmese, communicating in these languages is more comfortable than conversing in Thai. By communicating in Lahu and Burmese, the possibility that the customers will buy produce from Na Tii, and then become a regular customer, increases.

Another tactic used by the traders is the produce itself. Na Htaw is a temporary vendor from Village D, Chiang Rai. She usually comes to trade at Tonlamyai Market and at the Night Bazaar over a few days. While other vendors buy produce from Mueang Mai and Chin Ho Markets, she seldom buys from there. She brings produce and forest products from her home village, which are difficult to find in urban Chiang Mai. She has regular customers who are the Akhavendors at the Night Bazaar. When she makes chili powder blended with salt, dry chili and a kind of fruit<sup>80</sup> from the forest, she does not sell it at Tonlamyai Market during the daytime, but sells it to the Akhavendors at night. In addition, she often sells dry chili brought from home, and this is purchased, not only by the northern Thai customers, but also by the other highland ethnic groups, since dry chili grown in the highland is spicier than that grown in the lowlands. For Na Htaw, who does not go to other markets in Chiang Mai, it is a way to avoid competition with the other Lahu vendors, those who sell produce from Mueang Mai and Chin Ho Markets.

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<sup>80</sup>In Lahu, it is called 'si ma'.

Most Lahu vendors do not miss out on going to buy produce at Chin Ho Market on Tuesdays and Fridays. They know that the produce from Mueang Mai Market is similar to what the northern Thai traders sell. Chin Ho Market provides them with produce which has been planted in the highlands, is of a good price and good quality. Except for the period around Chinese New Year, vegetables at Chin Ho Market are usually cheaper than those at Mueang Mai Market. In order to differentiate themselves from the northern Thai traders, and also due to the demands of some customers, those who are from the highland ethnic groups, the Lahu vendors tend to choose to buy produce grown in the highlands or collected from the forests, such as chayote and gooseberries. It is important, especially for the permanent Lahu vendors, to obtain produce from Chin Ho Market, since they are seldom able to obtain forest products and produce from the highlands elsewhere. Customers from the highland ethnic groups tend to choose produce from the highlands, because they want to consume produce they are used to eating when they are at home, as in the case of the Akha vendors at the Night Bazaar (Pirote 2007). Customers who speak northern or central Thai like to buy produce which is rare in the lowlands and is seasonal, such as forest fruits, cherries, persimmons and hill rice. While I was at the market, there was one case in which a northern Thai customer asked a Lahu vendor whether or not her produce was organic or not, which may suggest that there is a notion among the lowland Thais that the produce the Lahu vendors sell is from the village and is organic; and therefore of a good quality. While the forest products which the Lahu vendors sell are organic, the produce they sell is not always from their home and not always organic. One vendor was asked whether the potatoes she sells are organic or not. She answered that they are organic, although she actually does not know, because she buys them from Mueang Mai Market. Another vendor told me that she sells ginger

which is of a low quality at the market in Chiang Mai, as she prefers to keep the ginger of a good quality behind, to plant for the next season. This shows the recognition among highlanders (*khondoi*) of the value lowland customers often put on produce from the highlands, and this means the Lahu vendors are keen to differentiate themselves from the northern Thai traders. Unlike the Akha vendors at the Night Bazaar, the Lahu vendors do not need to express their Lahu identity, since their customers do not care; they only care whether the produce is from the highlands or not.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

Since highland development policies were implemented by the Thai Government, and with the tourism boom in Chiang Mai in the 1950s, many highland ethnic groups have become involved in a variety of occupations in the urban areas of Chiang Mai, performing traditional dance at the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center (Tawit et al. 1997, Apinya 2008), selling handicrafts at the Night Bazaar and other tourist spots, as well as carrying out mostly low paid wage labor. Some types of work involve people from particular ethnic groups; soy milk sales are carried out by the Mien, massage services by the Lisu and sales of dried squid by the Akha, among others. Anyone can do these jobs and it does not strictly relate to their own culture, rather, it is related to their social networks - as one may be introduced to work by family, friends and neighbors<sup>81</sup>. After this, the work may then expand within a certain ethnic group. The case of the female Lahu vendors is not an exception. Social networks are important for the Lahu vendors, as these networks motivate them to

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<sup>81</sup> According to research by the Tribal Research Institute (1991:18-19), about 40% of the highland ethnic groups who come to work in urban Chiang Mai, are motivated by their family and relatives. This indicates that kinship ties are commonly utilized by highland ethnic groups in their decision to migrate to urban areas, as well as to work in the city.

become mobile and to connect with people at the markets, as well as in their villages. Like a spider's web, Lahu vendors utilize the social networks they have with different people on various levels, mixing several networks together to construct their space.

Social networks are important for the female Lahu vendors, as they do not normally organize into groups. The Lahu vendors are individual workers who do not have a formal group with regulations and a leader to utilize. Though they are connected by kinship and friendship ties, they are almost free to choose the time and date they decide to move between places, where to buy and sell, as well as what to sell. Na She (pseudonym-39 years old), a permanent vendor from the Wat Ket Sub-district in Chiang Mai Province, complained about the misunderstandings the Lahu have with the city police:

“When they (the Lahu female vendors) came down from the villages, the administrative official came to me and scolded me. The vendors don't understand Thai so they keep selling even though the officials tell them not to sell. So he says to me “why do you bring such a bunch of people?” The officials see me as their (the vendors') leader! The other day, they gathered the Lahu vendors together and made me translate for them; when not to sell and when it is ok. But they don't listen; they don't know anyway.”

(personal interview with Na She: October 2009)

She can speak fluent northern Thai and is one of the permanent vendors who sell from the afternoon until the night time. However, the Lahu do not recognize her as their leader, though it is easier for the officials to make her the leader of the Lahu vendors, in order to exercise control over them.

Even though the mobility of the Lahu vendors takes them away from their family, the kinship ties that exist within the household are still meaningful, for them to

maintain their houses in the village. Moreover, kinship ties beyond the household are utilized extensively in support of the household, as well as their selling activity in the marketplace of Chiang Mai. When they trade, friendships are fully utilized and expanded, not only among the Lahu but also with those of different ethnicities, in order to survive at the markets and in Thai society. Mutual relationships among the Lahu vendors are derived from the notion of *aw vi aw nyi* - the expanded kinship system of the Lahu. Although it is meant to be practiced among kin, the Lahu vendors are expected to practice it among friends also.

Many of the settings for their social networks, and the differentiation that exists, are strongly influenced by the power relations that exist among the Lahu vendors, among the families of the vendors, and among other traders and the authorities, and these relations are exercised on different levels. The status of the female Lahu vendors at the Thai markets and in Thai society is often vulnerable, and it is difficult for them to exercise power over other traders. The decision of each Lahu vendor in terms of how they connect and how they differentiate themselves is made in order to avoid being oppressed or banished from the market they wish to operate at.