Chapter 1
Introduction

Every story that begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness imagines the dream of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, the fall into writing, alienation . . .

Donna Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature

To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.

Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self

What does it mean to be successful, mature, or psychologically healthy? Who gets to decide, and by what criteria? The ideas that people hold about the course of human development and the nature of the self are more than idle speculation. For those of us living in Europe or North America, Western theories of human development have had a profound impact both on the external organization of our society and on our subjective experience of ourselves as particular individuals. Almost daily, some aspect of our lives is touched by the body of knowledge that our recognized experts have accumulated on what constitutes the “normal” course of cognitive, social, and moral growth. Although the assumptions underlying this body of knowledge are rarely examined, they exert a powerful influence on such diverse aspects of social life as our philosophies of child rearing, the structure of our schools, our timetables for career advancement and retirement, and our methods for recognizing and treating mental illness. More than that, they orient us toward certain goals and away from others; they inform our retrospective judgments of our past deeds. In short, they define the moral boundaries of a life well lived.

This book is about how people come to understand and find signifi-
cance in the trajectory of a human life and how, in the process, they come to understand themselves. As such, it is a rather long answer to a series of questions that arose during an earlier research project on culture acquisition and moral development in a small Shan community in northwestern Thailand. At the time, I was an earnest young graduate student, anxious to show that the moral reasoning of Shan children was every bit as sophisticated and “developed” as that of European and North American children. To do this, I felt I needed to expose the inadequacies of the then current method for assessing moral development, a method that relied on standardized story problems depicting moral dilemmas. The project was successful, I think, in demonstrating the need to consider how the content of cultural beliefs affects moral reasoning, but it raised a host of other questions that I was unable to answer fully. Many of these pointed to the cultural significance of age and one’s position in the life course—themes that seemed to figure prominently, and in unexpected ways, in Shan children’s thinking about moral dilemmas.

Nor was this perceived connection between morality and the life course confined to children. Adults, for example, frequently remarked that it was impossible to follow the five Buddhist precepts (injunctions against killing, thieving, lying, intoxication, and improper sexual behavior) on a daily basis until one was old. Moral behavior had to be, in some sense, postponed until later in life. Although I eventually learned to appreciate the larger rhetorical context that helped make sense of such comments, I continued to be struck by the references to age and one’s stage in life whenever people talked about appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Unlike the familiar image of life’s standard trajectory that Donna Haraway alludes to in the opening quotation, an alternative conception of the process of human development was hinted at by the people I spoke with, one that did not begin in innocence nor end in alienation.

At the same time, I gradually began to realize that Shan talk about age and the life course—including, and especially, any evaluative talk about people’s behavior—was always predicated on a particular view of what it meant to be a person or, more specifically, a “normal” person. There, as here, “crazy” behavior was not always obvious to the untrained eye. If I wanted to understand Shan talk about appropriate and inappropriate behavior throughout the life course, I would have to learn more about their views of self and personhood, about what it meant, quite literally, to be a healthy, normal human being.

Thus, ten years after the original fieldwork that raised these issues, I returned to the same village in order to take a closer look at local beliefs and practices surrounding the life course and their implications for indigenous
theories of the self. This book, the result of that inquiry, explores the ways in which Shan villagers’ expectations regarding the course of human development are tied to concepts of self that are rehearsed in daily conversation, enacted in religious ritual, and embedded in the very structure of community social life.

It is a book that has taken a long time to write. As a result, it has been influenced by a large and somewhat unwieldy range of literature—some of it relatively recent, some no longer fashionable. These sources include not only the obviously relevant titles on similar topics that have appeared since I began this project, but also some seemingly unrelated but (to me) inspiring items I came across while teaching or writing about other things. It would be impossible to discuss all of these sources of influence adequately, but in the interest of providing the reader with some sense of the thinking that has informed this work, I will briefly discuss three of the major research traditions that have found their way, in one form or another, into this book: the literature on ethnopsychology and the life course, studies of Buddhism and religion in Southeast Asia, and the history of modern ideas of human nature and selfhood in Europe and North America. Additional sources are discussed in a more focused way in the chapters that follow. The chapter ends with an introduction to the Shan village that is the focus of this study.

Selves and Lives

While I was struggling to reconcile moral development theory with the demands of cultural difference (Eberhardt 1984), another rapprochement between anthropology and psychology was occurring in the form of ethnopsychology (White and Kirkpatrick 1985) and a closely related strand of psychological anthropology that dealt with “mind, self, and emotion” (Shweder and LeVine 1984). In some ways, the writers who were featured in these two important collections represented a new generation of researchers in psychological anthropology.2 Although familiar by training with the older culture-and-personality approach (which appealed to differences in cultural institutions and socialization practices to explain the observed variation in personal styles), this generation questioned the cross-cultural validity of the very notion of personality and embraced the emerging consensus within the discipline that the assumptions underlying it were fundamentally flawed.

In its place, they emphasized the need to uncover the locally relevant categories (hence, “ethnopsychology”) that people employed to describe human nature and human variation. In local terms, what are people like? And what
accounts for the differences in the way people behave? In contrast to the body of research done in the 1970s under the rubric “ethnoscience,” which eschewed the study of affect and focused instead on cognition and on describing native systems of knowledge, this group of researchers enthusiastically embraced the project of exploring local understandings of emotions. But unlike earlier studies of affect that were psychoanalytically oriented, this time emotions were understood to belong not in the realm of private, individual (un)consciousness but, rather, in the realm of public, culturally organized social life. Instead of looking for the effect of culture (understood as something external to the individual) on emotions that were “inside” a person, students of ethnopsychology have been more interested in how emotions emerge between two or more social players in the course of social interaction.

Methodologically, their increasing attention to discourse—that is, to larger units of talk and naturally occurring conversation, as opposed to discrete concepts or symbols—signaled a move away from a representational view of language (in which words, independent of their speaker, are thought to represent some aspect of reality) toward a view that is more oriented to social relations and praxis. What, they ask, is the pragmatic force of a given discourse about the nature of the self? What are the behavioral and ideological consequences of constructing the self in this way as opposed to some other way? Who ends up being empowered by such a formulation, and who is restrained? And how, finally, are such discourses used and manipulated during everyday social interactions? In a volume entitled New Directions in Psychological Anthropology, Geoffrey White put it this way:

> Once we view local discourses of person (including talk of “personality”) as having directive force in shaping psychosocial reality, the constituents of those discourses assume a more central role in theories of person, action, and society. Talk of selves and persons everywhere constitutes a moral rhetoric—a way of explaining and evaluating everyday actions and events. Investigating the conceptual and institutional forces that sustain such talk and make it socially consequential requires a more broad study of discourse than has typically been pursued in individual-centered studies of cultural psychology. (1992, 33)

This inherently dialectical approach that sees meaning as emergent in social interaction makes it much more difficult to sustain the traditional dichotomies that separated the psychological from the cultural (or the individual from society), dichotomies upon which an earlier distinction between self and person was typically based (where “person” referred to a public role or socially recognized position, while the term “self” was reserved for reference to a more private and perhaps idiosyncratic subjectivity). Indeed, one of
the hallmarks of this branch of psychological anthropology has been the repeated calls to dismantle one or another invidious dichotomy, such as individual/society, thought/feeling, or mind/body.

These dichotomies, it is argued, do not reflect natural or objective aspects of the human condition but, rather, are features of a particular ethnotheory about the nature of persons, namely, that of “the West,” a situation described most vividly by Clifford Geertz:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures. ([1974] 1984, 126)

Other societies, according to this view, may cultivate a sense of self that is not necessarily opposed to society and may, in fact, entail identification with it or some subgroup (such as an extended family or lineage). Further, the degree to which people identify with their internal thoughts and/or feelings (that is, the degree to which they are willing to be defined by them and to define others by theirs) is also quite variable, according to this view. Although some have continued to argue for a more universalist understanding of the self (e.g., Spiro 1986), there seems to be broad agreement that real and significant differences do exist in how people conceptualize personhood (Shweder and Bourne 1984). Where controversy remains is in deciding where precisely to locate those differences. Many have criticized the monolithic view of Western society implied by statements such as that of Geertz quoted above (e.g., Murray 1993), suggesting instead that multiple and perhaps contradictory views of the self are at work in all societies (including those of “the West”) and, further, that these differences often fall along lines drawn by class, race, and gender.

One of the leading and, to me, most helpful voices in forging a synthesis between these concerns has been that of Catherine Lutz (see, for example, Lutz 1985 and Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990). In her pathbreaking monograph, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory* (1988), Lutz’ finely tuned analysis of how emotions are understood to work in a small island community in Micronesia provides a model for how to link sensitive, “site-specific” ethnography with insightful analyses of larger issues, including gender theory, that have a broad impact on the discipline. I have drawn on several aspects of her approach in my work with the Shan.
One is her urging that we become more self-conscious of the tacit basis of comparison (usually some version of the writer’s own cultural background) that lurks behind much ethnographic description, and that we strive to make these assumptions explicit. In her own ethnography of Ifaluk emotional life (Lutz 1988), this task becomes the centerpiece—a comparative analysis and deconstruction of the term “emotion” and its links to gender constructions in American society and on the Micronesian island of Ifaluk. In my case, it has meant an effort to interrogate the concepts of “a life” and “development” by comparing what I have learned about Shan theories of self and human development with those in several other societies, including my own. While the main thrust of this book is clearly about Shan culture and society, I have tried to insert comparative examples, where relevant, in order to highlight both our tacit assumptions about these concepts and what is distinctive about the Shan case.

A related and welcome aspect of Lutz’ work is her willingness to consider how the particular understandings of self and emotion that prevail on Ifaluk are grounded in concrete aspects of the social structure, gender relations, and material conditions of life in that community. Although hers was an early voice on this, it has since been joined by others such as Kondo (1990), Mageo (1998), and Holland et al. (1998), all of whom insist upon the crucial role played by power relations in the fashioning of emotion, gender, selves, and lives. If people’s understandings of themselves and their emotions are truly emergent in the process of social interaction, then it is not sufficient to explain their logical coherence as abstract conceptual systems. Rather, one must show how such understandings arise in everyday life, whose purposes they serve, and how they are maintained, deployed, contested, and revised. With this in mind, I have tried to link the particular conceptions of self and human development that currently prevail in the Shan village that is the focus of this study to an identifiable constellation of social arrangements regarding the organization of work, gender, and the household.

Finally, and most fundamentally, Lutz’ work has been useful for this project because it deals explicitly with people’s ideas about human development and the life course. Her work demonstrates that looking at a society’s indigenous theories of human development is often a particularly effective way to find out about local constructions of self and personhood, including people’s ideas about the causes and effects of human behavior. Drawing on her experience in Micronesia, Lutz has suggested that one of the advantages of examining people’s ideas about the life course is that, in most societies, the course of human development is explicitly conceptualized, classified, and explained (Lutz 1985, 58). She goes on to note:
The ways in which children and adults are seen to differ will often reveal important ethno-theoretical dimensions that might otherwise go undiscovered. In addition, the process by which development is thought to occur is revealed in talk about the life course, including conceptions about which human behaviors are changeable and about how that change may be caused. Such conceptions thereby often point to the hypothesized origins of behavior. (Ibid., 59)

The suggestion that a link exists between concepts of self and concepts of human development is one I have adopted as an organizing frame for this project as well.

Other writers, who do not necessarily look at the life course as a whole but focus on particular segments of it, have also been significant influences. David Plath, for example, observing the numerous studies of childhood socialization and the dearth of work on adult development, has long urged anthropologists to stop treating human development as if it were something that ended with adolescence. His nuanced study of adult development in modern Japan (Plath 1980) inspired me to listen for “rhetorics of maturity” in Shan talk and to be alert to cultural differences in “archetypes of growth.” Similarly, the engaging collection of papers in Richard Shweder’s edited volume on middle age (1998) has reinforced my inclination to focus on the culturally constructed aspects of developmental stages and to think about how the Shan experience of midlife compares to others. Although I came to it much later in the project, Sarah Lamb’s ethnography of aging and gender in North India (2000) has been stimulating on multiple levels. Her emphasis on the benefits of using age as a category of analysis is one I find especially congenial to the approach I have taken in this book.

**The Southeast Asian Context**

As the examples above suggest, while numerous studies of self and human development have been conducted in the nearby areas of East Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific, there has been an almost complete lack of research on this topic among the societies of mainland Southeast Asia. This is all the more surprising, given that societies in island Southeast Asia have provided the material for some of the pioneering studies of cultural constructions of self and the life course, as well as more recent work (e.g., H. Geertz 1959; C. Geertz 1973, [1974] 1984; Rosaldo 1980; Keeler 1983, 1987; Broch 1990; Wikan 1991; and Hollan and Wellenkamp 1996). In contrast, similar topics on the mainland have not received sustained treatment, showing up only in passing or for the space of a chapter in works devoted primarily to ritual,
religion, and worldview. In fact, the only book-length treatment of an ethnopsychological topic that pertains to the culture of lowland Buddhist societies on the mainland is Collins’ incisive textual analysis of images and ideas about “selves” and “persons” found in Buddhist scriptures (1982), a work that does not pretend to be an empirical study of actual beliefs and practices. Indeed, Collins notes in the introduction to his book, “There is a good book waiting to be written on the relation between the psychological universe of the Buddhist Canon and the indigenous psychology of ‘popular’ culture in ‘Buddhist’ countries” (ibid., 20).

What has, however, received considerable anthropological attention on the mainland, particularly in Thai studies, is precisely the study of ritual, religion, and worldview, especially among those ethnic groups (the vast majority) who consider themselves Buddhist. Not all of this extensive and varied literature is germane, of course, to a study of self and human development, and it will be simplest to discuss the relevant comparative points as they arise in conjunction with the Shan material. Nevertheless, a few orienting observations about Buddhist studies and the anthropological approach to religion are appropriate at the outset.

First, what is the status of Buddhist doctrine in everyday religious life, and how should we regard any discrepancies between what is stated in the scriptures and what is said by contemporary Buddhists? While an earlier generation of writers on this subject may have identified the canon of Buddhist scriptures as the “true” Buddhism and tended to view any deviation from this in actual practice as aberrant and inferior, contemporary scholarship has pointed to several reasons why the doctrines as stated in scripture cannot be taken as equivalent to what the average person knows, believes, or understands. For one thing, communities often choose to highlight different aspects of the canon (elaborating this but not that portion of the scripture into a ritual object, a ceremony, a basis for popular legend, etc.). In addition, religious ideas are used selectively by individuals, sometimes strategically, for their own ends. Further, ideas, once selected by individuals for strategic use or by communities for cultural elaboration, must be (continuously) interpreted, and this process of interpretation and reinterpretation, spanning a series of generations, offers manifold opportunities for creative revision and amendment.

This same process occurs in urban areas and in rural villages, in areas close to the institutional centers of religious power and in those far removed from it. Hence, the Buddhism of the cities or of Bangkok is no closer to some hypothesized true Buddhism than is the Buddhism of the countryside (nor, as is sometimes thought, is the rural version more authentic than what is seen as a corrupted urban version). Rather, they are simply the results of dif-
ferent sets of local actors applying received Buddhist traditions to somewhat different circumstances. Hence, throughout this book, I have been unwilling to privilege doctrinal or canonical Buddhism (that is, the Buddhism of the religious scriptures as interpreted by religious specialists) over customary practice and local interpretations (see Gombrich 1971, Lehman 1972, and Collins 1982 for insightful discussions of these issues). At the same time, I am convinced of the centrality of many Buddhist ideas—when defined in local terms—for people’s everyday thinking.

A case in point is the Buddhist doctrine of *anattâ*, or “not-self,” which teaches that the belief in any sort of enduring soul or essence for individual human beings is an illusion. How can I possibly write a book about Shan conceptions of self if they do not believe they have one? The key here is to attend to how the teaching of *anattâ* is actually understood and used by laypeople. In the community I worked in, as in many other Buddhist communities (see, for example, Spiro 1970, Gombrich 1971, and Tannenbaum 1995), the belief in some aspect of personhood that is enduring and that even survives the transformation of death is commonplace. To allow for this, *anattâ* is defined variously as “having no control over oneself,” “being unable to keep oneself from changing,” and so on.6

This does not mean that more sophisticated understandings of *anattâ* have no effect on local understandings. It simply acknowledges that, as with any complicated system of thought, there are specialist and lay understandings of important concepts. To ask, for example, what the average Shan villager knows about the doctrine of *anattâ* is akin, in my view, to asking what the average person in Chicago knows about Einstein’s theory of relativity. Each has at least heard of it and believes it to be true, but they do not pretend to understand it fully, if at all. If questioned about it, a few people will be able to give a satisfactory account, but most will repeat an abbreviated version that they’ve been told and then direct you to the appropriate local specialist (monk or physicist, as the case may be). Meanwhile, they go about their lives, secure in the knowledge that someone, somewhere understands these things, while relying for their own needs on a less complicated and more intuitive understanding of the way things work. Does this mean that our hypothetical Shan villager is not a Buddhist or that our friend in Chicago does not participate in the culture of science? Not at all. But it does mean that we cannot define Buddhism or any other complex tradition solely on the basis of what its virtuosi believe and do.

A related issue has to do with the use of Buddhist discourse and Buddhist ritual forms to legitimize social and political inequalities both within and between communities and social groups. As many researchers have documented, Buddhism has been a powerful tool of state building in Thailand,
used both to reinforce the hegemony of Bangkok and to help justify local inequalities (see, for example, Tambiah 1976, Reynolds 1978, Keyes 1987, O'Connor 1990, and Tannenbaum 1995). As someone who has worked on the periphery of the Thai state, I have absorbed certain lessons from these writings that are reflected in this work, including a certain degree of suspicion toward cultural forms emanating from the center and a reluctance to assume that the dominant religious institutions can adequately encompass local meanings. At the same time, I recognize (and try to show) that this is a stance Shan villagers cannot always afford to take. To the extent that any particular version of Buddhism enjoys prestige and authority in the larger culture, adherence to which is reinforced by certain incentives and sanctions, it becomes, among other things, a hegemonic discourse that can perhaps be resisted (or creatively interpreted) but not ignored.

Finally, how should we regard the non-Buddhist elements that exist in the religious life of any given community? In Shan villages, as elsewhere in rural Southeast Asia, rituals involving local “spirits” are especially commonplace and sometimes quite elaborate. Are we dealing with two separate religions here, or a syncretic form that incorporates elements from different traditions, or something else entirely? If such practices are mentioned in the scriptures and occur wherever there are functioning Buddhist communities, are these elements really non-Buddhist? When our informants say that they are, what do they mean? Many writers have sought to uncover the underlying principles and logic that would account for the totality of observed ritual forms, and they have offered various strategies for reconciling the presence of so-called animistic elements with a more translocal Buddhism (see, for example, Tambiah 1970, Lehman 1972, Mulder 1979, Davis 1984, Wijeyewardene 1986, and Tannenbaum 1995). From this work, I have learned much about the common content and range of religious belief and practice in Thailand, and this knowledge has guided my inquiry into local understandings of selves and human development. Tannenbaum’s work on Shan religion and overall Shan ethnography (1987, 1989, 1990) has been particularly helpful in this regard.

However, there is an additional problem entangled in this muddle that has to do with the very category of “religion.” What makes spirit-related practices a “problem” is our assumption that they, like Buddhist practices, fall unambiguously into the category of religion (thus necessitating some sort of reconciliation between the two). But this assumption may derive more from the society of the researcher, where there is often a marked distinction between the religious and the secular (and between the supernatural and the natural), than from anything found in the society being investigated. Sorting this out will have impacts beyond the Buddhism/animism conundrum. In the
Shan case, for example, it may well be that spirit-related beliefs and practices more closely approximate the category of natural science than that of religion.

There is, in short, a solid ethnographic literature on ritual, religion, and worldview in Thai studies, but I think this material will have to be approached from a somewhat different angle if it is to be useful for a study of self, human development, and, more broadly, indigenous psychology. By what criteria does one separate spiritual, mental, and physical well-being? How does knowledge about the world (including cosmological knowledge) impinge on knowledge about people and human nature (i.e., on indigenous psychologies)? Is there a nonarbitrary way (i.e., a culturally motivated way) to separate the religious from the nonreligious? If we leave these issues unexamined—or, worse, assume they are irrelevant—we may simply further reify the dichotomies between the individual and society, and between culture and psychology. Instead, we need to attend to the way putatively religious concerns enter into people’s everyday talk about human nature, emotions, mental health, and so on, and to consider how (and when) the very notion of a separate psychological realm of human experience has itself been constructed.

This is an inquiry that is fundamentally ethnographic, one that requires the production of detailed descriptions of alternative formulations of selves and their development, and how these formulations are related to, among other things, what some might call religious talk and/or ritual practice. Hence, although a fair amount of space is devoted to it, this book is concerned not with Shan ritual, religion, and worldview per se but, rather, with the way such beliefs and practices are used, sometimes strategically, in people’s constructions of themselves and with what they might reveal about Shan theories of human development and human nature.

The Comparative and Historical Context

Although the historical research on this topic has not consistently been in dialogue with the anthropological research, it should be, for they have much to offer one another. By asking similar questions about the history of concepts of personhood and the life course in Europe and North America, cultural historians have begun the task of documenting when, where, and how the seemingly monolithic Western notion of self was constructed. Like those engaged in ethnopsychological research, historians have made a case for how our subjective sense of self—in particular, the sense of being an individual with an inner life—has varied through time, along with our perspective on different segments of the life course (especially childhood), but these differences have
been theorized differently from those reported in the cross-cultural record. Where anthropologists have traditionally taken a culturalist approach to explaining difference, appealing to the logic of the cultural system and the tacit assumptions of the prevailing religion or worldview to explain any given view of self, historians have been more likely to focus on social and economic institutions that have been transformed by historical events as the key responsible agents. Among those who have investigated the history of European and American notions of self and personhood, the critical social institution has been the changing family structure, and the relevant historical event, frequently described as a watershed, has been the industrial revolution.

The portion of this scholarship that has most influenced my thinking for this project is the work that has been done on changes in the family structure of the urban middle class that occurred in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, and their consequences for modern ideas of selfhood and human nature (see especially Zaretsky 1976 and Demos [1978] 1997). This body of research is helpful because it illustrates how a particular ethnography of self and human development (the paradigmatic “Western” view of the person) grew out of a specific set of social and economic conditions. These conditions can be briefly summarized as follows.

Due to people’s increased involvement with factory work under industrialization and the gradual removal of both children and women from that arena (a process that occurred to varying degrees and at different rates for different social classes), “work” eventually became separated to an unprecedented degree from the rest of everyday life, including domestic life, while the family retreated into a previously unknown level of privacy. “Home” became the haven or refuge from work in a world that was increasingly viewed as heartless and corrupt, and women were assigned the new task of “emotion management” in the household, providing emotional succor and repair for family members engaged in work outside the home. Those who worked under the alienating conditions of industrial labor did not identify with their jobs, and any notion of authenticity, including the concept of self, became identified with home. Home was the new site of “personal life,” the place where the “true self” could be cultivated and displayed.

Gender stereotyping and culturally exaggerated differences in gender roles became the norm, with men and women each becoming closely associated with their newly created separate spheres. The removal of children from the workplace encouraged a new view of them as “tender” and in need of nurturing and cultivation. This, coupled with the new emphasis on “character education” that would prepare them for work under these vastly altered circumstances, created a child-centered family with an increased emphasis on “quality parenting,” a concept that eventually translated into an ideology

The consequences of this separation of work and domestic life were profound. As the opposition between what was now understood as an authentic self and an artificial, “man-made” society became increasingly polarized around the turn of the century, a new ethnopsychology arose and eventually gained popularity under the writings of Sigmund Freud (see especially Freud [1930] 1961). Society, or “civilization,” was necessary but repressive of the authentic self, which was now conceived as harboring antisocial tendencies. The resulting tensions between self and society, which were increasingly seen as natural, spawned a view of the self as having interiority, depth, or emotional complexity—themes that emerged in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literature, art, and academic writing (see the collection of papers in Pfister and Schnog 1997 for examples and an overview of this period).

Views of the life course also changed, in response both to the above factors and to changing demographic factors (such as longer life span and decreased infant mortality rates). Childhood, now recognized as a special stage of life, became prolonged; adolescence was given new significance; “middle age” was identified for the first time; and the status and authority of grandparents was greatly reduced (Ariès 1962; Tufte and Myerhoff 1979; Lowry 1997; Shweder 1998; Hareven 2000).

Obviously, this sketchy history does not do justice to the subtle arguments presented in the sources mentioned above, nor does it begin to capture the complexity of the changes that occurred in people’s conceptualizations of themselves and their expectations regarding the process of human development, but I hope it at least suggests the sorts of structural factors that might impinge on any society’s leading concepts of self and the life course. For those of us who have conducted research in communities that are not yet fully industrialized, it raises important questions about the connections we might investigate between the organization of work, gender, and domestic life, on the one hand, and people’s conceptualizations of themselves as persons with a certain kind of life trajectory, on the other. In my description of Shan village life below, and in the chapters that follow, I have tried to highlight those aspects of social and economic organization that are implicated by this account.

**The People and the Place**

The people called Shan by English speakers, and who call themselves Tai, do not fit easily into the categories most often invoked to describe ethnic groups
in Southeast Asia. Not quite “hill people” and not quite “valley people,” they have chosen to live in the narrow upland valleys halfway up the mountainsides. Originating in the northeastern part of Burma (Myanmar) known as the Shan States, Shan have been migrating out of Burma and into the northern and northwestern provinces of neighboring Thailand for well over a hundred years—a process that continues today and has, in fact, been accelerating due to the ongoing political troubles in Burma. Although they are one of the most populous ethnic groups in Burma, in Thailand they are an ethnic minority, living on the periphery of the Thai state. They share the border area with other ethnic minorities—such as the Karen, the Hmong, and the Lahu—most of whom live farther up the mountains, where they have traditionally practiced swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture and have followed their own local religious traditions. The Shan of this region have made their share of swiddens too but prefer whenever possible to cultivate the narrow upland valleys with irrigated rice.

Unlike most other highlanders in the area, Shan are practitioners of Theravāda Buddhism9 and, as such, share a certain cultural affinity with their lowland neighbors elsewhere in the region, including the Burmese and the Thai. However, like all nominally Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia, they operate within their own local traditions of interpretation that are linked in intimate and complicated ways with other practices, including beliefs and rituals related to spirits. Living in the hills as they do, and yet practicing Theravāda Buddhism and wet-rice agriculture, Shan occupy an interesting social niche that participates in both the upland and lowland cultural traditions of Southeast Asia.

The specific community that is the focus of this book is a place I will call Baan Kaung Mu (a pseudonym), a well-established Shan village in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand, where I have lived for a total of three years. Two of these were in 1979–1981, when I was conducting research on culture acquisition and moral development, and the third year was in 1990–1991, when I focused more explicitly on the concerns that led to this book. Although the community witnessed significant changes during the interim, as well as since then, many features of the place have persisted.

Situated in one of the many narrow valleys that line the hills of the province, Baan Kaung Mu is about twenty kilometers from Mae Hong Son town, the provincial capital, and about a two-day walk from the Burmese border. Teakwood and split-bamboo houses form a dense cluster pressed into the side of a west-facing mountain, leaving the maximum possible amount of precious irrigable land free for cultivation. In 1980, Baan Kaung Mu still had no electricity or running water, cooking was done over a wood fire, and all but a handful of the 69 houses were built on stilts in the traditional way, using the
space underneath to stable water buffalo, oxen, pigs, and chickens. By 1990
the population had grown from 300 to close to 400 people arranged in 99
households, many more of which had adopted the Northern Thai style of
architecture that features a cemented ground floor used as a living area.
Charcoal had replaced firewood as the fuel of choice in most kitchens, sup-
plemented now by an electric rice cooker, but the houses were still arranged
in fenced compounds along dusty paths lined with carefully tended flowers,
bushes, and lime and coconut trees.

Most of the residents of Baan Kaung Mu continue to be born and raised
in this or other nearby villages, although a few more come each year from the
Shan States in Burma. A handful of Northern Thai and Red Karen have also
married into the village and settled here. In addition to the houses, there is
also an elementary school with six grades (where children are taught to read
and write not in Shan but in the Central Thai language¹⁰), a small health
clinic staffed by part-time health workers from town, a few small stores, and
the occasional impromptu noodle stand, set up to sell lunch.

Near the center of the village within a clearly demarcated area lies the
local Buddhist monastery. In 1980 it was home to a rustic but graceful old
temple, or “preaching hall,” where services were held and where the monks
and novices lived. There were also three smaller and simpler dwellings for
the three mae khaao, or Buddhist nuns (all local women); a modest but
well-kept pagoda; a banyan tree; a shrine for a place-spirit; and the founda-
tion for an ordination hall the villagers were building. By 1990 the ordina-
tion hall was complete, and the old preaching hall had been replaced by a
larger but otherwise similar building—all built by hand using local labor—
with beautifully polished teakwood floors that felt cool and smooth on
one’s bare feet, an open-air pavilion style of architecture that captured each
passing breeze, and several imposing new Buddha statues, brightly covered
with gold leaf and donated by well-wishers from Bangkok who had come to
“make merit” in this upcountry temple.

During the years I lived in Baan Kaung Mu, the population of the temple
grounds fluctuated, but there was always at least one monk and sometimes two
in residence. Novice monks, and younger boys studying to become novices,
were present less regularly and for shorter periods. Shan religious services
follow a lunar calendar, observing the day of the new moon, the full moon,
and the half-moons between each of these as wan sin, or precept days, some-
thing similar to a Sabbath.¹¹ A set of standard Buddhist holidays (most of
which fall on either a full moon or a new moon wan sin) are celebrated lo-
cally, often including elaborate festivities at the temple the evening before
and food preparations in the temple kitchen that go on well into the night.

Unscheduled, household-sponsored ceremonies (such as offerings for a
View of Baan Kaung Mu in 1980, with pagoda in foreground and monastery grounds toward the right.

The same area in 1990, with new buildings on the monastery grounds.
deceased relative, scripture readings upon the donation of a new manuscript, and so on) are also often held at the temple, especially if the entire village has been invited to attend. If a smaller ceremony is held in a person’s home, villagers may nevertheless rely upon the temple’s supply of dishes, teapots, and cookware. Beyond its use for religiously oriented activities, the temple also serves as a sort of community center for many other activities. Travelers passing through may spend the night there. The public address system is used to make village-wide announcements on a variety of subjects. Village meetings are also usually held at the temple.

Surrounding this cluster of houses, monastery, and other buildings that make up the village itself lies a patchwork of cultivated fields, gardens, and forested hills. Although the forest is still used as a supplementary food source (for gathered plants, mushrooms, small game, and so on), and gardens are an important source of fruits and vegetables for home consumption, the economy of Baan Kaung Mu continues to be based on the production of irrigated rice, an activity in which almost every household is vitally involved. A generation ago, village production was geared almost completely toward subsistence agriculture, although even then sesame (grown on hillside swiddens) served as a major cash crop. Current production is still focused primarily on subsistence, but the developing infrastructure of the region has strengthened the village’s market orientation. During the past twenty-five years, Baan Kaung Mu farmers have produced soybeans, garlic, and sesame for sale as well as for domestic consumption. Construction companies with government contracts for road building and repair in areas near Baan Kaung Mu provide some villagers with cash earnings from day labor (an opportunity that has also attracted some workers from the Shan States), and young people of both sexes increasingly seek temporary wage labor in Mae Hong Son town and other urban areas. For those who remain in the village, though, cash is not generally plentiful. After the sale of a cash crop, a substantial portion of the earnings is usually invested immediately in clothing and household staples, with another portion set aside for religious observances.

The exceptions to this state of affairs are the schoolteachers, whose government salary provides them with a steady source of capital. Although the number of schoolteachers residing in the village has fluctuated during the years since I began conducting research there (some commute from Mae Hong Son town or live in state-sponsored housing on the school ground itself), those who do opt to live in the village have invariably used their access to capital resources to operate small shops selling sundry food and household items. Two or three other households have, from time to time, operated diesel-powered rice mills, another source of cash income.
Although located in one of the least developed areas of Thailand, Baan Kaung Mu is not without links to the rest of the world. In 1976 a new, all-weather road was built, linking the village to Mae Hong Son town and providing reliable, year-round access to it for the first time. When I first arrived a couple of years later, villagers were in the process of making a series of local adjustments occasioned by this new access to the town’s hospital, post office, larger schools, daily produce market, and social/ceremonial life. More attention was being given to cash crops, for example; more people were trying to buy motorcycles; and the one local owner of a “minibus” (a converted pickup truck outfitted with two benches in the back) had begun to do a brisk business of daily runs to and from town. By 1990 several drivers were servicing the area, some making more than one trip to town a day, and those families who could afford it were often bypassing the village school altogether and sending their children to town to begin their education. Tourist activity in the province, especially in Mae Hong Son town, has also increased dramatically, bringing villagers into much more frequent contact with foreign guests. Meanwhile, caravan trade back and forth across the Burma border continues, bringing with it more news and occasional refugees from the troubled area in the eastern Shan States.

In addition to these sources of contact and information, there are the news media. During my first stay in Baan Kaung Mu, most households relied

Shan women transplanting rice seedlings in the gently terraced rice paddies that surround much of the village.
on shared newspapers and on battery-operated radios, which provided access to news and other programming in the national language, Central Thai. When I returned in 1990, nearly every house had electricity, and a few had purchased television sets that everyone was invited to watch, giving villagers access not only to national and international news but also to the broader commercial world of urban middle-class life as depicted in soap operas, sitcoms, and advertisements filmed in Bangkok.

In short, during the time I have been observing it, the village economy could be described as “in transition,” moving toward greater engagement with regional and national markets and toward greater disparities in wealth between households. In 1991 most of the households owned at least some rice land, although the size of their landholdings varied considerably. All engaged in both the production of rice for subsistence and the growing of soybeans or garlic for cash crops, supplemented by wage labor when such jobs were available. Although some households were certainly on the margin, the village was not, on the whole, poor, and most people had at least some discretionary income. Much of this discretionary income was used for the increasingly available consumer items sent out from the urban areas, but a significant portion was set aside for traditional Buddhist rituals and merit-making ceremonies.

Finally, because Baan Kaung Mu is the “county seat” (tambon village) of a cluster of villages, its headman is also the kamnan (tambon head). He and his assistants attend monthly meetings in Mae Hong Son town with provincial officials of the Thai government and return with information on national and regional events. This information is communicated to the rest of the community in village meetings that are attended by both men and women—at least one adult representative from each household.

As this last statement suggests, the household is a significant administrative unit in village social organization. A household representative must be sent to all community workdays as well as to village meetings. Further, participation in certain village-wide rituals entails the contribution of an offering, or “tax,” from each household, along with labor. Households are also the main unit of production and consumption in the local economy, pooling the income from their farm labor for the most part and making joint purchases for the household. However, individuals retain the right to control any wealth or property that they bring into a household through inheritance or their own efforts. Women, for example, may own land in their own name and decide independently of their husbands, fathers, or brothers what they want to do with it.

Although an old couple (or even a single widow or widower) sometimes chooses to live alone in a separate household, most households in Baan
Kaung Mu consist of at least two generations—a married couple and their children, often supplemented by additional relatives on a temporary or relatively permanent basis. Since kinship is reckoned bilaterally, these “extra” people may be relatives from either side of the family, including the husband’s or wife’s parents, the spouse and children of one or more of the couple’s grown offspring, or one or more collateral relatives of either the husband or wife. The availability of reliable birth control since the 1970s has resulted in smaller families, but villagers still find it convenient to have three generations living close to one another—under the same roof, if possible. Grandparents who are willing to stay home while their adult children go to work in the fields all day can care for young children, perform useful tasks around the house, or simply housesit (pau hoen)—a valued service, for villagers do not like to leave their houses unattended, if they can help it.

Children, for their part, can run errands, help with meal preparation, care for younger siblings, do laundry, carry water from the well, and perform other relatively simple but valued tasks. As a result, children are sometimes invited to change households in order to help another relative or, on occasion, even a nonrelative. The children themselves are often allowed to determine their own choice of residence. Some children, for example, decide to leave their parents’ household (perhaps temporarily) and join that of their grandparent(s). Others may leave to join an older married sibling who needs help with laundry and child care. When a couple divorces (which is easily done and common), their children usually end up living with the wife (and/or her mother), although the children continue to visit regularly at their father’s house. Mothers generally encourage this contact as a way of inducing the father to help buy clothes and other necessities for the child.

Furthermore, there is a considerable amount of visiting back and forth between households during the day, especially in any given neighborhood. Shan houses are built with a large open porch that faces a courtyard in the front of the house. Since these porches function as work areas for everyday household tasks—such as food preparation, tool repair, craft production, and so on—it is easy for passersby to see what is going on and to initiate a conversation with whoever is at home. Houses are close enough that neighbors can often carry on conversations in a normal tone of voice without leaving their house. (In fact, if one wishes not to be overheard, one must drop one’s voice to a whisper.) Yet it would be misleading to portray the family as the site of personal life. Socializing between nonrelatives is, on the whole, a same-sex affair in Baan Kaung Mu—men visit men, and women visit women. This carries over into other activities as well: people generally work, travel, and sit in same-sex groupings at rituals, at village meetings, when participating in group agricultural labor, and on other public occasions. Hence, one’s marital
status and household membership are largely irrelevant for everyday work and socializing, and women, in particular, are not isolated in any way.

In short, household membership is fluid and, to a significant degree, voluntary. During the course of a lifetime, most people have the experience of living in more than one household and learn to feel comfortable in many more. Daily life is structured by a combination of the annual cycle of agricultural work and the annual round of religious ceremonies, and what leisure time there is occurs at the interstices of these events. When activities permit, the preferred form of recreation is still visiting at each others’ houses, and it is there—in the intimate context of peoples’ homes and among friends—that much of the data for this book was collected.

The Fieldwork Context and This Project

During my 1990–1991 stay in Baan Kaung Mu, I rented a room in a house that belonged to a middle-aged widow, who I will call Aunt Ying, a strong and energetic woman who still worked her own land and was active in all temple affairs. Her son and daughter-in-law, whom I was close to from my previous stay in Baan Kaung Mu, used to live with her in this house, but they now lived independently in another part of the village, making it possible for Aunt Ying to rent some space to me. I hired a young woman from the neighborhood, Nang Kaew, to help with cooking and light housekeeping, and she decided to move in with us as well. This proved fortuitous on many counts, as Nang Kaew quickly became something more akin to a research assistant, accompanying me on my daily outings, “translating” for me (from more advanced Shan to simpler Shan phrases) when my language facility needed a boost, and offering counsel of all sorts. More than this, she soon became my closest friend, a relationship nurtured by constant companionship and late-night chats as we fell asleep on mattresses laid out next to each other on the floor, just outside Aunt Ying’s bedroom.

In fact, my decision to use pseudonyms in this book has been a difficult one, largely because it prevents me from being able to thank and acknowledge people like “Nang Kaew” by name. Pseudonyms are not as necessary in a book that is focused more on concepts and events than on individual persons. But in order to provide a credible account of Shan thinking about selves and how they develop, I needed to talk about real individuals in some detail. Although some of these people may have liked to have seen their real name in print here, I wanted to allow those who might prefer to stay anonymous the possibility of doing so. Pseudonyms for everyone seemed the best way to accomplish this. At the same time, I am acutely aware that this decision is
largely symbolic, since anyone persistent enough would be able to figure out the location of this village. I have therefore occasionally changed a few non-essential details about the persons described, in the hope of providing them (or their descendants) with a kind of plausible deniability, should they wish to invoke it.

As recent scholarship in anthropology has observed, the results of any given fieldwork project are affected in highly significant ways by the particular historical circumstances in which it was conducted, including many aspects that are not wholly within one’s control. These include the gender or racial dynamics of the community, the local attitudes toward foreigners in general and anthropologists in particular, and myriad idiosyncratic and/or random events that can and do affect one’s access to people, information, and particular settings. In order to provide some context for the account that follows, I will try to specify some of the factors that may have affected my results.

My situation in Baan Kaung Mu was a lucky one in several respects. First, in addition to being well known from my prior stay in the village, I was the indirect beneficiary of the rapport that had been established by three previous anthropologists who had worked elsewhere in Mae Hong Son Province: my former teachers F. K. Lehman and E. Paul Durrenberger and my good friend Nicola Tannenbaum. Their legacy meant that I was the recipient of the general goodwill, trust, and tolerant bemusement that villagers had come to extend toward the anthropological profession. Few anthropologists labor under such benevolent circumstances; I count myself among the fortunate.

Second, I think villagers’ expectations of me were also colored, in part, by their situation as an ethnic minority in a multiethnic state. In this context (and despite my repeated attempts to explain my research agenda), I was widely understood to be there in order to record “traditional Shan customs,” and people were constantly coming by my house to call me to witness some event that they deemed worthy of my camera and notebook. This was consistent with a rising self-consciousness among some of the more educated and traveled villagers about Shan culture, a process that was cross-fertilized by the increasing numbers of Shan refugees from Burma whose presence (including any perceived variations in style of speech, dress, customs, and so on) complicated local understandings of tradition and raised curiosity about authenticity and origins. My job, in this context, was to record the “real” Shan customs for posterity—an impossible task, of course, but one that they seemed to perceive as an honorable endeavor.

Third, although I made consistent efforts to get to know as wide a range of people as possible, my gender undoubtedly had some effect on this, making it easier for me to talk to women and for them to feel comfortable talking
with me. Men who were locally recognized leaders or ritual experts were important exceptions to this, for it was understood that I would have a reason to visit and interview them, and some of my most important informants fell into this category. And inevitably, when I visited many of my female friends, their husbands, fathers, or brothers were often around and entered freely into the conversation. In addition, those teenage boys and young men who, as children, had been some of my major informants during my first field trip in Baan Kaung Mu and with whom I seemed to have developed a permanent “older sister” status, also remained comfortable chatting with me. Finally, time spent participating in group agricultural labor, riding back and forth to town in the local minivan, or traveling with groups of villagers to ceremonies and events in other villages provided further opportunities to talk with men in a relaxed setting. Nevertheless, it is probably true that my most intimate conversations were with other women, because it was possible for me to do things with them that were culturally impossible for me to do with men, such as to be alone in a house with them, to spend the night with them while traveling, to work with large groups of them during sex-segregated work parties, and so on.

My marital status was probably also significant. During my first stay in Baan Kaung Mu, I was a new bride accompanied by my husband, a status that made me privy to a kind of joking, sexual banter frequently carried on among young, married women (and not done with unmarried women who are presumed to be innocent of such knowledge). When I returned in 1990, I had been widowed and then remarried, events that villagers were eager to talk with me about.

Finally, and perhaps most significant for this particular project, my continued correspondence with people from the village in the intervening years, along with our mutual sharing of major life events—joyful and sorrowful—that occurred along the way, meant that by the time I returned ten years later, we had shared a significant chunk of our lives, a process that has continued right up to today. We have mutually advised, comforted, and congratulated each other on a wide variety of events, a process that, more than once, has prompted me to question my own first reactions. It has also made me more self-conscious about my own particular ethnotheory of self, emotions, and human development. Under Shan tutelage, I have learned much about the possibilities for how to interpret life’s vicissitudes and have come to appreciate and value the alternatives they have to offer.

It was in this context, then, that I undertook my investigations. In the chapters that follow, I attempt to lay out a view of human development and the life course that is rooted in indigenous practices, discourses, and—to the extent they can be inferred—beliefs. It is based on listening to what people
say, watching what they do, and talking with them about what it all means. What I consider my “best” data are the body of unsolicited comments about selves and human development that I overheard, or was party to, in the context of everyday life, but I have also made use of information I obtained in more formal interviews and household surveys, as well as my observations and analyses of various ritual practices and social events. The picture that emerges from these disparate sources is, of course, a partial one, limited both by my idiosyncrasies as an ethnographer and by those of the people who were generous enough to let me live with them and accompany them on their daily rounds. But I hope it will prove useful, nonetheless, in helping us imagine an alternative way of thinking about the course of a human life, and of highlighting the contingent and local origins of those seemingly inescapable issues that occupy our lives.

The Plan of the Book

In order to introduce and raise questions about some key features of Shan understandings of self, I will begin (in chapter 2) with a description of a healing session in the home of a local healer during which a troublesome spirit was chased out of an ailing body and the body’s “souls” were called back. My purpose in beginning here is to draw attention to certain aspects of bodies and selves that figure heavily in Shan thinking, especially the concern with keeping spirits (phi) and souls (khwan) separate. Then, in the five chapters that follow, the book charts in rough chronological order the transformations that a Shan self experiences or endures over the course of a life and beyond, from “pre-” to “post-human” forms.

I have chosen to begin my description of this odyssey (in chapter 3) at the moment of death—both to underscore the cyclical nature of human development for Shan (a self does not begin at birth) and to draw attention to important aspects of the Shan self that are most easily seen in conjunction with death. The ethnographic focus is on two funerals. These funerals contrast in important ways that reveal the role of emotional attachment in creating “good” versus “bad” deaths. Building on the previous chapter, chapter 3 shows how, at the point of death, the concern with keeping khwan and phi separate intensifies. It also introduces important Buddhist concepts—such as karma, merit making, and rebirth—that figure prominently in Shan conceptions of self and human development.

Chapter 4 describes the segment of human development from birth (or rebirth, as Shan see it) to young adulthood, that is, the process of achieving social maturity. It begins with a discussion of the rebirth stories I collected
and what these stories reveal about local ideas regarding emotional attachment. Young children, I suggest, are seen as both vulnerable and "wild." In an argument that draws upon the ethnographic material presented in the previous two chapters, I show how spirits, souls, and children together form an indigenous category of Other that is opposed to ideal notions of a mature self. I discuss the normative implications of this view, as well as the way it contrasts in significant ways with North American ideas about the nature of childhood and child development. The second half of the chapter, which continues the ethnographic description through childhood to young adulthood, is aimed at showing the significance of the local social structure and family organization. It ends with a discussion of some ideas about hierarchy that inform Shan social organization, showing how these articulate with an equally important value placed on personal autonomy.

Having survived the dangerous period of childhood and achieved some measure of maturity, a Shan enters a period of routine maintenance of that status. Adulthood is the time when people shore up control over the contested site that is their selves, by various means—some personal, some collective. In chapter 5, I present a sample of the techniques and ritual aids they employ, concentrating on examples from a single day in which three key rituals, held annually, were performed. In the final section of this chapter ("Self-Made Rituals and Ritually Made Selves"), I summarize the underlying logic of the practices I have described and their implications for a Shan concept of self.

Shan are well known in Thailand for their elaborate and theatrical version of the Buddhist ordination ritual that transforms a young boy into a novice monk. Chapter 6 examines an aspect of novice ordinations that has received scant attention in the literature, that of the role of the organizers, or sponsors, of these events. I argue that taking on this role is an anticipated and hoped-for event in a person’s life, a goal that most people aim for, even if not all achieve it. As such, it constitutes a midlife project that illuminates both an official cultural consensus about idealized social relationships as well as the tensions that result when people attempt to enact these relationships. I give particular attention to the gender implications entailed in novice ordinations and to how women have responded to them.

Chapter 7 discusses old age, but it does so in the context of a larger set of values and practices to which all aspire but in which old people are considered particularly adept. These values and practices are embedded in a discourse of increased knowledge and self-control. The chapter begins with a discussion of local ideas about mental health as expressed in the advice people regularly give to each other (a kind of Shan self-help manual) and analyzes these ideas as providing the foundation for a Shan ethnopsychology.
This ethnopsychology is further explored by examining the arsenal of coping strategies that people have developed for restoring one’s equilibrium when it is lost or threatened, strategies that prepare adults for a kind of retooling that occurs in old age. I then describe how old age is structured in this village, arguing that it is seen as an important developmental stage—a kind of second socialization during which people are expected to change in significant and highly valued ways, a process that is driven by old people’s increasing involvement in Buddhist ascetic practices. The chapter ends with a summary of Shan thinking on human development and a discussion of the implications of this view for the sorts of explanations that Shan offer of people’s behavior.

Finally, in chapter 8, I consider how the particular view of self and human development that emerged in the preceding chapters may be linked to broader issues, academic and personal, and I point to what I see as the most promising pathways for future research on the topic.