



# **Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present**

*Proceedings of the Chiang Mai Conference,  
1 - 2 December 2011*

*Edited by*  
**Olivier Evrard  
Dominique Guillaud  
Chayan Vaddhanaphuti**

*Postface by*  
**Charles F. Keyes**



*Mobility and Heritage  
in Northern Thailand and Laos:  
Past and Present*



***Mobility and Heritage  
in Northern Thailand and Laos:  
Past and Present***

*Proceedings of the Chiang Mai Conference,  
1 - 2 December 2011*

*Edited by*

*Olivier Évrard,  
Dominique Guillaud  
Chayan Vaddhanaphuti*

*Postface by*

*Charles F. Keyes*

Copyright © 2013 Institut de Recherche pour le Développement.  
Printed in Chiang Mai at Good Print.

National Library of Thailand Cataloging in Publication Data

Évrard, Olivier.

Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present.-- Chiang Mai : Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 2013.

302 p.

1. Thailand--History. 2. Laos--History.

I. Guillaud, Dominique, jt. auth. II. Vaddhanaphuti, Chayan, jt. auth.

IV. Billault, Laurence, ill. V. Title.

959.3

ISBN 978-974-672-822-5

Cover picture © *Olivier Évrard*

Lamet woman walking toward her field hut.

Ban Takrong, Pha Oudom district, Bokeo province, Lao P.D.R.

Layout : *Laurence Billault*

Illustration & cartography : *Laurence Billault, Elisabeth Habert*

Institut de Recherche pour le Développement :

<http://www.ird.fr/>

PALOC :

<http://www.paloc.ird.fr/>

Center for Ethnic Studies and Development,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

<http://www.cesd.soc.cmu.ac.th/>

# Contents



---

<i>Authors</i>	9
----------------	---

---

<i>Introduction</i>	11
---------------------	----

---

Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present	11
--	----

DOMINIQUE GUILLAUD  
CHAYAN VADDHANAPHUTI

---

<i>Part 1</i> <i>Historic and Symbolic Traces of Sedentism</i>	25
---	----

---

1. Sedentarity and metallurgy in upland Southeast Asia	27
--	----

OLIVER PRYCE

2. Fouding, deserting and returning: the impeded sedentism of Northern Tai populations. An analysis of the Luang Namtha Chronicles	47
--	----

CHANTHAPHILITH CHIEMISOURAJ

3. The ruins, the “savages” and the princess: myths, migrations and belonging in Viang Phu Kha, Laos.	55
--	----

OLIVIER ÉVRARD

CHANTHAPHILITH CHIEMISOURAJ

4. Becoming spirit: spirit cults in Northern Thailand	75
---	----

TANABE SHIGEHARU

*Part 2*  
*Territories and the State* 103

---

5. The rural development policy and the transformation  
of upland/lowland relationships in Laos since 1975 105  
OLIVIER ÉVRARD

6. Kalayaniwattana District: a new modern space  
in ethnic cultural area 127  
MALEE SITTHIKRIENGRKAI

7. Mental mapping of inter-ethnic relationships  
in Pak U District (Luang Prabang Province, North Laos) 141  
MARIE GUÉMAS

*Part 3*  
*Borders and Crisis of Settling* 155

---

8. Borderland economy: contract farming  
and labor mobility in the zone of conflict  
along the Thai Burma border 157  
CHAYAN VADDHANAPHUTI

9. Talaku movement among the Karen  
in Thai-Burma Borderland:  
territorialization and deterritorialization Processes 167  
KWANCHEWAN BUADAENG

10. The impossible sedentism:  
The Lao Hmong “illegal immigrants” in Thailand 185  
PRASIT LEEPREECHA

11. The incomplete sedentarization  
of nomadic populations: the case of the Mlabri 205  
SAKKARIN NA NAN



*Part 4*  
*Health, Mobility and Belonging* 227

---

12. Access to health care among highlanders  
and ethnic minority migrants in Thailand 229

PETER KUNSTADTER

13. The commoditisation of therapeutic knowledge  
among diasporas' populations,  
the case of the Hmong in Lao PDR 263

AUDREY BOCHATON

14. Transmission and vitality of traditional medicinal  
knowledge among several ethnic groups of Northern Laos 275

JEAN-MARC DUBOST

*Postface* 291

---

CHARLES F. KEYES



# Authors

---



**Dr. Audrey Bochaton**, geographer,  
University of Paris X-Nanterre.

**Dr. Kwanchewan Buadaeng**, anthropologist,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

**Dr. Chanthaphilith Chiemsisouraj**, historian,  
Director of History Department,  
National Academy of Social Sciences, Vientiane.

**Jean-Marc Dubost**, ethnobotanist,  
National Museum of Natural History, Paris.

**Dr. Olivier Évrard**, anthropologist,  
Institute of Research for Development,  
Paris & Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

**Marie Guémas**, anthropologist,  
University of Provence, Aix-Marseille.

**Prof. Dominique Guillaud**, geographer,  
Director of research unit, “Patrimoines Locaux”,  
Institute of Research for Development  
and National Museum of Natural History, Paris.

**Prof. Charles F. Keyes**, anthropologist,  
Department of Anthropology  
and Jackson School of International Studies.

**Dr. Peter Kunstadter**, anthropologist,  
Program for HIV Prevention and Treatment,  
Institute of Research for Development, Chiang Mai.

**Dr. Prasit Leepreecha**, anthropologist,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

**Dr. Sakkarin Na Nan**, anthropologist,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

**Dr. Oliver Pryce**, archaeologist,  
Research Laboratory for Archeology  
and History of Art, Oxford University.

**Prof. Tanabe Shigeharu**, anthropologist,  
National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka.

**Dr. Malee Sitthikriengkrai**, anthropologist,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

**Prof. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti**, anthropologist,  
Director of the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

# *Introduction*

## *Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present*



---

DOMINIQUE GUILLAUD  
CHAYAN VADDHANAPHUTI

This volume brings together papers that were presented during the conference “Sedentism in the Mekong region: Mobility and Heritage in a long-term perspective” held at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Chiang Mai University, on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2011. This conference was an opportunity to present the results of the program entitled “Sedentary settlements around the Mekong (Thailand/Laos): Identities, techniques, territories and environments” and the works of other researchers from the region about similar issues of locality, territoriality and identity.

All the contributions within this volume focus on Northern Thailand and Northern Laos (and to a lesser degree Burma, but always seen from the Thai side). These two areas share similar archaeological and historical features but have more recently followed different development patterns, offering thereby interesting characteristics for a comparative approach. In Prehistoric times, the Mekong river valley was a migration route followed by several waves of settlement. Diverse geographic and ecological systems offered the migrants opportunities of specialisation and differentiation when

---

<sup>1</sup> Funded by ANR-Les Suds, AIRD and IRD.



Figure 1: the regional context

they settled down. The middle Mekong valley was also an axis along which independent Tai and Lao principalities have grown, and progressively demarcated themselves from Chinese, Burmese and Khmer centres of power. More recently, from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Northern Thailand and Northern Laos have followed different paths on many aspects (characteristics of state building, rural and urban mobility, development and prosperity, use of natural resources etc.). These historical developments gave rise to great contrasts in politics, culture, economy, society, in health and in environment.



Figure 2: Northern Thailand and Laos: places mentioned in the volume

## A conference inspired by the theme of sedentism

Obviously, the question of “sedentism” that guided the conference, and to which all participants have tried to shed light upon, was not a common issue. Although social sciences have thoroughly studied migrations and mobility, they have never questioned “sedentism”, a neologism that is familiar to Prehistorians only. For them, sedentism is one of the main features of the Neolithic period: in

different parts of the world, at the same time in a recent prehistory, environmental, demographic, or technological innovations provoked the same kind of changes, summed up in the ubiquitous and simplifying concept of a Neolithic “revolution”. This concept has been elaborated in the West, to describe the technical, social and symbolic changes observed in Europe and the Near East. However, it is now generally acknowledged that this “Neolithic revolution” could have had, in different parts of the world, very different aspects, and that this notion could even have been irrelevant in some regions. Sedentism in itself refers to the processes that led more or less mobile human societies, which were dependent on spontaneous resources, to settle down while developing various forms of plant and animal domestication (Guilaine, 2005; Higham, 2002). More specifically, it refers to the process of “rooting down” among human communities, and to the construction of territories and networks. Compared to a two-dimensional territoriality as most geographers define it, sedentism also involves a third dimension that is the affective and symbolic investment of people in their land.

Until now, other fields of Social Sciences and Humanities did not pay as much importance to this notion as did Archaeology. In Geography, although issues about territoriality have been blooming since the 1980’s, the concept has been completely overshadowed by complementary issues of mobility and migration. In social Anthropology, the notion of sedentism has never been discussed, and moreover, the spatial dimensions of societies, even though they have been addressed in Condominas’ “social space” or in Lefevre’s “production of space” for example, are mostly considered as a projection of social patterns and treated secondary. On the contrary, Social sciences have emphasized the themes of migration and “plural mobility” in their research priorities since the 1960’s. As opposed to sedentism, considered as a social and political standard, migration was first seen as motivated by a crisis (of social, environmental, demographic origin...), which could generate risks, constraints and imbalances. But subsequently, with increased globalisation towards the turn of the millenary, some authors started to consider mobility as a new standard. Bauman (2000) for instance, among others, coined the term “liquid modernity” and insisted upon the widespread “nomadism” all around the world. Such mobility resulted



in an acceleration of “deterritorialisation” and “reterritorialisation” processes, whilst the increased movements of populations and the irresistible networks of internet and of diasporas shattered National territories and questioned the functions of borders. Simultaneously, renewed attachment to place was expressed, both in Western and Asian countries, through the emergence of “heritage” policies and tales of a rediscovered or reinvented past. Local actors also sought to negotiate their economic and political place at a local, national or international scale. In that way, heritage policies and discourses often became the counterparts of the technologies of mobility and praised globalisation which went along with them.

Within this overall framework where globalisation, everywhere, had disrupted the relationships to land and places, the notion of sedentism, defined as the rooting or the attachment to places, offered a good start to question common ideas on locality, territoriality and their transformation in the globalised societies. First, there was a need to revisit the heavy ideology invested in sedentism. There has always been an opposition between sedentary peasant and pastoralists, or a gap between hunter-gatherers and farmers in most areas of the world. However such a clear-cut contrast, is a cliché derived from an evolutionist vision of cultures: that leading inexorably from the nomadic foragers of the origins to the sedentary agriculturalists. Each of these situations is associated to specific technical systems whose inevitable succession would illustrate the idea of “technical progress”. In this context, it is not surprising that the notion of sedentism is invested with conservative values (the more sedentary, the higher on the scale of evolution). It offers simultaneously striking paradoxes. For instance, one commonly contrasts rural sedentism to urban mobility - while in the history of mankind, people have been most effectively settling down in the cities! Everywhere in the world, states try to eradicate nomadism, hunting-gathering and rotational farming under various reasons: “development”, protection of the environment, control of populations, response to an international demand, etc. At the same time, by doing so, they legitimate new forms of mobility and threats which they are not always able to cope with (transnational labour migrations, depopulation of rural areas, environmental degradation).

This leads us to a second key idea which guided this conference: sedentism covers very complex situations, always involving mobility up to a certain degree; therefore the difference with migration or nomadism is not as clear-cut as could be presented. Sedentism has in itself the seeds of mobility, and in some cases can only be maintained by the migration of part of the group, for a permanent or a regular time-span. In reality, there is an interesting ambiguity in today's conceptions of sedentism. We may not be nomads anymore, but many of our practices are functioning in a way that evokes nomadism: the virtual nature of a great deal of the economy moves products and markets from one side of the earth to the other, and the circulation of people, ideas and goods, is something that has never been matched to such an extent in history. This perspective has to be carefully nuanced though: periods of acceleration and slowing down of exchanges and mobility have already occurred in the history of the world-system and many contemporary discourses on mobility seem to echo those held at the end of the 19th century when new techniques shortened distances and increased the speed of travels. Besides, not everyone can be mobile, and while some people may access to wider social and geographic spaces, others are forced into refugee camps or resettlement areas. The fact remains that the contemporary context has deeply affected our understanding of relations between people and places. It has created new connexions between local communities and the global world, a process summarized in the neologism "glocal": globalisation leads to a kind of standardisation, but this standardisation has its own character in every place. *Glocalisation* has thus created new issues, new problems, but also new opportunities.

The rediscovery of locality is certainly amongst the most interesting consequences of globalisation, and has been made possible by the generalised mobility and by the opening of communities to the rest of the world. There are however some other phenomenon which are linked to this generalised contact and that are grouped up in the different chapters of this book.

### **Ancient tales of present powers**

In order to reassert or legitimate locality or territory, local groups use specific discourses that, most of the time, resort to memory.

The rooting of societies to their land is always linked to the invocation of the past and its connection to the present according to various procedures. Typically, they consist in narratives of discovery and colonisation of a new territory, as well as of rise and fall of local powers. Chanthaphilith Chiemsisouraj provides a very good example of such narratives with the Luang Nam Tha Chronicles in Laos, which describe the very complex movements of population that occurred in this area until the colonial times. Some other procedures that are conveyed to express or reassert locality resort to another temporality, like myth, legends, or the reference to ancestry. Olivier Évrard explains how local communities legitimate their territory through mythical and/or historical narratives in the Viang Phu Kha area in Northern Laos. He sets up the myths he collected in a solid historical background and explains the ethnical composition of the region: the myth appears as an ingenious way of expressing both the complexity of the settlement and the present-day social order.

In the same region, Oliver Pryce's contribution provides major results for Palaeometallurgy and knowledge of the possible imprint of such an activity on the environment. It also gives a glimpse of the complexity of past territories and societies. It shows by assumptions and inferences that things were not as simple as they appear. The mastery of metallurgy's technical knowledge, which was essential to the old political centres, could have resulted in a distribution of powers between highlands and lowlands that was very different from today's. During the discussion it was suggested that such an archaeological approach could also provide clues or arguments for present-day territorial constructions, with all the risks arising from the possible appropriation of the results it could provide. Above all it confirms the very strong symbolic and strategic dimension involved in the past, and more precisely in the discourse on the past.

This strategic dimension can also be found reflected in the special relationship of the "first inhabitants" of a country with the land, as shown in the papers of Olivier Évrard and Marie Guémas, which both reveal their role as intermediaries with Chthonic forces inhabiting the ground. Such supernatural relationship with the territory is also present in Pr Tanabe's contribution exposing spirits

worshipping in Northern Thailand. Spirit-mediumship appears to be a reaction to disturbances at an individual level, that the author attributes to the rapid economic and social transformation of the country and to the loss of “locality”, defined as the natural relation of a culture to a geographical and social territory: spirit possession would be a kind of ritualised contestation, concludes the author, to the rise of capitalism in Thailand.

### **Constraints and opportunities of the modern state**

We noted that the considerable changes of modern times primarily affect the rooting down of societies to their places, and the state appears as one of the main agents in this disruptive process. This chapter’s idea is to confront the “spontaneous” territoriality of local communities (as derived from the history of settlement), with the constrained territoriality derived from the influence of a modern state.

Amongst the contributions which focus on public policies and their consequences on local communities, Olivier Évrard gives the general context that governs political choices affecting minority groups’ territoriality in Laos. He reminds us of the importance of different factors, such as wars, the demands of international institutions, and the changing ideology of “development” in explaining the shifts in the geostrategic value of highlands and borders. A constant of these evolutions seems to be the resilience of mobility practices amongst the populations that have adapted to extremely changing contexts in the last decades.

With specific examples from her fieldwork in the Luang Phrabang region, Marie Guemas shows how archetypal representations of territory among local communities, some flexible and some more static, explain adaptation or blocking in today’s dynamics of Lao society, changing under the pressure of the state. Moreover, her paper shows how long-term relationships between different ethnic groups have been perpetuated up to the present, and how the balance of power eventually switched to the detriment of a specific group, an idea that will be met in some other contributions.

Mallee Sitthikriengkrai describes the spontaneous territorial organization of a Karen group in the province of Chiang Mai

(Kalayani Watana district), showing how in recent years the experience of the creation of a new district and of its associated infrastructure by the Thai state, intended to be a participatory process, resulted in disarray. The manipulation of territoriality is sometimes the occasion of negotiation, when for instance local communities and the state discuss the symbols that will be retained in the construction of the modern “common building”. This process is also for the author the opportunity to convey, after Rodman (2003), the notions of “multivocality” and “multilocality”, expressing that the opening of the community to the outside world entails a multiplicity of actors and of visions of the same territory. In this process, the villagers have claimed the possibility to “dream” the future of their land, i.e. participate to its conception according to their own representations and values, before revolving back, after a disappointing experience, to their old rituals in order to restore the indispensable balance of society and territory.

### **Crisis of territory**

Some authors described modernity as being linked to the end of frontiers. But borders are still a huge issue, and in a context of important mobility, they have taken other significances. They offer opportunities to play on the different possibilities of two countries, or to re-create new societies in a foreign context; over the border one can also find possibilities that are not available in one’s original community. Borderland, as an area where the state-community confrontation is extreme, may be a zone of conflict; it is also a zone of opportunities, for the economy but also for new social or religious constructions. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti gives an example at the Burma-Thai border where, on the Burmese side, the unstable political situation, and dangers such as mines or warfare, induce work migrations towards Thailand. Thai entrepreneurs supported by governmental agencies recruit Karen workers who are the indispensable workforce of a commercial agriculture that can exist only because of the contrasts on each side of the border. This strategic use of the frontier causes back the development of cash crops in Burma, based on the same networks and know-how. Peace or conflicts around the border determine the impulse of this opportunistic economy.

Other papers evoke locality as an instrument, a pattern that can be reproduced or adapted, or that can be used to divide. Some groups resist or even escape pressure or threat on their land through mobility, migration, and ultimately the setting up of other forms of territoriality, which usually imply fluidity or networking. Re-territorialisation can also be a solution, consisting in the recreation, elsewhere, of the same territoriality or of a modified, adapted one. Kwanchewan Buadaeng, with the example of the Talaku movement of the Karen at the Thai-Burma borderland, shows that such a reterritorialisation process consists in various attempts to adjust to the power of the state. This contribution provides interesting hints on how adaptation proceeds, with different tries that can be contradictory sometimes, such as the conversion to political or religious movements, the negotiation for new land with other groups, the closing up of the society on itself or, finally, the strengthening of cultural practices.

In some cases, local groups can't keep their traditional links to the territory and have to alter deeply their patterns of mobility. The Mlabri nomadic hunter-gatherers presented by Sakkarin Na Nan offer a case in point. Under the pressure of their neighbours and of the state, they had to learn to live in a restricted place and to adapt to the life in villages. The resurgence of old patterns of mobility among the "settled Mlabri" and the geographic instability of several settlements (for various reasons) show that the state's will to have its population settled down is not easily nor completely implemented. Some recent public and private projects in Mlabri settlements have even encouraged the preservation of a nomadic tradition, either for livelihood necessity (conservation approach) or for mercantile prospects (shows for tourists).

These three texts address a theme that runs throughout the book: the symbiotic nature of the relations between highland and lowland societies and the superposition of recent political borders over older systems of territorial relations. A similar theme, with different patterns, is to be found in most Southeast Asian countries. In his latest book, James Scott (2010) classifies the highlanders as "runaways" fleeing the power of the lowland political systems, but he acknowledges that the situation has been completely transformed since the 1950s by new technologies and by techniques of control

driven by the state. However, anthropology and history show that the relations between highland and lowland populations have often been based on complementarities, rather than solely on conflict and escape. Besides, the nature of these complementarities may have changed over time: the archaeological approach alone shows that power relations between highlands and lowlands may not have been the same in the past. Similarly, policies vis-à-vis these groups can vary from one country to another, and their philosophy also varies over the recent period following the changing representations that the central states have on their minorities. This draws a very dynamic array of geopolitics between the populations of this region.

### **Mobility, identity and health care**

Our last chapter addresses these issues from the point of view of health status, practises and policies. Peter Kunstater's contribution shows how access to care epitomizes inequalities and power relations between highlanders, migrants, and lowlanders. His analysis is based on detailed statistics of Lahu, Chinese and Northern Thai communities. Major differences in access to care are due to relative poverty, limited Thai language ability and a variety of social and cultural factors. This paper also suggests some potential adjustments in local health policies that could help reduce health service disparities in the migrant and minority populations.

Health seems to express in a special way the quality of the relationship to places, and the mobility potential. Two related contributions, by Audrey Bochaton and Jean-Marc Dubost, are dedicated to medicinal plants in Laos, and question more specifically the way in which their use and commerce reflect current changes in territoriality. Plants knowledge is an intimate expression of the attachment to the land and reflects the consequences of migration in a given area. Jean-Marc Dubost's contribution compares, in different ethnic communities, how specialists pass along knowledge on medicinal plants from one generation to another. Depending on their social organisation and on other factors (writing system, relations to environment and public health services for instance), this knowledge is more or less degraded. It can also be revitalized, as shown by Audrey Bochaton's paper about the trading networks of medicinal plants among the Hmong of Laos. Such networks

connect them to the Hmong diaspora members in Western countries, who want to access traditional Hmong medicine and, beyond borders, strengthen their connection with their original land.

### **Conclusion : locality revisited**

While all these papers take as a starting point the relationship to land and the mobility patterns associated with it, they all end up converging toward the theme of local (and mainly immaterial) heritage, showing the importance of such an issue to understand social dynamics and relations between peoples and the state. The contributions reveal how local-based knowledge on nature and on the territory is intimately linked to the identity of the group, and how the severance of these links can affect local society; reversely, claims or reassertion of such links can become very strong arguments for social, territorial or political legitimation, which corresponds to the process of “heritage-making”. Most papers reveal that these processes and claims are local, spontaneous, and not imposed by the upper levels, even if they have appeared as a reaction to national or international action. These processes that we can qualify as “bottom-up” seem to be crucial in today’s approaches of heritage and they design an important entry. In some cases of course, as for diaspora networks for instance, ethnic identification takes the precedence over belonging to a place. However most contributions indicate that heritage processes are better understood at the level of the village, or rather of a group of villages, than at the scale of an ethnic groups. This observation, which matches in some ways the notion of “social space” as defined by Georges Condominas (1983), finally leads to stress the importance of fieldwork in all the papers presented here, which show research practices that are in close contact with local people, and always with a view to report on their perceptions and representations.

All the papers presented here are based on in-depth and long-term studies with the people, that the authors accepted to share with us. We thank all of them for participating to this conference, as well as all those who accepted to chair the various panels and to discuss the papers with the other contributors. We are especially grateful to Professor Charles F. Keyes who has kindly presented



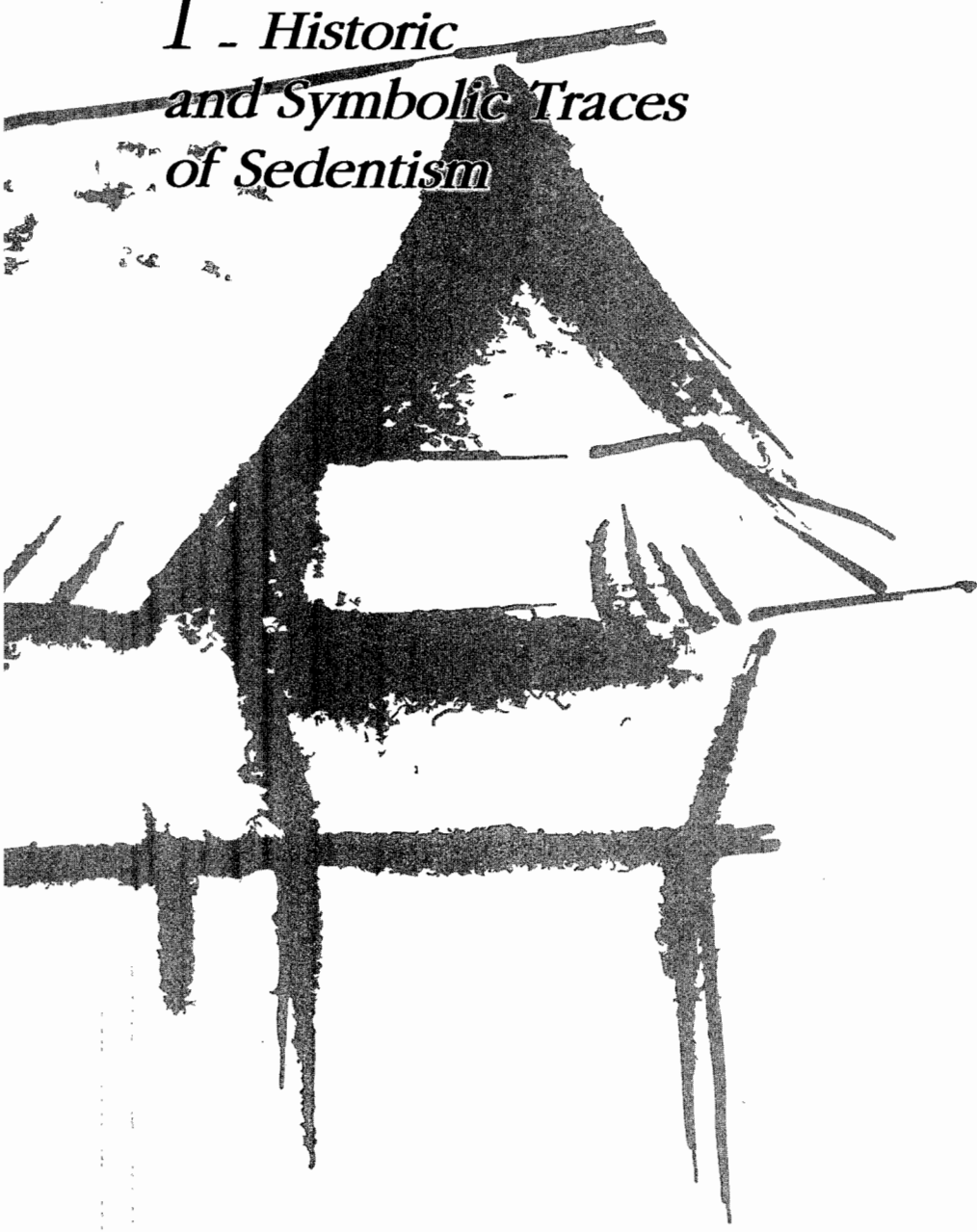
some concluding remarks at the end of the conference, and has accepted to contribute to this volume.

## References

- Bauman Z., 2000 — *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge-Malden: Polity Press – Blackwell Publishing, 240 p.
- Condominas G., 1980 — *L'espace social, à propos de l'Asie du Sud-Est*. Paris, Flammarion, 539 p.
- Guilaine J., 2005 — *Aux marges des grands foyers du Néolithique*. Paris, Editions Errance, 294 p.
- Higham Ch., 2002 — *Early Cultures of Mainland Southeast Asia*. Bangkok, River Books, 375 p.
- Rodman M.-C., 2003 — Empowering place: multilocality and multivocality. *American Anthropologist* 94, n° 3 : 640-656.
- Scott J.-C., 2010 — *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale Agrarian Studies Series, Yale University Press, 464 p.



*I - Historic  
and Symbolic Traces  
of Sedentism*





# 1 *Sedentarity and metallurgy in upland Southeast Asia*



---

OLIVER PRYCE

The study of Southeast Asia's upland populations since the eighteenth century has revealed an exceptionally complex web of interactions and practices; including commerce, conflict, industry, inter-marriage, medicine, religion, settlement, and subsistence (e.g. Crawfurd 1820; Ehlers 2002 [1894]; Harmand 1876; Valentyn 1726). To reach beyond this ethnographic data frontier is difficult due to the very low visibility of such social groups in regional textual sources more concerned with elite religious and administrative matters (e.g. Cœdés 1968). Much useful work in providing an upland Southeast Asian 'prehistory' - in the strict sense of having no textual evidence rather than pertaining to any degree of social-cultural development - has of course been done by linguists, in the provision of a phylogenetic understanding of shared terminology. DNA studies of living people are also likely to prove extremely informative from a purely biological perspective. To access other aspects of regional upland prehistory we would normally turn to the range of theoretical frameworks and practical methodologies offered by archaeology.

However, if the largely unspoken presumption that the small, shifting, swidden-farming, palafitte-dwelling, and sometimes aceramic communities attested in recent centuries are somehow 'timeless' is correct, then their ancestors' archaeological signatures can be expected to be very weak indeed, due to the much impeded concentration of architectural and midden deposits and the low environmental impact of husbandry practices. Perhaps as a consequence of these modest expectations, comparatively

little ‘upland archaeology’ has been done in Southeast Asia, and in particular there is a near complete dearth of the funerary assemblages which might permit the phenotypic and isotopic studies that are showing promise in lowland areas, as well as the technically difficult prospect of ancient DNA research (e.g. Cox *et al.*, 2011; Oxenham and Tayles 2006).

One feasible upland archaeological approach then is to pursue evidence for past industrial activities as means of reconstructing economic, settlement, and social interaction histories (e.g. Miller, 2007). Unfortunately, many of the known productive accomplishments of present and recent upland populations will not serve, being in large part based upon the exploitation of vegetal material, and thus likely to degrade in a humid climate. For the deepest time perspectives, technological studies of lithic tools and weapons of course reign supreme, but from the advent of the Mainland Southeast Asian Bronze Age c. 1000 BC (e.g. Higham *et al.*, 2011; Pryce *et al.*, 2011; cf. White and Hamilton 2009) metal production - in particular mining and smelting which tend to be concentrated in metallogenic upland areas with substantial forestry fuel reserves - offers a significant window of interpretive opportunity due to the concomitant accumulation of substantial and durable deposits of high-temperature waste-products like technical ceramics (crucibles, furnaces, tuyères, and moulds) and slag (the anthropogenic ‘rock’ composed of aluminosilicate impurities and iron oxide, e.g. Pryce and Natapintu 2009), and potentially strong environmental pollution and biodiversity signatures (e.g. Breitenlechner *et al.* 2010). Founded upon the fundamental anthropological observation that the particular ways in which people go about technical tasks in their daily lives can be socially indicative, (e.g. Lechtman 1977; Roux 2007; Stark 1998; Stark *et al.*, 2008), the study of ancient metallurgy, ‘archaeometallurgy’, also benefits from the analytical affordances of it being a technology that:

1. Must operate within known thermodynamic constraints but is sufficiently flexible to offer a wide range of technical solutions to ancient metalworkers (e.g. Killick 2004; Rehren *et al.* 2007). **This permits the characterisation of social groups through technological styles;**

2. Always indicates a relatively high level of skill if performed successfully, which implies close and prolonged cooperation for high fidelity technological transmission within and between social groups (e.g. Charlton *et al.*, 2010; Keller and Keller 1996). **This permits the identification and characterisation of population interactions and movements through technological style comparisons;**

3. Requires unevenly distributed raw materials, that we can often distinguish geochemically (e.g. Leroy *et al.* in press; Pryce *et al.* 2011). **This permits the identification of exchange/trade patterns and the reconstruction of past economies and political geographies.**

Furthermore, ancient metallurgy has long been associated with increasing *economic specialisation*, *social stratification*, and *political complexity* (e.g. Childe 1936: 157-201; Roberts *et al.* 2009); though this remains to be fully established in Southeast Asia (cf. Bacus 2006; Higham 2009). All the above factors, alongside the persistence of extractive metallurgy as a major component (c. 10%) of Global World Product (e.g. Anon. 2011; Spitz and Trudinger 2008)<sup>1</sup>, combine to make archaeological evidence for primary metal production a particularly potent form of **industrial heritage**.

### **The Saphim iron smelting workshop**

In this paper, I present a recently discovered early historic iron production tradition in the ethnic Lamet (Rmeet) uplands West of the Nam Tha (River Tha) in Nalae District, Luang Namtha Province, Northwest Lao PDR (Figure 1). The site in question is located at an altitude of c. 1100m on a ridge between the two hilltop Lamet villages of Saphim (*Sa Prim* in Lamet, meaning ‘Old Place’) and Talouy (101.076° E, 20.320° N). A single small sub-circular surface feature was first reported by Hideyoshi Kavasima in 2008 whilst conducting research on bronze drums in Luang Namtha province. This led to a field investigation in July 2010.

---

<sup>1</sup> An industry heavily represented in Southern economies (e.g. Adams 2009; McGregor 2008).

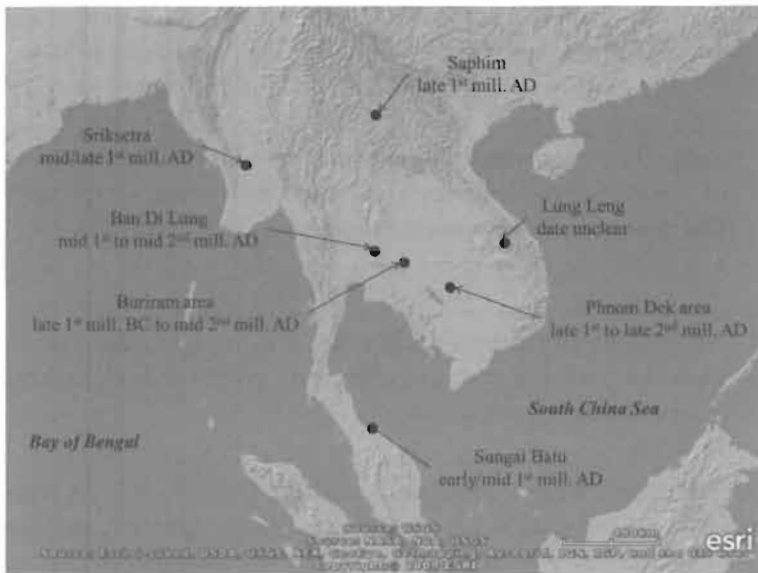


Figure 1



Figure 2

Upon arrival the sub-circular feature was still visible, consisting of ceramic wall sections c. 10 cm thick, arranged in a diameter of 50-60 cm. Clearing away the leaf litter and overburden swiftly



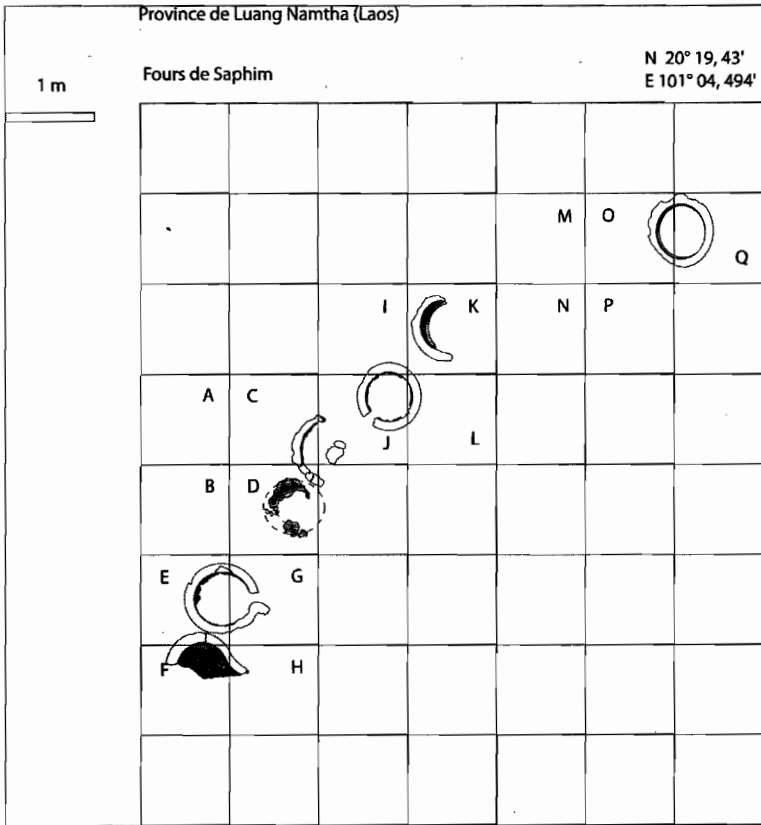


Figure 3

revealed a further five such fragmentary ceramic structures arranged in a row extending SW-NE, with a seventh slightly offset (Figures 2 & 3). Within the 10 cm of topsoil removed were recovered fragments of vitrified ceramic, tuyère, quartz, haematite, and dense slag with flow marks (Figure 4), highly suggestive of an iron smelting operation (Bachmann 1982). Villagers informed that both the haematite and quartz could be found nearby, the latter in stream beds. The linear arrangement of the furnaces at a relatively uniform floor level suggested a workshop representing either simultaneous production or a production sequence; based on the supposition that chronologically superposed production would be less likely to produce a neat row of furnaces (Figure 5). To test this idea the two terminal features, F and Q, were sectioned to confirm the technology and investigate the form and date of

the furnaces. Considering the typically poor survival of smelting furnaces a relatively recent date was assumed for the site, which was subsequently sampled for thermoluminescence (TL) rather than radiocarbon dating - performed by Dr. Jean-Luc Schwenger and his team at the University of Oxford.

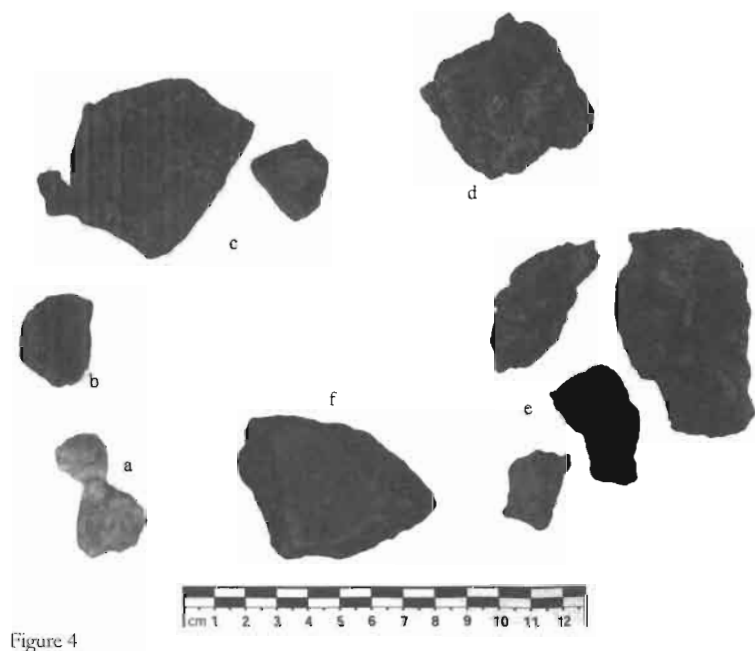


Figure 4

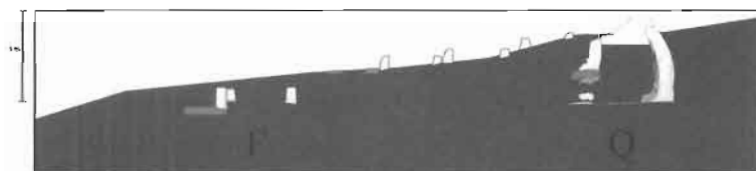


Figure 5

The southernmost furnace, F, was c. 50% complete in circumference and 20-25cm in depth. Practically no slag, ceramic, mineral, or charcoal was recovered from the interior, but this could be the result of the structure having been incomplete and emptied. Three ceramic samples taken from the furnace wall provide TL dates of  $631 \pm 170$ ,  $731 \pm 370$ , and  $1011 \pm 150$  AD.



Figure 6

The northernmost furnace, Q, buried in a bank, transpired to be near complete (Figure 6). Standing about 100 cm tall, the external diameter varied from 60-70 cm at the circular rim to 110-120 cm at the sub-circular base, which formed a salient in the south-easterly downslope direction. This feature can be used to better understand the other furnaces, whose sub-circular remains probably represent bases rather than rims. Furnace Q's wall thickness ranged from 10 cm at the top to 20 cm at the base and at least seven re-linings could be detected, suggesting multiple repair and reuse (Figure 7). Despite excavating around the

back of the furnace no tuyères were discovered *in situ*, but a large root penetrating about halfway up the rear wall probably followed a pre-existing opening for air blast provision. The presence of a c. 15 cm x 20 cm opening at the south-easterly basal salient indicates a slag tapping operation, and a c. 10 cm x 15 cm x 25 cm stone

Figure 7



just inside the furnace may have been used to stop the hole during the smelt (Figure 8). No tapping pit was detected but the direction of the tap hole would have led any slag to flow downhill out of the furnace. A single fist-sized fragment of dense furnace slag was recovered from the base of the interior and several similar sized chunks from the surrounding fill, but there was an absence of the quantity of slag expected from a furnace of this size, especially if it was being used repeatedly. It should be noted that the workshop lies adjacent to a precipitous and now thickly forested slope and it is thus quite feasible that past metalworkers kept their workspace clear by throwing cold slag down the hillside; a scenario that could not be checked safely at this time. Three ceramic samples taken from the furnace wall gave TL dates of  $621\pm270$ ,  $771\pm190$ , and  $1181\pm170$  AD.

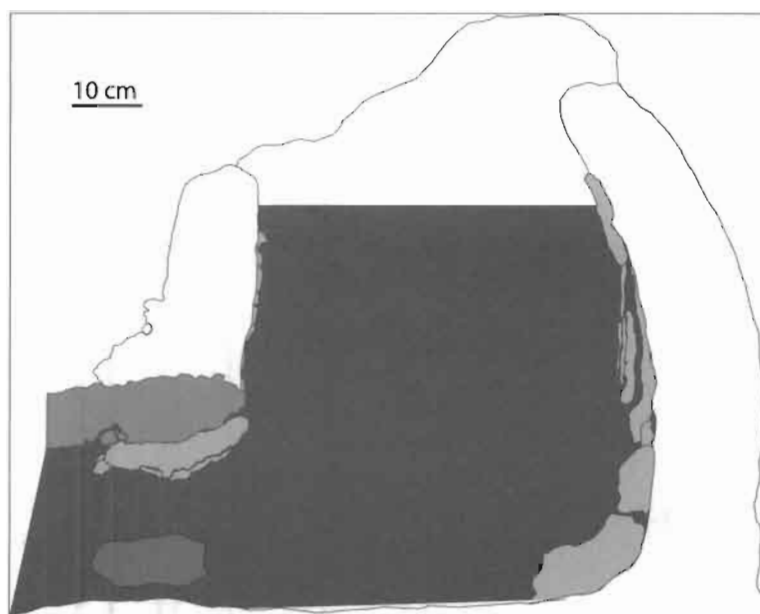


Figure 8

Based upon the range of available TL dates, and working with a conservative estimation of background radioactivity, Dr. Jean-Luc Schwenninger (pers. comm.) suggests the last operation of the two

terminal furnaces was c. 800 AD, and possibly earlier. Furthermore, the relative contemporaneity of furnaces F and Q, and presumed of the intervening structures, supports the initial impression that the site represents an organised industrial facility (see e.g. Costin 1991; Costin 2001 for a theoretical/methodological perspective; and Egyptian Qantir Piramesses in Pusch 1995 for a well known example).

## Discussion

This evidence reasonably establishes the presence of an eighth/ninth century iron smelting workshop on a ridge in the northwest Lao PDR. I suggest that this is a rather important discovery, being the first pre-modern iron smelting site reported in the Lao PDR, and one of only a handful known in Mainland Southeast Asia (Figure 1), but more importantly for the purpose of the present volume, the degree of *capital investment* and *organisation* demonstrated in the workshop may indicate a *sedentary* community with some degree of *social complexity*.

The major issue in the way of placing the Saphim workshop in its historical context is its being the first formally excavated and radiometrically dated site in Luang Namtha Province. That is, there is no settlement history in the area with which to correlate the iron smelting activity - realistically beyond the ethnographic records of Izikowitz (2001 [1951]) only eight decades ago – and thus I cannot offer a well-evidenced interpretation of the social organisation of production (*sensu* Costin 1991; Costin 2001). As Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic) language speakers, the present Lamet population would generally be assumed to be autochthonous inhabitants within the region (e.g. Sanchez-Mazas *et al.* 2008), and thus good candidates to be the biological and cultural descendants of the here attested eighth/ninth century iron producers. However, in the absence of any other physical evidence, what archaeologist would not hesitate before leaping more than a millennium to assume social continuity? Nevertheless, the consideration of local ethnographic and historical data, alongside regional iron producer comparators, allows some interpretive purchase whilst the necessary long term Lamet settlement and material culture data accumulate.

### ***Decline of an industry***

There are no known records of the Lamet having been associated with the production of iron. Indeed, Izikowitz (2001 [1951]: 146) reports that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only did the upland Lamet obtain the iron they needed for agricultural tools by exchanging rice with lowland ethnic Tai groups near Luang Prabang, they were also noted for their lack of proficiency in the smithy (*ibid.*: 79) – secondary not primary metal production. That is, if the Saphim workshop was operated by the ancestors of the present day Lamet, those latter have experienced the near total loss of a technological tradition over the course of some twelve centuries. Such shifts in a population's productive repertoire are by no means extraordinary; peoples' subsistence and industrial output achieving punctuated equilibria with their social and natural environment (e.g. Roux 2003; Shennan 1999). Given the high communication costs that continue to exist in the Lamet uplands, it is quite reasonable that a degree of self-sufficiency in iron production was advantageous in an area that was constituted of unstable and overlapping polities until the establishment of the Lao PDR (Stuart-Fox 1997), but perhaps it became culturally undesirable to smelt iron locally, or it was overwhelmingly economically expedient to import it, or the necessary raw materials had become inaccessible or depleted.

The economical expediency scenario may have some historical precedence as Izikowitz (2001 [1951]: 313) also records that whilst French steel was not in favour with Lao blacksmiths, being too costly and hard (presumably high in carbon), the low-carbon Swedish variety was extremely popular and was traded far into the Southeast Asian upland ethnic minority areas, including that of the Lamet.

*“Such steel is produced today at a few Swedish foundries, and this only for the purpose of export to the primitive blacksmiths of exotic lands. The Swedish export of this steel has been going on since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it has partially displaced the native production of steel” (ibid.).*

Whilst the commencement of Swedish imports in the seventeenth century cannot account for the decline of the Saphim workshop

some eight centuries earlier, the direct European contact experience does perhaps offer an economic comparative economic advantage model for the mid/late 1st millennium AD (e.g. Shennan 1999). It should be recalled that the Lamet uplands are less than 100 km from the modern border of the Lao PDR and the Peoples' Republic of China (Figure 1). The exact position and character of the southern boundary of the eighth/ninth century Nanzhao kingdom is not clear (Backus 1981; Twitchett 1979), but *T'ang* dynasty iron production was operating with potentially substantial economies of scale and organised, which could reasonably have disrupted or displaced production at the Saphim workshop in that local people may have preferred to exchange their labour for 'Chinese' iron (Needham 1958; Wagner 1993). We are not as yet overwhelmed with evidence for contemporary iron mining and smelting activity in Southeast Asia (Figure 1), although it doubtless exists, but alternative regional iron supply could have come from: Thailand (also attested historically by Izikowitz 2001 [1951]: 146), for example where Pornchai Suchitta (1983; 1992) investigated a sixth century AD iron smelting site at Ban Di Lung; from Burma, also noted for the recent past by Izikowitz (2001 [1951]: 146), where Hudson (2006: 9) considers that the post 1500 AD furnace he excavated near Popa may have antecedents outside the mid/late 1st millennium AD city of Sriksetra (Gutman and Hudson 2004: 160); and Cambodia, where smelting sites associated with the iron-producing ethnic minority *Kuay* people have now been dated as far back as the eighth century AD (Hendrickson et al. in press)— of which more below. So much for attempting to explain the death of the Saphim workshop; what can we offer by way of its life?

### ***Rise of an industry***

Firstly, if one applies the 'upland timelessness presumption' mentioned in the introduction, then an eighth/ninth century upland population in the Saphim area that employed a comparable subsistence regime of swidden agriculture plus hunting and gathering as the modern Lamet would have had an understandable need for iron tools and weapons. The potential complication comes when we consider the scale, investment, and organisation of the Saphim workshop. Only the terminal furnaces, F and Q, have been dated

and it is not certain that either they or the intervening structures were in literally simultaneous operation. However, I maintain that for such a linear arrangement (Figure 5) to have transpired, at least two furnaces must have been at least visible at the time a new one was built. Given that the workshop's slag dump has not yet been discovered, I am at present unable to evaluate the evolution of metallurgical behaviour in terms of smelting charge recipe, nor calculate the efficiency and output of the process (e.g. Charlton *et al.* 2010; Pryce *et al.* 2010; Rehren *et al.* 2007). Nevertheless, global experience with pre-modern iron smelting technologies suggests that furnaces of a similar size to Saphim furnace Q (Figure 6) could produce tens of kilos of iron with each operation. Multiply this by the number of re-linings (at least seven, Figure 7), and again by the number of furnaces (at least seven, Figure 3), and we are beginning to obtain a picture whereby the potential metal output of the workshop seems in excess of the needs of small (a few hundred persons) villages like present day Saphim and Talouy.

In terms of organisation, furnaces the size of Saphim Q cannot be operated by one person. A family or clan group could certainly handle the workload, which is not inconsiderable when the major labour requirements of mineral extraction and preparation, charcoal production, clay processing, and the all-important air blast provision (bellows) are taken into account. What should we think though if more than one furnace was operating at the same time, as could be interpreted of their layout? I speculate that although the labour for multiple furnace iron smelting could be provided from one village, it would probably require inter-clan or possibly inter-village cooperation. This requirement for the effective coordination of individuals' actions does not correlate well with the present day and historic Lamet data for social groups relatively undifferentiated by status and authority. This is not of course to say that the Saphim workshop could not have been operated in multi-furnace mode by Lamet ancestors, but rather that the social groups responsible may have had a more hierarchical structure than the extant Lamet records allow for (Sprengr 2008; 2010).

The other striking feature of the workshop is the degree of capital investment it represents. Modifying the traditional state-centred/



sponsored view of metal production (e.g. Childe 1936), current doctrine holds that metalworking communities can be highly mobile, especially when employing a portable or easily constructed apparatus (e.g. White and Hamilton 2009), but this is not what we see at Saphim. I would estimate that the near complete furnace, Q (Figure 6) may contain up to 250 kg of clay, a substantial mass to collect and prepare, which when multiplied across the workshop indicates that substantial, probably group, effort went into its production. Furthermore, the range of TL dates suggests an extended period of use, which with the evidence for maintenance (Figure 7) is compatible with *trans-generational capital investment*. Thus I argue that unless the operators of the Saphim workshop could be quite sure that their industrial infrastructure would not be exploited/degraded by other groups operating in the area, they were quite likely to be representative of a sedentary population.

### ***Upland labour for lowland buffaloes, Lamet iron for exogenous wealth indicators?***

In attempting to explain the attested scale of production, I propose three major scenarios:

1. Community specialised iron production for consumption by neighbouring upland groups;
2. Community specialised iron production as a means of accessing regional markets;
3. Community specialised iron production for consumption by a regional polity.

Of these, the first is entirely reasonable and should probably be the default interpretation, though it cannot be demonstrated with the current archaeological data. The second possibility, production to access regional markets, can be explored using the Lamet ethnographic data.

Buffalo ownership is one of the major indicators of wealth in upland Lamet society, key to attaining *lem* status, and the sacrifice of buffalo to the spirits and recently deceased is still commonly practiced at marriages, illnesses, and deaths, respectively (Sprenger 2005; 2006). Although buffalo may be kept in upland Lamet villages, they tend not to be reared there, being obtained instead from

lowland groups of other ethnicities, which presumably enhances their prestige value (cf. Helms 1988). The buffalo are paid for with Lamet labour, in particular their specialisation in carpentry, and the necessarily shared Lamet effort in house building in foreign villages often results in complicated shared ownerships of buffalo (Sprenger 2005). An alternative to the buffalo practice was noted by Izikowitz (Izikowitz 2001 [1951]: 102) in that Lamet males would go to Thailand (then Siam) in order to acquire bronze drums from upland *Karen* ethnic minority groups, which were used as a store of wealth to achieve *lem* status, in the purchase of brides, and in the performance of ancestor rites. Thus it seems that the present and recent historical Lamet have a predilection for the acquisition of 'exotic' items to satisfy their socio-economic needs. It is in this frame that I wonder whether the iron produced at the mid/late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD Saphim workshop was in fact to be used as a medium of exchange for prestige goods. Given the shared labour in iron production, perhaps the resultant 'exotics' might also have had shared ownership, as per the buffalo (Sprenger 2005)? Only the excavation of such exogenous materials from contemporary settlement sites in the locality may determine if any truth lies in this speculation.

### ***Kuay and Khmer: Lamet iron to a regional polity?***

Finally, we might consider whether the Saphim workshop was producing iron, freely or under some form of coercion, for a regional power centre or *müang* as they were beginning to be known in this period for *Tai* speaking lowland groups (Wyatt 2003). Spheres of influence remain unclear but the nearest candidates are *Chiang Saen* (100.088° E, 20.275° N) and *Sipsong Pan Na* (100.797° E, 22.008° N), both of which sit on the banks of the River Mekong in present day Thailand and Yunnan, respectively, and could thus have conducted trade and other relations with the Lamet highlands relatively easily via the River *Tha* tributary. Again, whilst the necessary methodologies exist to track iron exchange networks (e.g. Leroy *et al.* in press), we need a huge expansion in the archaeological dataset to test this hypothesis.

The best known contemporary Southeast Asian power centre, Angkor, in northwest Cambodia, was in its nascent form c. 800 AD and at no point in the next 650 years did the Khmer Angkorian Empire exercise direct political and economic influence over the Lamet uplands (Hendrickson 2010). We may thus rule out Angkor as a likely destination for Saphim iron, but it does offer a potential analogy in upland/lowland socioeconomic relationships. The ethnic *Kuay* minority have an historic homeland in Preah Vihear province, which also contains Cambodia's only extensive reserves of high-quality iron oxides around Phnom Dek (Figure 1). Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century accounts of francophone travellers record certain *Kuay* groups as specializing in the production of iron, which was exchanged in ingot form, sometimes serving as money, across colonial Cochinchina (e.g. Harmand 1876). Recently, investigations by the "Industries of Angkor Project" and the "Iron *Kuay* Project" have identified iron smelting sites in the Phnom Dek region dated to post-Angkorian (15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> c. AD), Angkorian (9<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> c. AD), and pre-Angkorian (8<sup>th</sup> c. AD) periods (Hendrickson, in press), which provides empirical support to earlier speculation that the ancestral *Kuay* may have interacted with, and been integral to, Angkor, due to their provision of the iron needed for the Khmer's intensive agricultural production, vast building programs and fervent militarism (Cœdés, 1968).

Whether a similar situation pertains for Saphim iron remains to be determined, but as regional metal-related archaeological research continues to propagate I consider that we may well find ourselves in receipt of a critical dataset for understanding complex inter-dependency relationships that may have existed between mineral and fuel-rich upland populations and those of the fertile lowlands of Southeast Asia. This would imply that **industrial heritage** may be able to evidence the implicit participation of at least some upland populations in the regional **state and nation-forming** processes that are typically thought to be entirely unrelated to them and driven largely by lowland majority groups and their adaptation of extra-Southeast Asian cultural influences – e.g. China and India. Concurrently, we must confront presumptions of timelessness by acknowledging that we know practically nothing of regional upland prehistory, and thus that the ancestors of present day

populations may have had **sedentary** and **hierarchical** socio-cultural configurations far removed from those with which we are ethnographically familiar. The answers await us, however faint, underground.

## Acknowledgements

I offer my grateful thanks to my colleagues who helped me in the field, Chanthaphilith Chiemsisouraj, Valery Zeitoun, Hubert Forestier, the headman, Mr. Bun Mi, and villagers of *Ban Saphim*, to Mr. Mieng Lorvankham, Director of the National Museum of Luang Namtha, and Mr. Sengphet Nokhamsomphu of the Laotian Ministry of Information and Culture, as well as Olivier Évrard, Mitch Hendrickson, and Stephen Murphy for their useful comments. This investigation was funded by the French ANR program SUDS “*sedentarité autour du Mékong*”, directed by Prof. D. Guillaud, and my own position at the University of Oxford is supported by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship.

## References

- Adams W. M., 2009 — *Green Development: Environment and Sustainability in a Developing World*, London & New York, Routledge.
- Anon., 2011, — *CIA World Factbook* [Online]. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>. [Accessed February 2011].
- Backus C., 1981. — *The Nan-chao Kingdom and T'ang China's China's Southwestern Frontier*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Bacus E.-A., 2006. — Social identities in Bronze Age Northeast Thailand: Intersections of gender, status, and ranking at Non Nok Tha. In: Bacus, E. A., Glover, I. C. & Pigott, V. C. (eds.) *Uncovering Southeast Asia's past: Selected papers from the 10th international conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*. Singapore: National University of Singapore., 105-115.
- Breitenlechner E., Hilber M., Lutz J., Kathrein Y., Unterkircher A. & Oeggl K., 2010 — The impact of mining activities on the environment reflected by pollen, charcoal and geochemical analyses. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 37, 1458-1467.
- Charlton M. F., Crew P., Rehren T. & Shennan S., 2010 — Explaining the evolution of ironmaking recipes - An example from northwest Wales. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 29, 352-367.
- Childe V. G., 1936 — *Man makes himself*, London, Watts.

- Cœdés G., 1968 — *The Indianised States of Southeast Asia*, Canberra, ANU Press.
- Costin C. L., 1991 — Craft Specialisation: Issues in Defining, Documenting and Explaining the Organisation of Production. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 3, 1-56.
- Costin C. L., 2001 — Craft Production Systems. In: Feinman, G. M. & Price, T. D. (eds.) *Archaeology at the Millennium: A Sourcebook*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 273-327.
- Cox K. J., Bentley R. A., Tayles N., Buckley H. R., Macpherson C. G. & Cooper M. J., 2011 — Intrinsic or extrinsic population growth in Iron Age northeast Thailand? The evidence from isotopic analysis. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 38, 665-671.
- Crawfurd J., 1820 — *History of the Indian archipelago*, Edinburgh, Archibald Constable and Co.
- Ehlers O. E., 2002 [1894] — *On Horseback through Indochina. (Volume 2. Burma, North Thailand, the Shan States and Yunnan)*, Bangkok, White Lotus.
- Gutman P., & Hudson R., 2004 — The archaeology of Burma (Myanmar) from prehistory to Bagan. In: Glover I. C. & Bellwood P. (eds.) *Southeast Asia – from Prehistory to History*. London: Routledge/Curzon, 149-178.
- Harmand D., 1876 — Voyage au Cambodge. *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, 337-367.
- Helms M. W., 1988 — *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographical Distance*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Hendrickson M., 2010 — Historic routes to Angkor: development of the Khmer road system (ninth to thirteenth centuries AD) in mainland Southeast Asia. *Antiquity*, 84, 480-496.
- Hendrickson M., Pryce T. O. & Sonnemann T., in press — Industries of Angkor Project: Preliminary investigation of iron production at Boeng Kroam, Preah Khan of Kompong Svay. *Sikhsacakr*.
- Higham C., 2009 — Thailand's Bronze Age superburials: The aristocrats of Ban Non Wat. *Current World Archaeology*, 35, 18-23.
- Higham C., Higham T., Ciarla R., Douka K., Kijngam A. & Rispoli, F. 2011 — The Origins of the Bronze Age of Southeast Asia. *Journal of World Prehistory*, 24, 227-274.
- Hudson B., 2006 — Iron in Myanmar. *Enchanting Myanmar*, 5, 6-9.
- Izikowitz K. G., 2001 [1951] — *Lamet: Hill peasants in French Indochina*, Bangkok, White Lotus.
- Keller C. M. & Keller J. D., 1996 — *Cognition and tool use: The blacksmith at work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Killick D. J., 2004 — What Do We Know about African Iron Working? *Journal of African Archaeology*, 2, 97-112.

- Lechtman H., 1977 — Style in technology: some early thoughts. In: Lechtman, H. & Merrill, R. S. (eds.) *Material Culture: Styles, Organization, and Dynamics of Technology*. St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 3-20.
- Leroy S., Cohen S. X., Verna C., Gratuze B., Téregeol F., Fluzin P., Bertrand L. & Dillmann P., in press — Depiction of the medieval iron market in Ariège (France): Multidisciplinary analytical approach and first development of multivariate analyses. *Journal of Archaeological Science*.
- McGregor A., 2008 — *Southeast Asian Development*, London & New York, Routledge.
- Miller H., 2007 — *Archaeological approaches to technology*, New York, Elsevier.
- Needham J. 1958 — *The Development of Iron and Steel technology in Ancient China*, London, Newcomen Society.
- Oxenham M. & Tayles N. (eds.), 2006 — *Bioarchaeology of Southeast Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pryce T. O., Brauns M., Chang N., Pernicka E., Pollard M., Ramsey C., Rehren T., Souksavatdy V. & Sayavongkhamdy T., 2011 — Isotopic and technological variation in prehistoric primary Southeast Asian copper production. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 38, 3309-3322.
- Pryce T. O. & Natapintu S., 2009 — Smelting iron from laterite: Technical possibility or ethnographic aberration? *Asian Perspectives*, 48, 249-264.
- Pryce T. O., Pigott V. C., Martínón-Torres M. & Rehren T., 2010 — Prehistoric Copper Production and Technological Reproduction in the Khao Wong Prachan Valley of Central Thailand. *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*, 2, 237-264.
- Pusch E., 1995 — High Temperature Industries in the Late Bronze Age Capital of Piramesse (Qantir): II. A Quasi-Industrial Bronze Factory Installation, Tools, and Artifacts. In: Esmael F. A. (ed.) *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Egyptian Mining and Metallurgy and Conservation of Metallic Artifacts*. Cairo: Ministry of Culture, Supreme Council of Antiquities, 121-132.
- Rehren T., Charlton M., Chirikure S., Humphris J., Ige A. & Veldhuijzen H. A., 2007 — Decisions set in slag: the human factor in African iron smelting. In: Niece, S. L., Hook, D. & Craddock, P. (eds.) *Metals and mines: Studies in archaeometallurgy*. London: Archetype Publications Ltd, 211-218.
- Roberts B. W., Thornton C. P. & Pigott V. C., 2009 — Development of metallurgy in Eurasia. *Antiquity*, 83, 1012-1022.
- Roux V., 2003 — A Dynamic Systems Framework for Studying Technological Change: Application to the Emergence of the Potter's Wheel in the Southern Levant. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 10, 1-30.
- Roux V., 2007 — Ethnoarchaeology: A non historical science of reference necessary for interpreting the past. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 14, 153-178.

- Sanchez-Mazas A., Blench R., Ross M. D., Peiros I. & Lin M. (eds.), 2008 — *Past human migrations in East Asia: Matching archaeology, linguistics, and genetics*, New York: Routledge.
- Shennan S. J., 1999 — Cost, Benefit, and Value in the Organization of Early European Copper Production. *Antiquity*, 73, 352-363.
- Spitz K. & Trudinger J., 2008 — *Mining and the Environment: From Ore to Metal*, London, CRC Press.
- Sprenger G., 2005 — The Way of the Buffaloes: Trade and Sacrifice in Northern Laos. *Ethnology*, 291-312.
- Sprenger G., 2006 — *Die Männer, die den Geldbaum fällten: Konzepte von Austausch und Gesellschaft bei den Rmeet von Takheung, Laos*, Berlin, LitVerlag.
- Sprenger G., 2008 — Do the Rmeet have clans? In: Goudineau, Y. & Lorrillard, M. (eds.) *New research on Laos*. Ventiane & Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 559-578.
- Sprenger G., 2010 — From Power to Value: Ranked Titles in an Egalitarian Society, Laos. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 69, 403-425.
- Stark M. T. (ed.), 1998 — *The Archaeology of Social Boundaries*, Washington, London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Stark M. T., Bowser B. J. & Hornes L. (eds.), 2008 — *Cultural Transmission and Material Culture: Breaking Down Boundaries*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Stuart-Fox M., 1997 — *A History of Laos*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Suchitta P., 1983 — *The history and development of iron smelting technology in Thailand*. PhD PhD, Brown University.
- Suchitta P., 1992 — Early iron smelting technology in Thailand and its implications. In: Glover, I. C., Suchitta, P. & Villiers, J. (eds.) *Early Metallurgy, Trade and Urban Centres in Thailand and Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 115-123.
- Twitchett D. (ed.), 1979 — *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589-906, Part I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Valentyn F., 1726 — *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, Dordrecht and Amsterdam.
- Wagner D. B., 1993 — *Iron and Steel in Ancient China*, Leiden, E.J. Brill.
- White J. C. & Hamilton E. G., 2009 — The Transmission of Early Bronze Technology to Thailand: New Perspectives. *Journal of World Prehistory*, 22, 357-397.
- Wyatt D. K., 2003 — *Thailand - A Short History, second edition*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.





## 2 *Fouling, deserting and returning: the impeded sedentism of Northern Tai populations*

An analysis of the Luang Namtha Chronicles



CHANTHAPHILITH CHIEMSISOURAJ

Chao Noy Silanka Chaiñavong and his cousin Noy Insong Kaliñavong are descendants of two important local families of Luang Namtha in Northern Laos. Both of them were willing to contribute to the historical knowledge about their area and to the memory of their ancestors who ruled Luang Namtha. Mr Noy Insong Kaliñavong wrote several pieces on the history of this region but unfortunately he passed away in 1999, at the age of 80, before he was able to achieve completely his work. Chao Noy Silanka Chaiñavong on the other hand wrote two books: the *Luang Namtha Chronicle*, and a piece entitled *Yuan-Lue traditional customs*. Both authors wrote in tham yuan script on mulberry tree paper books.

The two books of Chao Noy Silanka Chaiñavong were summarized and transliterated into modern Lao by Mr Inpan Chanthaphon, known locally as Tui Pan, of Ban Vieng Nuea, while the History of Luang Namtha by Noy Insong Kaliñavong was transliterated by his nephew, the Honorable Khamsaen Chaiñavong (son of Chao Noy Silanka Chaiñavong) and by Professor Volker Grabowsky. Then, the Honorable Khamsaen Chaiñavong, continued working on the manuscripts of his uncle which were finally divided in five booklets (they now include historical events until 1961) and completed in 2005. Now the Honorable Khamsaen is in his eighties and stays in Vientiane Capital at Ban Thong Sang Nang.

These documents are very interesting since few historical data are available on this part of Laos. They allow us to better understand the numerous migrations of various ethnic groups in this area (especially the Tai populations: Tai-Lue, Tai-Yuan and Tai-Dam) as well as the political connections existing between this area and other regions in Southeast Asia during the last centuries. They show that the sedentary occupation of the lowlands by the Tai was impeded by the numerous wars between their kingdoms. Nonetheless, memory of the place survived and is currently revived by the local Yuan descendants of the first settlers.

### **The political chronology in Luang Namtha according to the chronicles**

As in the Luang Prabang chronicles, the history of Luang Namtha begins by the attack of Khun Lo on Khun Kang Hang, the legendary Austroasiatic King of Muang Sua (nowadays Luang Phrabang). Khun Kang Hang, defeated by Khun Lo, retreated to Luang Namtha area and built a refuge in Vieng Phoukha (around 50 km south of the plain of Luang Namtha). Khun Lo became the first Lao King<sup>1</sup> of Luang Phrabang and changed the name of Muang Sua for Xiengthong. Then, after Khun Lo, 22 Lao kings successively ruled Luang Phrabang until Fa Ngum united the Lao Kingdom (Lan Xang) and became king in 1353.

The year after, in 1354, he went northwards upstream the Mekong River to extend the northern territories of his kingdom until Sipsong Panna. After setting the border with Chiang Saen at a buffer city called Phadai, Fa Ngum went back downstream and ordered his lieutenants to take all so-called “Kha Kao” (austroasiatic populations)<sup>2</sup> from the areas of Luang Namtha to Xiengthong, the capital of his kingdom. According to the chronicles, Fa Ngum allowed only 20 Khmu families to remain in Vieng Phu Kha area: 20 families in Phu Chomchaeng and 20 families in Phukhun. This is why Luang Namtha (or at least its surroundings since it is not clear

---

<sup>1</sup> The territories of Muang Sua may covered also Luang Namtha and Vieng Phukha. Khun Kang Hang lost only the eastern part of his kingdom. .

<sup>2</sup> On this practice of moving populations from subjugated territories, see below.

if the Kha Kao were really inhabiting the lowlands at that time), was left empty of its people for the first time in 1356.

A first attempt to repopulate Luang Namtha seemed to have occurred in 1417 when, according to the *Xieng Hung Chronicle*, the king of Swaenwi Xieng Hung, Chao Sua Luang Fa, sent his son, Yot and entourage and villagers to govern Muang Luang Namtha<sup>3</sup>. A second attempt of repopulation occurred in 1485. At that time, the kingdoms of Lan Xang and Ayutaya had become allied. King La Saen Tai Phuvanath and King Rameswan had made their kingdoms peaceful and prosperous. However, troubles occurred in Lan Xang due to Nang Maha Thevi (or Nang Phimpha) and the Dai Viet War (1479-1480). The Lan Xang took this opportunity to come back and repopulate Luang Namtha.

The history of this region during the following century is not clear and it seems that Luang Namtha, as a borderland between Lan Sang, Sip Song Panna and Siam was alternatively under Lao, Lue and Yuan influence. The chronicles only mentions that in 1629, while Luang Namtha was ruled by a local leader known as Phaya Luang Han Surin, two chedi, Chedi Phupuk and Chedi Phu Prasad, were built in Luang Nam Tha plain as the celebration of a territorial agreement between two rulers known as Sutho Thammaraja for Siam and Phaya Nalae Taphay for Lan Sang. This agreement said that the neighboring city of Mueang Sai was to be considered as the border between Lue and Lao territories. In the following years, several of the descendants of Sutho Thammaraja would rule Luang Namtha, as shown in the list of rulers given by the chronicle from 1624 up to 1927.

- 1624-1633 Phaya Luang Han Surin ruled Luang Namtha with 27 families from Xieng Hung, under the suzerainty of Chiang Saen.
- 1633-1658: Chao Xang Phueak (Son of Southo Thammaraja)
- 1658-1687: Chao Luang Hark Muong (brother of precedent).

---

<sup>3</sup> The *Chronicles* didn't mention the Tributary Missions and Trade between Luang Prabang and the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) which were prosperous during 1402-1485; they took both the land routes and the inland waterways: Luang Prabang-Viang Phu kha-Luang Namtha-Muang Sing-Shimao-Kunming-Nanjing/Beijing. The exchanges were jeopardized by Nang Maha Thevi Court Intrigues and Coups in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and by Dai Viet-Lanexang War 1479-1480.

- 1687-1700: Chao Nang Khan Kham and Chao Nang Suthamma (sisters of Xang Pheuak) governed together. They died in a giant flood and became the tutelary spirits of Luang Namtha up to present days.
- 1700-1703: interregnum
- 1703-1736: Chao Mom Luang, son of Sutho Thammaraja and Princess Khemma of Xieng Hung.
- 1736-1890: Luang Namtha was abandoned for 155 years.
- 1891-1906 Chao Luang Suvanarangsy-Sitthisarn-Kummachang. 1906-1918: Chao Luang Butsalot (son of precedent)
- 1918-1923: Chao Luang Ton Pha.
- 1923-1927: Tasseng Bunma.
- In 1927, the local administration with local indigenous administrators ended because of corruption. The French Colonial Administration took everything in hands.

### **Migrations, abandon and reconstruction in the pre-colonial era**

When the two sisters Chao Nang Khan Kham and Chao Nang Suthamma died in 1700 without an heir, Luang Namtha remained without governor for three years. In 1703, the town council found a descendant of Sutho Thammaraja and Nang Khemma in Xieng Hung, named Mom Luang, and asked him to come and govern Luang Namtha, which he did until 1736. Then, an internal war occurred between him and his nephew, Thao Phu Nhae. The latter won but all the inhabitants followed Chao Mom Luang in exile and Thao Phu Nhae was therefore unable to govern and develop the city, which was left inhabited for 155 years until 1891<sup>4</sup>.

After leaving Luang Namtha, Chao Mom Luang and his people went to Nan and stayed there for three years before setting up a new town, Muang Ngoen (currently in Northern Sayabury province, on the left bank of the Mekong) where he died in 1751. From then on up to 1890, eight governors who were all his sons and nephews successively ruled Muang Ngoen. In the meantime, new

---

<sup>4</sup> The chronicle doesn't explain why the city was abandoned for such a long period of time.

populations were to join the founders of Muang Ngoen, mostly as war captives taken by the Siamese army in the Northern regions.

The chronicle mentions for instance that in 1804 Bangkok ordered Nan principality to wage war and take all Lue populations from Mueang Siang Khaeng, Mueang Sing, Mueang Phong, Mueang Siang Hung (Jinghong) and Mueang Viang Phu Kha to settle in Mueang Nan territories namely in Mueang Siang Kham, Mueang Ngoen, Mueang Khop, Siang Hon, Hongsa and Siang Lom on the right bank of the Mekong. This war was known to local people as the “Klom War” and it is the origin of the mix Tai-Yuan and Tai-Lue settlements of Mueang Ngoen, Mueang Nan as well as Mueang Luang Namtha.

Such practices were common at that time and Nan city was similarly emptied of its inhabitant several centuries before when the Burmese took the city and captured all the populations to bring them to their own territories in 1624. These practices of moving populations from subjugated territories to the geographic and political centers will be called later by local historians by the following expression: “Cropping vegetables to fill one’s basket and moving slaves to peopling one’s Muang”.

Such authoritarian resettlement could also be done to repopulate peripheral territories. That is what happen to Luang Namtha at the end of the 19th century. After having been deserted for 155 years, it attracted the attention of the Siamese again for the fertility of its land but above all for its strategic position: it was the time when both French and British colonial powers were trying to control these northern territories at the limit of the Chinese borders.

All the land from Luang Namtha to Muang Ngoen was at that time under the control of Nan principality. Bangkok therefore assigned Nan to consolidate the Siamese positions in northern Laos by reestablishing Tai settlements in Luang Namtha. The King of Nan therefore instructed his son, Sithisarn<sup>5</sup>, then governor of Muang Ngoen to go in 1891 with 500 people to rebuild Luang Namtha.

---

<sup>5</sup> Chao Sithisarn was later on given the name Chao Luang Souvannarangsy. Because of his art and skills in capturing wild elephants, Sithisarn also had a third name, Chao Luang Kumba (“capturing”) Xang (“elephant”).

Sitthisarn ordered his people to set up villages and practice agriculture and animal raising. However, since he had not enough soldiers, laborers and equipments, Sitthisarn went back to Nan to ask for more support from his father. He came back to Luang Namtha in 99 days by Chiang Khong, Huay Xai and Vieng Phu Kha with more than one hundred families composed of his close parents, friends and followers. These people settled down in 1892 at the confluence of Nam Ngaen and Nam Tha rivers; they also built a pagoda named Vat Luang Khone and invited one senior monk, two novices and two pagoda servants to stay there.

### **Migrations and territorial reorganization under the French rule**

The French arrived in Luang Namtha immediately after signing the 1893 Treaty. In 1894, they gave to governor Sitthisarn the French Tricolor Flag. In 1898, a French military camp was set up by Mr Malone at the Nam Ngaen and Nam Tha confluence and the nearby six villages (around 1200 people) had to resettle elsewhere. Those villages were Ban Nam Thung, Ban Bone, Ban Viang Tai (or Viang Kao), Ban Luang Khon, Ban Tha Ngam and Ban Tha Or.

Immediately after taking Luang Namtha, the French decided to increase the population of the area and they encouraged Tai Dam people from the Sip Song Chue Tai (Vietnamese border) to settle there. Contrary to the Lue and Yuan people, most of whom stayed faithful to Siam, the Tai-Dam had supported the French since 1888 when the colonial power took control of the Northeastern part of Luang Prabang kingdom.

The Tai Dam populations who arrived in Luang Namtha were under the authority of five leaders: Phia Suvannabuakham; Saen Pong; Phia Khammy; Thao Bua; Thao Khuang Khuang. These five Tai Dam leaders asked for audience to the Luang Namtha governor who welcomed them and encouraged them to participate to the rebuilding of the place and to its development. The Tai Dam newcomers were allowed to set up five new villages according to their clans as follows:

- Ban Vang Om with Phia Suvannabuakham as leader
- Ban Pung with Saen Pong as leader

Ban Thong Kang with Phia Khammy as leader

Ban Thong Dee with thao Bua as leader

Ban Thong Khay or Thong Chay. With Thao Khuang Khuang as leader

Altogether, these two migrations waves (one from Siam, one from the Eastern border with Vietnam) created ten villages, either mixed Lue-Yuan or Tai-Dam. Then, the Luang Namtha governor Chao Luang Sitthisarn, also called Chao Luang Suvannarangsy, put up in place a basic administrative mechanism composed of headmen, tasaeng and a justice court.

Chao Suvannarangsy died in 1906 at the age of 68. With his first wife, he had two sons: Butaroth and Noy Phommueang. Butaroth governed Luang Namtha in 1907 after the death of his father. Butaroth thought that Ban Viang Kao (or Viang Tai) was too narrow and inundated every year in the rainy season. He explained the facts to his entourage and villagers, and persuaded them to build a new village at a higher altitude with spacious flat land. The newly-built village in 1909 was first called Ban Viang Kao and was later renamed Ban Viang Nuea. The Luang Namtha chronicles were written there by Chao Suvannarangsy's son (from his second wife), Chao Noy Chaiñavong and latter completed by Chao Noy's son, Khamsaen Chaiñavong.





### 3 *The ruins, the “savages”*

#### *and the princess:*

Myths, migrations and belonging  
in Viang Phu Kha, Laos.



---

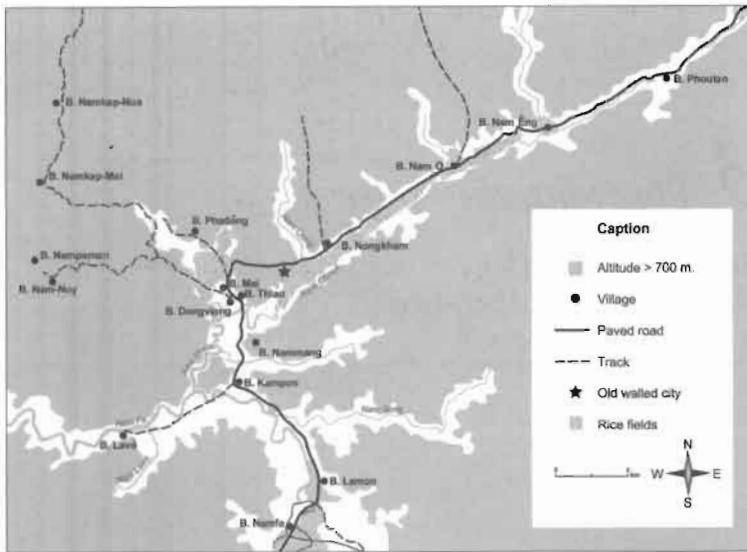
OLIVIER ÉVRARD  
CHANTHAPHILITH CHIEMSISOURAJ

*Heritage is about the process by which people use the past;  
a discursive construction with material consequences.*

*(Harvey 2008:19)*

This paper intends to show that sedentism relates less to the actual permanence of a human settlement than to shared memory and symbols related to a given place. This is especially clear in areas such as Northern Thailand and Laos, where numerous migrations during the historical and contemporary periods have constantly redesigned the human landscape, mixing various populations and preventing them to settle durably in one same location. In such a context of “impeded sedentism”, myths and rituals provide a common matrix for the organization and the reproduction of territorialized identities.

I take the case of a small city of North-West Laos known under the name of Viang Phu Kha. Located on a small plateau along the main road linking China and Northern Thailand, its existence is attested from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward. Ruins whose exact origin is unknown surround it. These vestiges give rise to speculations and different interpretations among the historians and the local populations. According to the formers, Viang Phu Kha remains one of the most mysterious principalities of Laos (Lorillard, 2008:

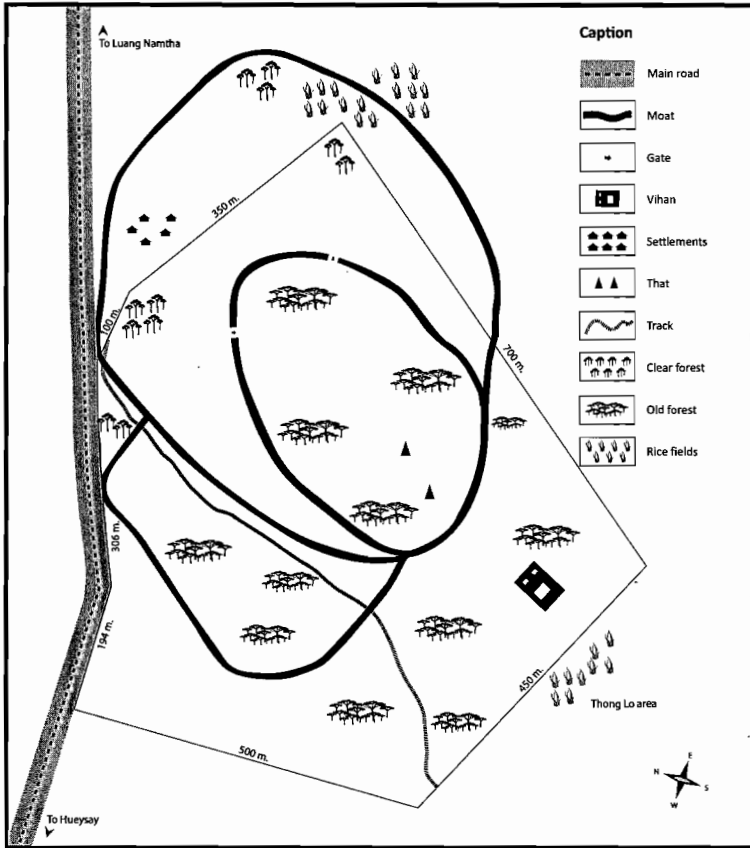


Map 1: Centre of the district of Viang Phu Kha

134), mainly because of the scarcity of the written sources available about it. The latter attributes its foundation to invaders either from Chinese (*ho*), Northern Tai (*yuan*) or Burmese (*man*)<sup>1</sup> origin. These uncertainties are not only due to the lack of deep genealogical memory among the contemporary inhabitants –mostly Tai (Yuan, Lue, Yang) and Mon-Khmer (Rmet, Samtao, Khmu) speaking groups. They are also a result of the continual political instability in this area during the last centuries and of the countless invasions and displacements of populations that affected it. This is also true for the recent period that saw numerous migrations during the two “Indochina wars” as well as massive resettlements of highland villages near the main road since the early 90s under the State rural development policy.

In this context, it is worth noting the existence and the relative permanence among the local populations of a rich oral literature related to the origins of Viang Phu Kha and of the ruins that lie nearby the town. This oral literature has been largely ignored until now by those who have worked on the history of this part of Laos.

<sup>1</sup> This last ethnonym could also maybe apply to Mon.



This is probably due to difficult conditions of access to fieldwork until recent times as well as to the reluctance of the historians to take into account oral sources that they consider less reliable and more difficult to interpret than the written ones. By taking these oral sources into account and analyzing them, We pursue two objectives.

Firstly, we contribute to an ethnohistory of Viang Phu Kha, that is not only to a better knowledge of the history of this place but also, and above all, to a better understanding of how people put the present in relation to the past with their own categories. We want to show how the sense of belonging, either to a place or to an ethnic group, is related to the interactive nature of myths: they are

used to interpret history but at the same time they are constantly updated by the event.

Secondly, we reflect on the common imaginary shared by the Mon-Khmer and the Tai speaking populations and what it tells us about the ethnic differences, their perception and their perpetuation in this part of Asia. More precisely, we consider that the contemporary ethnic fragmentation in Viang Phu Kha is as much a product of complicated (in and out) migration movements as a result of “dispersion” inside a common cultural matrix<sup>2</sup>.

### **The origins of Viang Phu Kha: two stories**

The small city of Viang Phu Kha is surrounded by ruins of stupa, temples and old fortifications which origin is still unknown. The main complex of ruins lies on and around a small hill located at the South-Western end of the plain where the city is installed, near a meander of the Nam Cuk (see map 1 and 2 in annex). This site is known under the name of Vat Mahaphot and the oral tradition says it used to be the centre of a fortified city (*viang*) organized in three concentric circles: the inner circle for the monks, the middle one for the soldiers and the outer circle for the craft workers. From the top of the hill, one can observe a series of ditches as well as the vestiges of at least three religious buildings built in bricks surrounded by a rampart covering a total surface of roughly 40 hectares. At the bottom of the hill, on its south-western side, at least five ovens have been identified but there are still probably others lying deeper in the ground or further in the plain. This part of the site is known under the name *thong lo* and it is said that it has been used for the making of bronze drums, though the remains found there suggest rather a small-scale production of potteries, ceramics and glasses objects. The absence of material proofs is less important than the legend itself and the representations it carries. The frequent mention of bronze drums production in this area is related to the role attributed to the Khmu populations in the foundation of Viang Phu Kha. The Tai acknowledges this role and said it directly explains the name of the place. However, the oral

---

<sup>2</sup> In this attempt, I am inspired by François Robinne's work on trans-ethnicity (2007, 283-297) and his reading of Michel Foucault's concept of “space of dispersion”.

tradition allows two different interpretations of the name *viang phu kha* and both of them differ from the official transcription in Lao language ວຽງພູຄາ, which means “the viang of the imperata grass mountain”.

The versions relating to the first interpretation tell the story of a procession of soldiers and craftsmen led by a man called Cao Muen Chin. Their supposed ethnic origin varies according to each storyteller: some say they were *ho* (Chinese), other say they were *man* (Burmese or Mon?), other again say they were Tai, either *ngiu* (a Shan population) or *yuan* (also known as *khon mueang* in Northern Thailand). Before these men could create the city of Viang Phu Kha, they had to fight three ferocious beasts that were the guardians of the place. Two Khmu men volunteered to kill the animals. In return for their help, Cao Muen Chin gave them the political and ritual control over Viang Phu Kha. However, because they had killed the spirits of the place, the Khmu could not live in the plain where the mueang was installed and they had (or chose) to remain on its periphery. Hence the name Viang Phu Kha, (“the viang of the savages” or the “viang of those who killed [the ferocious beasts]”) which should then be written ວຽງຜູ້ຂ້າ where ຂ້າ is a term commonly used in the past to name the highland groups.

In the versions related to the second framework, the main character is a Tai woman called Nang On Am, who was abandoned on a raft by her father, the ruler of Mueang U. The raft arrived in Viang Phu Kha where the young princess met Khmu hunters. Three of them collaborated to kill three ferocious beasts living in the area and one of them, called Muen Chin (Lue and Yuan pronunciation) or Muen Sin (Lao pronunciation) married the princess and came in the valley to live with her. Hence the complete name of the place: Vieng Phu Kha Ya Tai ວຽງຢູ່ຂ້າຍ່າໄທ which means “the city of the *kha* paternal grand-father and of the *tai* paternal grand-mother” or “the city of the *kha* and *tai* ancestors”. This second framework has been popularized by a recent publication of the Ministry of Culture (Boualay Phengsengkham, 2008) and constitutes, in a way, the “official” version of Viang Phu Kha legend even if its content

contradicts the official transcription of the toponym, mainly because ຂ້າ is a derogatory term in the new political context<sup>3</sup>.

The first framework is more linked to the Khmu oral tradition while the second one appears more frequently in the tales of the Tai storytellers and has close relationships with the written tradition<sup>4</sup>. It is therefore tempting to consider that the differences between these two frameworks coincide with historical and ethnic ones. On one side, an old and autochthonous (Mon-Khmer) framework is narrating the foundation of the town by a foreign conqueror and legitimates the eminent right of the Khmu over the territory. On the other side, a more recent framework from Tai origin reinterprets the first one and transforms it by adding a figure commonly found in the literary traditions of Lan Na, Lan Sang and Sipsong Panna (see the classical novels of Nang Phom Om<sup>5</sup>). Things are however much more nuanced and complex: these two mythical frameworks have likely coexisted since a long time and both of them have fed on the incidents of local history as well as on the cultural patterns and representations shared by the inhabitants independently from their ethnic origin.

### **The town of the “savages”: foreign conquerors and highlanders allies**

Viang Phu Kha used to be an important commercial crossroads as well as a contested political border zone between several regional powers (Burmese, Siamese, Chinese and Lao). In the course of its tumultuous history, conflicts, abandons, displacements and reconstructions occurred, which have nurtured and constantly brought up to date the myth of foundation by a foreign conqueror.

---

<sup>3</sup> Variations in the transcription of the toponyms have also most probably been facilitated by linguistic factors, especially by the fact that the Lao aspirated consonant *ph w* is pronounced as a non-aspirated consonant in Lue and Yuan dialects, that is, as the *ʋ* in Lao language. This allows a phonetic equivalence between “mountain” and “paternal grandfather” in these dialects. For more details, see Évrard 2011.

<sup>4</sup> The reality is, of course, more complex and I collected many versions that mixed elements of the two frameworks independently from the ethnic origin of the storyteller.

<sup>5</sup> For a complete analysis of Nang Phom Hom story and variations in Yuan, Isan, Lue, Shan, Khuen, Lao and Siamese versions, see Peltier 1995. In the Tai-Yuan version of Chiang Mai, this tale is known as “Jang Prong – Nang Phom Hom, Jang Prong being the King of the elephants”.

Two Tai populations, namely the Tai Yuan and the Tai Lue seem to have alternatively controlled and occupied this area. The oldest written traces indicate that Viang Phu Kha was first under the political and cultural influence of the Tai Yuan principalities located on the right bank of the Mekong. The Chiang Mai chronicle for instance mentioned that this region was one of the "outer Panna" of the principality of Chiang Saen founded in 1329 by Saen Phu (Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeo 1998, 60). In Viang Phu Kha proper, the oldest written document is a silver leaf dated of around 1509, a date which coincides with the period of greatest political and cultural influence of Lan Na (contemporary Northern Thailand). It is written in a Lan Na tham script and refers to a dignitary named Cao Nang Khoa Muang Chiang Khong, to an edict (*atya*) and to a monarch (*somdet phra chao*), "which is almost certainly the ruler of Chiang Mai" (Lorillard 2008, 134). The immigration of Tai Yuan populations on the left bank of the Mekong has come along with this expansion of Lan Na political power and extended until the city of Luang Nam Tha which the Tai Yuan have founded at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (1587) according to the local chronicle, then abandoned at the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1718) before settling down again on the same place in 1890 (Inpan Chanthaphon 1997, 14). Conversely, the Tai Lue populations came mostly from the area of the Sip Song Panna in the North during phases of conflicts and deportations but there also have also been some complex trajectories which involved displacements down to the Mekong banks and later resettlements back in Vieng Phu Kha area.

The Burmese conquered this region in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and probably displaced a lot of its inhabitants, as they did in other areas (Grabowsky 2008, 48-49). However, in Viang Phu Kha, they also built religious monuments (both Vat Mahaphot and Vat Bo Kung are attributed to them by the locals) and brought with them new populations. Some of these are still settled today just near the ruins of the old city in a village called Ban Tiao. They are known as Samtao (but also as Tai Doi in Mueang Long district in Laos or as Tai Loi in Shan States in Burma) and they still keep the memory of their migration from the Western banks of the Mekong. Indeed, *samtao* seem to have been originally a political category used to refer to Palaung populations settled in a semi autonomous

mountainous territory East of the city of Kengtung in the Shan states. They were known for their ability to produce rifles with the iron bars brought to them by the Chinese traders. According to the information collected by the French explorer Francis Garnier during his expedition in the Upper Mekong in the 1870 they were “*producing 3000 rifles per year and giving 200 of them to the prince of Xieng Tong [Kengtung] as a mark of allegiance*” (Garnier 1885, 416 –my translation). Three decades later, during his stay in Viang Phu Kha, another French explorer (and journalist) Alfred Raquez noticed that Samtao men were “seriously armed” and he described a New Year ceremony where a monk blessed rifles and swords put in front of him (2000, 270).

These elements invite to consider the Samtao as a group of highland mercenaries recruited by the invaders and left in this region after their departure to keep control over it. It is noteworthy that this ethnonym is still in use despite the fact that the Samtao of Viang Phu Kha have largely assimilated to Tai and Khmu populations up to the point where they even lost their original language. If they remain with a separate identity, this is probably due to their previous political role in this region (at least before the colonial period), their religious functions during the annual ritual for the tutelary spirit of Viang Phu Kha<sup>6</sup> and their practice of Buddhism, which they consider as a Burmese heritage.

While the consequences of the Burmese “invasions” in Viang Phu Kha are not well known yet, more details are available on the 19<sup>th</sup> century events. Troops from Nan principality, vassal of Siam, conducted three large-scale military operations in 1804-1805, 1812-1813 and 1830-1831 in North-West Laos, proceeding each time to huge displacements of populations (Grabowsky 1999, 238). Then, while the first Westerners arrived in Northern Laos at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they discovered heavily depopulated places. In

---

<sup>6</sup> Until the early 70s, a ritual involving the Khuauen, Lue and Samtao villages settled near the ruins of Viang Phu Kha was held each year at the beginning of the rainy season for the spirit of the muang (*phi muang*), called locally *roy samao*. It consisted of a procession around the plain of Thong Lo, the paddy core of the *vieng*, and in a buffalo sacrifice at the top of a small hill, which marks the eastern limit of this plain. The main three ritual specialists were a Khuauen (*mo taeng tai*, ritual butcher), a Lue (main priest *mo luang*) and a Samtao (*mo uen*, chanting priest). A detailed analysis of this ritual is done in Évrard, 2011.



Viang Phu Kha center remained only "one or two empty huts" (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153) with abandoned rice fields (Mc Carthy 1994, 156; Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153) and local people were living under the fear of the tigers (Raquez 2000, 237). They also insisted on the instability of the settlements and on the numerous displacements of Tai Yuan and Tai Lue villages. For instance Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis noticed that the Tai Yuan populations who had settled down again in Viang Phu Kha just before his first visit in 1893 were already gone away again few months later and were being replaced by Tai Lue migrants coming from the Muang U area through the Nam Se (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153-155).

As a consequence of all these migrations and wars, Viang Phu Kha has been a place of "impeded sedentism" where the political context has rarely allowed a long use of the same lands. The main plain at the center of the district was periodically emptied of its inhabitants, who were replaced either by enslaved people (*kha*: the term points out more a status than an ethnic identity) brought by the conquerors, or by refugees fleeing war zones. The alternation of depopulation and repopulation phases gave birth to a profusion of ethnonyms, each of which relate to a specific geographic origin or migratory story and also often to linguistic mix. For instance, when Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis crosses Ban Yang Nuea village in 1894, he noticed that the villagers were Lue refugees (1902, 153) while in Ban Yang Tai village a few kilometers away, villagers told him that they were "Kiorr people whose ancestors were Kha from Xieng Kheng [Chiang Khaeng] who had taken refuge in Viang Phu Kha to escape a Burmese invasion" (1902, 290, my translation). Alfred Raquez, who visited the same area few years later wrote that people of Ban Tha Khat village are "Kha Tiol" that is "Kha belonging to no race" arrived in 1870 from Chiang Khaeng and speaking a dialect mixing Khmu and Lue words (2000, 237). These constant movements of populations may be seen as one possible origin for the name Viang Phu Kha, or at least one factor that contributed to popularize it. However, the term *kha* in the oral tradition refers primarily to the Khmu highlanders, not to the displaced population of the lowlands.

Wars and resettlements were affecting heavily the lowlands but were obviously having much less impact on the Khmu highland villages settled on the surrounding hills. Their inhabitants did not use the lowland fields near the main roads, even when they were left fallow, and practiced instead only swidden agriculture on the slopes (McCarthy 1994, 156; Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153). Political instability had contributed to reinforce the political autonomy granted to some of them, especially those known in the past as Kha Khuauen and today as Khmu Khuauen. Despite their relative cultural and geographic homogeneity, Khmu populations in this area are indeed subdivided into various subgroups, called *tmoy* in their own language<sup>7</sup>. I have shown elsewhere (Évrard 2007, 140-159) that these subgroups shall be viewed as an imprint made by the Tai political systems in this borderland area where various Tai principalities (Lan Sang for the Lao, Lan Na and then Nan for the Tai Yuan, Sip Song Panna for the Lue) were competing for control.

The case of the Khmu Khuauen is especially interesting because their villages are to be found only around Viang Phu Kha. The *khuaen* were administrative subdivisions of the mountainous margins in the Sip Song Panna chiefdoms or *mueang*. They were given a great deal of autonomy, and were controlled by tribal leaders named *bo khuaen*. In Viang Phu Kha, Khmu Khuauen are still said to be the guardians of the territory and their position in the local interethnic system here contrasts strongly with the position and the reputation of other Khmu subgroups, such as the Khmu Rok further in the East. The Khmu Khuauen have a long history of collaboration with the Tai chiefdoms, the Lue chiefdoms of the Sip Song Panna but also the Yuan chiefdoms under Lanna authority. Some of their leaders received titles of nobility from Tai princes and were in charge of surveying the movements of population and troops in this strategic area at the periphery of Burma, Sip Song Panna, Lanna, Siam and Lan Xang territories. Their autonomy and their political importance was underlined by the first French colonial explorers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who noticed that the Khmu Khuauen had sometimes

---

<sup>7</sup> These sub groupings coincide, at least in this part of Laos, with geographic, dialectal, technical and even religious differences. Other non-Khmu Mon-Khmer groups such as the Rmet (often written Lamet) and Samtao are sometimes included in the *tmoy* list by Khmu informants.

conflicting relationships both with the Tai Yuan of Luang Nam Tha and the Tai Lue from Mueang Sing. They sometimes refused to pay taxes to the former and opposed the latter when they tried to move the boundary stones to control more tightly the territory of Viang Phu Kha. Conversely, the Khmu Khuauen could also help some migrant populations and accept them as lowland neighbours, such as in the case of the Lue people arrived at the end of the 19th century from the Mueang U and who are still currently living in Viang Phu Kha district (in Ban Viang Mai). Today, Khmu Khuauen people still differentiate themselves from other Khmu populations by their traditional costumes, the shape of their baskets and above all by their religious practices which often include the presence of a medium as well as references to Tai tutelary spirits not found in other Khmu subgroups, or not to the same extent.

All these elements show that Viang Phu Kha has been conquered, abandoned and rebuilt several times in the course of its (recent) history. Enslaved populations or refugees settled down here only to be later on moved again by new invaders. Simultaneously, Mon-Khmer populations, either immigrant mercenaries (Samtao) or autochthons (Khmu) played a role of allies, guardians of the territory and semi-autonomous observers depending on the circumstances. In this context, the myth of the foundation of the city by a foreign leader who later on left it in the highlanders' protection has been literally "enacted" several times. It has crystallized a series of similar events in one single frame, which became a common reference (a way to conceive history and ethnicity as much as a product of it) for all the inhabitants of the place.

### **The town of the kha and tai ancestors: the myth of a common descent**

The second mythical framework comes on top of the first one and brings a theme well known by historians and anthropologists in this part of Southeast Asia: the marriage between members of two different ethnic groups as the first step of the creation of a new political entity. However, the case of Viang Phu Kha is quite unique: while the usual pattern is the marriage of a Tai prince with an aboriginal (Mon-Khmer) woman, it is here a Tai woman who

marries an aboriginal (Khmu) man. In the following paragraphs, I show that this reversal shall be understood as the consequence of a long-term coexistence and cross-contamination of several mythical and literary frames shared both by Tai and Khmu populations as well as their interactions with at least two historical events.

At first stance, it would seem that the introduction of this mythical framework is quite recent since it is found mainly in the oral tradition of the Lue populations currently settled in Ban Viang Mai (see annex 1), who arrived in Viang Phu Kha from U Nuea and U Tai at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here is one of the versions collected in Viang Mai.

*“Our village used to be called Ban Viang Phu Kha Ya Tai because it has been founded by a Tai woman married with a Kha man, eh, I mean a Khmu. She was a Lue, daughter of the Chao Mueang U. Her name was Nang On Am. Since she was born with 32 teeth, she was banished and abandoned on a raft. The raft went down the Nam U, up the Mekong, up the Nam Fa, up the Nam Chuk and finally ran aground near the cave that is located near the old site of our village. All the Kha were crowding around her but their chief said that any man wanting to marry the princess first had to kill the three ferocious beasts, a tiger, an elephant and a snake which at that time were haunting the area. Three hunters collaborated and succeeded in killing the animals. A buffalo sacrifice was organized and a big eater competition took place among the three men. The hunter called Chao Muen Chin was the winner and became Nang On Am’s husband. The old Thong Si, who is the chao cham of our village, is their descendant.”*

In the area of Bun Nuea, where the Viang Mai villagers say they originated from, Vanina Bouté (2005: 120) has collected the following version, in Ban Yo village.

*“The King of the Sipsong Panna had two daughters. The younger one had perfumed hairs and therefore was called Nang Phom Hom. One day, she cut a tuft of her hairs and let it floating on the Mekong. The tuft reached Luang Prabang and was collected by the prince of Lan Xang. Captivated by the perfume, he looked for the owner of those hairs and learned that they belonged to the daughter of the king of the*

*Sipsong Panna. He sent an emissary to ask the princess's hand. The king was reluctant to marry his younger daughter before his elder and he therefore decided to use a stratagem. He decked his elder daughter out with his younger daughter's hairs and sent her to Luang Prabang with a large escort of weavers from Ban Yo and numerous slaves. After a few months however, the hairs lost their perfume and the prince, understanding that he had been fooled, repudiated his wife. The princess left Luang Prabang with her escort, went upriver on the Nam U and settled down in Ban Yo".*

Between the area of origin and the point of arrival of the migration, the myth is altered by a series of inversions and displacements. While the Ban Yo version tells the story of the failed marriage of Nang Phom Hom's elder sister with a Lao prince, the Ban Viang Mai version explains the successful marriage of the Lue princess (here called Nang On Am) with a local *kha* hero. In the former, the exile on the river is the ultimate consequence of a usurpation of identity and of a broken alliance (facts of culture) while in the latter it is the consequence of a physical trait (fact of nature) and the prelude to a fruitful alliance<sup>8</sup>. Besides, the version collected in Ban Viang Mai also transforms the above "original" (Khmu) version of the myth of foundation of Viang Phu Kha: Chao Muen Sin, the foreign conqueror is presented as one of the Khmu hunters (they are now three instead of two) and as the husband-to-be of the Lue princess. These transformations convey obviously the necessity for the Lue migrants to link two very different mythical frameworks, the first one imported from their area of origin and the second one found when they arrived in Viang Phu Kha. However, several indications suggest that some elements of the new version were already present in the local culture. In other words, Lue immigrants succeeded in creating a new mythical framework (which became later on the "official" legend of Viang Phu Kha written and published by the Lao Ministry of Culture) not only because they were ingenious storytellers but also because they shared part of their imaginary with the populations already settled in Viang Phu Kha.

---

<sup>8</sup> The exile of Nang On Am on a raft echoes other Tai myths, such as those of Chao Fa Ngum who was abandoned adrift on the Mekong because he was born with 33 teeth; or Chao Fa Dek Noi, son of the King of Chiang Rung who had to leave his native land on a raft and married an aboriginal *kha* princess (Grabowsky, 2008).

The figure of the princess exiled on a raft can be considered as the local version of a theme common to many regions of Southeast Asia: a female character whose power exerts first over the aquatic world and then over the human (Przyluski 1925, 283). This idea has a great resonance in the Tai world but it is also found in the oral literature of some highland societies. Among the Khmu populations of the Nam Tha and Viang Phu Kha area, it gave birth to the myth of Ya Phan Phaeng. The many versions I collected during the last years would deserve a full analysis, which would largely exceed the space allocated here. In short, Ya Phan Phaeng is presented as a foreign woman with benevolent magical powers (contrary to her brother and her sister, who, when they are mentioned, are presented as warriors and destructors) who arrives in this area by going upstream the Nam Tha River. She sets up (*paeng*) the landscape and shares (*phan*) the territory out the many villages. She also establishes the seasons, the agrarian calendar and the sexual division of tasks. During her encounter with the locals, she takes part to the feast they organize for her and she challenges them with riddles (often bawdy ones), which only the villagers of Mok Klang (a village located near the Nam Tha river) are able to answer. In return, she gives them a piece of bronze, said to be her helmet, as a present and therefore becomes the tutelary spirit of this village.

The detailed analysis of the many recorded versions shows that this “core story” evolves in the Khmu villages nearer from Viang Phu Kha, especially Khmu Khuauen, and tends to merge there with the tale of Nang On Am as given by Viang Mai villagers -though never going up to the point where Ya Phan Phaeng would actually marry to the local Khmu hero. This connection between the two myths has been facilitated by the fact that the idea of a powerful female ancestor was present in both Khmu and Tai tradition even before the arrival of the Lue migrants. On the Khmu side, the myth of Ya Phan Phaeng echoes other stories which attribute to an old woman or a widow (or sometimes just to women in general) the invention of housing, rearing, funeral myths as well as meat and fish sharing (Lindell and al. 1995, 12-18).

Similar ideas are to be found in the Northern Tai tradition too and they are often more specifically related to the foundation

of a city. The legend of Suvanna Khom Kham (on the eastern bank of the Mekong, just in front of Chiang Saen) for instance attributes to a woman named Nang Indapathana the creation of a city called Mueang Indapatha Nagara Kroem Luang, the invention of wet-rice agriculture and the sharing of steamed rice. In the region of present-day Nan and Uttaradit provinces, oral tradition also mentions a lost city (Mueang Lap Lae) run by a woman (Cholthira 1991, 302-303). The idea of an extraordinary woman who establishes a city and civilizes the populations she encounters is also found in the Camdevi legend, composed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by a monk of Lamphun (Swearer and Sommai, 1998). Closer to Viang Phu Kha, a Tai-Yuan legend mentions the role played by two sisters, Nang Khan Kham and Nang Suthamma in the foundation of Luang Namtha city. They perished while cutting a giant liana that was blocking the flow of the Nam Tha River and they became the tutelary spirits of the mueang. Finally, a last element is worth mentioning here: in the Isan and Yuan version of the classical novel Nang Phom Hom (which structure is similar to the Nang On Am tale of the Lue village of Viang Phu Kha), the heroin has a sister whose name, Nang Phueng Phaeng, is strangely close from the Ya Phan Phaeng of the Khmu oral literature<sup>9</sup>.

In sum, figures such as Nang Phom Hom, Nang On Am and Ya Phan Phaeng shall be considered as localized elements of the same imaginary or, to use the vocabulary of structural anthropology, as "*mythèmes*" (elementary units of a myth) whose combinations vary in time and space. Taken together, they are part of a common cultural background that has nurtured the contemporary Tai and Khmu identities and the display of their differences. They constitute the two faces of the same literary tradition, one purely oral, mythical and sometimes saucy, the second one mainly associated with writing, manuscripts and Buddhism. This, of course, does not exclude the possibility of independent and localized transformations, rediscoveries and mutual borrowings in the course of history. Indeed, this is most likely what happened when the Lue ancestors

---

<sup>9</sup> In the version given by Anatole Peltier, Nang Phom Hom and her sister Nang Phueng Phaeng are the daughters of the Queen Sita and of the King of the elephants. One day, they meet their father in the forest and have to walk on his tusks to prove him that they are his daughters. Nang Phueng Phaeng fails and ends up devoured by the animal (Peltier 1995, 23-24).

of the present day Ban Viang Mai villagers arrived in Viang Phu Kha from U Nuea at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The myth that they imported and adapted to the local context was, to some extent, already available in the literary traditions of the local populations (both Tai-Yuan and Khmu).

Why had this idea of a power exerted or devoted to a powerful woman such a great resonance among Viang Phu Kha inhabitants? We have seen that the first mythical framework, based on the character of the foreign conqueror, reflected the many layers of migrations, conquests and resettlements that had occurred in Viang Phu Kha since its foundation. Similarly, one has also to postulate that the intermingled versions of the powerful female ancestor could not have been so meaningful if they had been entirely disconnected from historical events. Albeit not being an historian myself, I would like to point out two interesting elements here. First, the already mentioned silver leaf inscription found in Viang Phu Kha and dated of around 1509 (see above) refers to the visit of a female dignitary named Chao Nang Khua Mueang Chiang Khong. It confirms the influence of the principalities of the West banks of the Mekong over Viang Phu Kha at that period. It also seems to indicate that noblewomen could play a political role even as emissaries in remote regions.

A second and more recent historical evidence is given by Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis when he passes in Viang Phu Kha in 1893-94. A Khmu Khuauen leader tells to the French explorers that according to tradition, Viang Phu Kha and Mueang Sing had once “obeyed the same queen” (1902: 290). The Mueang Sing principality has indeed exerted a political influence over Viang Phu Kha in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and a road was linking the two towns without going through Luang Nam Tha, which was abandoned during most of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The remark of the Khuauen leader seems to allude to the widow of Chiang Khaeng’s ruler, Nang Khemma, who, in 1792, took the lead of the group of colons who repopulate the Mueang Sing plain which had been deserted after a first occupancy in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The local tradition indicates that under her leadership, a fortified town named Viang Fa Ya was built five kilometers on the Southwest of the current city



of Mueang Sing. She also supervised the building of That Chiang Thung, a locally famous Buddhist monument where a yearly festival is organized during the first full moon of November (Grabowsky, 1999, 235).

## Conclusion

Origin or foundation myths do not allow us to reconstruct the past but they give crucial insights on the way local people imagine it. They constitute "interpretative schemes" (Sahlins 1989) or interactive tales: they offer frameworks to interpret history and, simultaneously, they are constantly altered by it. They also play the role of "common operators" (Robinne 2007) at a trans-ethnic level, allowing the positioning and the display of ethnic differences in reference to specific markers, events or issues.

In Viang Phu Kha, two mythical frameworks have obviously coexisted for a long time. Both of them attribute the creation of the viang and the development of the paddy fields around it to an encounter with a foreigner who later becomes a tutelary spirit. In both cases, there is no mention of a violent conquest. Rather, we find here the idea expresses by James Scott of "cultural models", organized around a paddy core, "*opened to all those who wished to conform to their religious, linguistic and cultural format*" (Scott 2009, 28). However, while in both cases the Khmu and Tai populations claim to be related to the founder of the original viang, the exact nature of this link tends to differ according to the position in the local ethnic system: male conqueror, patronage and separation of the settlements for the former; female ancestor, direct biological link and merging of the settlements for the latter. In that sense, the myth acts as cartography of the social order; it either ratifies or abolishes a genealogical and geographical distance.

Claude Levi-Strauss was comparing the myths to a "chess game" and was writing that a new contest occurs each time they are told. Likewise, the two mythical frameworks analyzed here relate to two possible readings of local history: the first one insists on the tendency toward dissimulation (creation of distance inside a same society) and inclusion (hierarchical positioning and subsuming) while

conversely the second framework insists on the “domestication” of the highlanders and their assimilation by the lowland culture. Unsurprisingly in a contemporary context of massive resettlements from the highlands to the lowlands under State guidance, it is this second framework which has been put forward and which constitutes from now on the core of the “official” legend of Viang Phu Kha.

## References

- Boualay Phengsengkham (stories compiled by), 2008 — *Tamnan Vieng Phu Kba / Legend of ViengPhukbaa*, Vientiane, 17 p.
- Bouté Vanina, 2005 — En miroir du pouvoir. les Phounoy du Nord Laos : ethnogénèse et dynamiques d'intégration, PhD dissertation, Paris: EPHE, 529 p.
- Cholthira Satyawadhna, 1991 — *The Dispossessed. An Anthropological Reconstruction of Lawa Ethnohistory in the Light of their Relationship with the Tai*, PhD thesis, Canberra, Australian National University, 484 p.
- Évrard Olivier, 2007 — “Interethnic systems and localized identities: The Khmu subgroups in North-West Laos” in François Robinne & Mandy Sadan (ed.) *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia. Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma* by E.R Leach, Leiden: Brill, p. 127-159.
- Évrard Olivier, Chanthaphilith Chiemsouraj, 2011 — « Les ruines, la princesse et les “sauvages” », *Aséanie* n°27, p.67-99.
- Garnier Francis, 1885 — *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine*, Paris, Hachette et Cie, 662 p.
- Grabowsky Volker, 1999 — “Introduction to the history of Muang Sing prior to French rule: the fate of a Lü principality”, *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* 86 (1) 233-291.
- Grabowsky Volker, 2008 — « The Tai Polities in the Upper Mekong and Their Tributary Relationships with China and Burma », *Aséanie*, n° 21, p. 11-63.
- Inpan Chanthaphon, 1994 — *ປະຫວັດຫຍໍ້: ເຜົ່າລາວຍວນ* [Summary of Lao Yuan History], unpublished document, 14 p.
- Lorillard Michel, 2008 — « Pour une géographie historique du bouddhisme au Laos », in Yves Goudineau & Michel Lorillard (eds.) *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos*, Études thématiques n° 18, EFEO, Vientiane - Paris, pp. 113-181.
- Peltier Anatole, 1995 — *Nang Phom Hom, La femme aux cheveux parfumés* (classique lao), Vientiane, Ambassade de France au Laos, 376 p.

- Lefèvre-Pontalis Pierre, 1902 — *Voyage dans le Haut-Laos et sur les frontières de Chine et de Birmanie* (Mission Pavic, tome V), Paris, Ernest Leroux, 326 p.
- McCarthy James, 1994 — *Surveying and Exploring in Siam*, Bangkok, White Lotus, 215 p. [1st edition 1900].
- Lindell Kristina, Swanh Jan-Öjvind, Damrong Tayanin, 1995 — *Folktales from Kammu V: A Young Story-Teller's Tales*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, n° 66, Curzon Press, 122 p.
- Przyluski Jean, 1925 — « La princesse à l'odeur de poisson et la Nagi dans les traditions de l'Asie orientale », *Études Asiatiques*, tome II, Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient, p. 265-284.
- Raquez Alfred, 1902 — *Pages Laotiennes*, Hanoï, F.H. Schneider éditeur, 537 p.
- Robinne François, 2007 — « Conclusion » in François Robinne & Mandy Sadan (eds.) *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia. Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by E.R. Leach*, Leiden: Brill.
- Salhins Marshall, 1981 — *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Scott James C., 2009 — *The Art of Not Being Governed. An anarchist history of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 442 p.
- Swearer Donald K., Sommai Premchit, 1998 — *The Legend of Queen Cāma. Bodhiramsi's Cāmadevīvamsa, a Translation and Commentary*, New York, State University of New York Press, 205 p.
- Wyatt David K., Aroonrut Whichienkeo, 1998 — *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 234 p.



# 4 *Becoming Spirit:* *Spirit Cults in Northern Thailand*



TANABE SHIGEHARU

*Spirits flow to the village on the wind, sometimes on the wings  
of an owl (nok kao).*

*Ui Tha, Pa Chi, Chiang Mai*

## **Introduction**

This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural significance of Khon Mueang spirit mediumship, and the ways in which its cults have been transformed in the milieu of recent globalizing processes in Northern Thailand. According to the Khon Mueang folk theory of personhood, the body-mind relation is occasionally exposed to attack by multiple spirits, which may cause illnesses, psychosomatic disturbances, misfortune, or accidents. Based on such embodied knowledge and practices, spirit-mediums give curing, divination and oracles to their clients.

Researchers have long observed that some places and monuments are objects of worship by spirit-mediums as in the cases of the Inthakhin Pillar, the Lak Mueang Shrine, the Chiang Dao Cave, and, in more recent years, the Three Kings Monument. As many anthropologists since mid-twentieth century have pointed out, the sources of power of the tutelary spirits by which spirit-mediums are possessed have a sedentary nature, they are linked to places. This sedentary nature of spirits is related to historical, legendary and imaginary contexts that have long offered legitimacy for political and administrative authority over the related territories.

However, as the spirit mediumship rapidly developed in major Northern cities since late 1980s, the sedentary nature of spirits declined and newly invented spirits proliferated. Deterritorialized from the local bases of imaginary and ideological discourses, new spirits are, like Baudrillard's 'simulacrum', floating free from the Khon Mueang symbolic system, but sometimes partially or arbitrarily articulated with it. Furthermore, their cults have become 'sites' for event relations, cultural production and resistance. This paper examines more mobile, fluid and internalized aspects of spirit-mediums in order to reveal the ways in which they interact with external powers, as well as their local attachment.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) concept of 'becoming (devenir)' is useful to account for what occurs to such spirit-mediums, especially focusing on their engagements, through their affect (*affectus*), with the powers of other objects, i.e. spirits (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2009). With this perspective, this paper intends to illuminate the ways in which a new spirit-medium is born, and curing, divination and other utterances are given through affective contacts between a spirit-medium, clients and other participants within the cult. It will also argue that these affective and embodied contacts enable the clients and participants to develop, though modest and transient, new experiences of relief and liberation.

## Power of spirits

### *Spirit as a real being*

In dealing with spirits and spirit possession, I maintain, like some earlier folklorists and anthropologists (cf. Sanguan 1969; Turton 1984), that spirits (*phi*) are not only representations, but more significantly 'real' beings with power or potential (*potentia*) that may affect, sever, or transform the relationship between human body and soul, or that between persons and things<sup>1</sup>. Spirits are power, or more precisely, a flow or flux of power. According to the Khon Mueang folk theory, a person, surrounded by the external power

---

<sup>1</sup> This recognizes the 'reality' of spirits or other objects totally autonomous from human perception and mind. Such philosophical position is called 'realist ontology', which includes that of Deleuze (De Landa 2002).

of spirits, consists of body (*tua*) and soul (*khwan*). This body-soul relation, or what I call in cognitive terms ‘person-spirit schema’<sup>2</sup>, is occasionally exposed to attacks by multiple spirits, which may cause illnesses, psychosomatic disturbances, misfortune, or accidents.

The destructive effects on the unity of body and soul is best seen in cases of violent attack by various spirits such as forest spirit (*phi pa*), witch-spirit (*phi ka*), and ‘bad death’ spirit (*phi tai hong*). Violent possession by these spirits causes numerous signs and symptoms of emotional, mental and physical disorder, eventually inflicting illness, even madness, on the victims. First of all, a doctor of magic (*mo phi*) may exorcise the possessed spirit, and furthermore a ritual of propitiation of the spirit (*liang phi*), and/or a Buddhist exorcism (*thon khut*) by monks may be held. In order to call back the soul into the body, it may also be necessary to perform a ritual of ‘calling back the soul’ (*hong khwan* or *hiak khwan*) for the victim by mo phi or other specialists after exorcist rituals. It is such destabilized processes, as well as efforts to restore the original and optimal equilibrium by exorcism and the related healing rituals that are commonly manifested in most cases of violent spirit possession.

As Charles Keyes suggests, in addition to spirits, external powers that affect and threaten the internal equilibrium include the popular Buddhist notion of kam (*kamma*) and the mythical theory of destiny (*chata*) both of which are also often attributed to afflictions and breakdown of such relations (Keyes 1983: 266–267). In both theories at a practical level, however, a person can take actions to modify and improve the determined conditions in the ‘this-world’ or the ‘other-world’ through ritual practices, such as merit-making (*tham bun*) in order to ensure a better rebirth, the ritual of making an offering to the mythical ancestral couple (*song thaen*), and the ritual of ‘stretching the destiny’ (*suep chata*). As in kammic theory, spirit is often used to explain incomprehensible and unpredictable sufferings and accordingly numerous ritual measures and practices

<sup>2</sup> ‘The person-spirit schema’ is an abstract cognitive organization of experiences, particularly activated in critical moments such as fright, pain, misfortune, anxiety, affliction, and illness (Tanabe 2000b). The instability of the person is totally different from the Western folk psychology that establishes an affirmation of dominance of the mind over the body and its distinctive nature that eventually leads to the individual person (Tanabe 2002: 45).

have been developed to cope with its causal effects. Nevertheless, compared with *kam* and *chata*, spirit brings about more direct and specified effects on the equilibrium to be sustained in both body-soul unity and social relations.

Spirit is a more concrete and material power, comparable to and deeply connected with real violence, fear and terror exercised against emotional, mental, bodily conditions of a person in social and political contexts (cf. Kanchana 1982). According to Andrew Turton, the fear inspired by spirits is equivalent to the one which is widely felt by people in the countryside in relation to revenge killings and various forms of ‘extra-judicial’ killings (Turton 1984: 56–62), frequently observed during the period of severe confrontation between pro-democracy forces and the military-led governments in the mid-1970s. We also came across such ‘extra-judicial’ killings even in 2002–03 when Thaksin Shinawatra, then Prime Minister, launched the ‘War against Drugs’, which resulted in thousands of victims. It should be remembered that many people in the countryside talked then about such terror overlapped with the violent attack by spirits. Thus, spirit always acts more concretely on detailed human conditions, and is feared as much as are the coercive effects of terrorism. In this sense, the power of spirit is, as Benedict Anderson refers to in the case of Java, not a theoretical and abstract postulate, but a concrete existential reality (Anderson 1972: 7).

### *Protection against spirits*

To tackle the destructive and unpredictable attacks of spirits, various sources of popular knowledge have been mobilized. One of the long established traditions is ‘magical spell’ (*khatha*), including aggressive and violent magic (*khatha hon*, literally ‘hot magic’) and invulnerability (*kham*), which can be almost exclusively wielded by men such as spirit-doctors (*mo phi*) and even Buddhist monks and novices (Irvine 1985: 188–193)<sup>3</sup>. The magical power is normally acquired in the form of verbal spells from respectable

<sup>3</sup> As to more modest magical spells, glossed as ‘cold magic’ (*khatha yen*), which are used by monks and novices for blessing and protecting the people from evil external powers, see (Tanabe 2004: 147–150). ‘Invulnerability’ is discussed by (Turton 1991) and (Tanabe 1984: 96–97).



teachers (*kehu*, *kebru*), including Buddhist monks. This power, lodged in the spell itself, becomes effective when it is uttered in a prescribed manner. It is concentrated and preserved within the body of the male practitioner. By casting the spells over particular parts of the patient's body, often together with using other magical objects, the practitioner is able to repel harmful spirits intruding and destabilizing the patient's body-soul unity.

The use of male powerful magic against spirits is not restricted to doctors of magic and other Buddhist laymen. As I illustrate elsewhere, it is obviously prevalent among Buddhist monks and novices, and Buddhist meditation also engenders a vital source of internal strength against external forces including spirits (Tanabe 2004; Irvine 1985). Powerful magic and meditation, intrinsically a male monopoly, are in nature a counter measure against external power in that they reinforce the practitioner's soul and psychic power, utilizing it to regain the stability of other persons' soul-body unity and of social relations in general. Yet we should also note an affective transformation of the power of spirit that is evident in the Khon Mueang spirit mediumship. In the spirit-medium's cults, women's body occupies a crucial point of articulation between the power of spirits and the stabilized order of the body-soul unity and of social relations.

### ***'Weak soul' and affection (affectio)***

The Khon Mueang theory of the person lays eager stress on strength of the soul and its resistance against external powers, forces, and menace. In a broad sense, men own a 'strong soul' (*khwan kheng*) and a spirit-doctor among others, having an extremely strong one, is believed to be able to expel attacks of spirits against the body-soul unity of a person as well as his own. To the contrary, women are regarded as the owner of a 'weak soul' (*khwan on*), being easily frightened and vulnerable to attacks from malevolent spirits. This implies that the Khon Mueang theory makes a marked gender differentiation in terms of resistance against external powers.

The idea of the person focusing on external powers and the resistance against them seems to be closely associated with the

Khon Mueang's psychosomatic disorder, spirit-possession, and becoming a spirit-medium. The psychosomatic disorder, which is seen as derived from attacks by spirits and other external powers, is found mainly among adult women. Although occurrence of violent possession caused by witch-spirits and other malevolent spirits have dramatically decreased in Chiang Mai since the 1970, spirit-possession in general and the associated psychosomatic disorder is still quite prevalent, and lead some women to become a spirit-medium (Muecke 1979).

One of the most striking features of the Khon Mueang spirit mediumship is that it is associated with the affective, sensible, and vulnerable form of the personhood with a capacity of being affected. The spirit mediumship is based partly on the socially defined idea that women have a 'weak soul', as opposed to men with a strong one. Thus, being a spirit-medium means that she/he who has a devalued 'weak soul' becomes one who has power and capacity to provide divination and healing to others. The spirit-medium is a power, for which her/his body is host. The spirit mediumship thus shows an affective process in which the plasticity and vulnerability of a 'weak soul' is transformed into a source of power, as I shall examine in detail in Section 3 below. Even before the 1970–80s, this affective transformation (or 'affection/*affectio*' in Spinozian terms) had long been a general condition underlying spirit-possession by a variety of spirit-mediums in village settings, and occasional spirit-possession dances held among kin-groups to propitiate their ancestor spirits such as *phi mot*, *phi meng*, and so forth.

## **Sedentism and deterritorialization**

### ***Tutelary spirits and the imagined territories***

For quite a long time, the affective transformation of the Khon Mueang spirit-mediums had been rather confined to their locality. The spirits possessing spirit-mediums normally have strong attachment to kinship organizations and particular places. As Khon Mueang call 'tutelary spirit' (*phi ahak*), these spirits give the people protection, fortune, health and well-being, so far as they do not fail

to properly propitiate them in terms of the traditionally prescribed symbolism and practices.

Then, it would be pertinent to consider why tutelary spirits and their associated rituals are to do with constructing and maintaining political domains, including kin-groups, villages, *mueang* polities, as essential sedentary bases of the Khon Mueang. These tutelary spirits have their own imaginary construction within the corresponding bases, as often expressed in legends and myths. In terms of a theory of 'ideology in general', formulated by Louis Althusser, what is represented by the tutelary spirits are not the real social relations that govern the individual inhabitants. But it is the 'imaginary relation' of those inhabitants to the real social relations in which they live (Althusser 1994: 125).

As such, worship and propitiation of the tutelary spirits at various levels, such as matrilineal kin-groups and villages, is to enhance the 'imaginary relation' of the members to the real conditions of their lives. Worshipping spirits and the related propitiation rituals involve a series of embodied practices by the inhabitants and participants that can reaffirm their attachment to the groups and their 'locality' (Appadurai 1996: 179). These practices are inscribed onto bodies within the material existence of an ideological apparatus (Althusser 1994: 127; also see Bloch 2004). What Althusser illustrates in the 'imaginary relation' as an ideological process is resonant to Anderson's notion of 'imagined community', which account for processes of constructing diverse communities of higher levels, such as pre-modern *mueang* polity as well as modern nation-state (Anderson 1991: 5–6).

### *Spirits of indigenous peoples*

In spirit possession, affective contact and experience lead a spirit-medium to incorporate the power of the external other that generates her differentiating identity. The incorporation of powers of external other into domestic or territorial domains seems to be almost inherent compulsion, not only in the spirit mediumship but also in the Khon Mueang spirit-possession in general. Many of the ancestor spirit cults of matrilineal kin-groups, for instance, have imported sources of power from other cultural and ethnic

groups, which they have come into contact with. Groups sharing a particular type of ancestor spirits called *phi mot* (the spirit of the *mot*) hold periodically a collective possession dance; the *phi mot* itself is supposed to derived from the spirits of other cultural groups, if yet unidentified, in the Shan States of Burma or in Laos. Other groups holding *phi meng* (the spirit of the Mon) have taken it from the Buddhist Mon in Thailand-Burma borderlands (Tanabe 1991).

Similarly *phi lua*, the spirit of the Lua or Lawa, the most immediate indigenous neighbours in Northern Thailand has been propitiated as an ancestor spirit among some matrilineal kin-groups, but also incorporated within the Northern Thai political systems. Barbarity and subjugation are not the sole representation of the Lua: they have also been regarded by the Khon Mueang as holders of ritual rights to propitiate the tutelary spirits of domains, implying Lua superiority over Khon Mueang in ritual terms. In fact, in the sacrificial ritual *Pu Sae Nā Sae* are regarded as the ancestors of the Lua who became the guardian spirits of the lands of Chiang Mai after their death<sup>4</sup>. The villagers who hold the ritual under the sponsorship of the Chiang Mai court are considered as the descendants of the autochthony, though they have been almost completely assimilated to the Khon Mueang over centuries (Tanabe 2000a: 299–305).

The indigenous peoples within Tai traditional political systems are thus ambivalently and contra distinctively represented, both as barbarous, cannibal, uncivilized, and non-Buddhist on the one hand, and as original landholders, therefore ritually superior to the Tai conquerors, particularly in relation to the tutelary spirits of the upper political domains (*mueang*), on the other. This categorization of particular groups, mainly conquered and marginalized indigenous groups, not only relates to ethnic distinction often expressed in terms of a civilized/uncivilized dichotomy, parallel to the cooked/raw division, quite a common feature in South East Asia and elsewhere, but also further indicates a special feature of political relations. The political significance of such contradictory

---

<sup>4</sup> In Luang Phrabang, *Pu Nōe Nā Nōe*, the tutelary spirits appearing in the cosmogony myth of Luang Phrabang kingdom and the related annual propitiation ritual, are an indigenous couple, presumably representing the present upland dwellers aggregately called Kha (Archaimbault 1964).

representations attached to the Lua in the Khon Mueang polity is twofold. As the peripheral category the Lua are continuously subject to the dominant Khon Mueang system, but at the same time, the conceptual construct of an indigenous and peripheral category came to be closely associated with the legitimacy of the monarchy as the centrality of the traditional Khon Mueang polity. This process is illustrated in detail elsewhere in the case of the Inthakhin Pillar in Chiang Mai (Tanabe 2000a).

### *Categories of possessing spirits*

In 1985–86, I surveyed 203 spirit-mediums living in 15 sub-districts (tambon) of the Chiang Mai city area, concerning their personal history, services, names of possessing spirits, and cult organization and clients. Female spirit-mediums are 83 per cent of the total, and their age is mostly distributed between thirties and seventies, concentrated in forties and fifties, as shown in Table 1 (Appendix, p. 23). Most female spirit-mediums have married, and divorced or remarried. They have almost invariably experienced domestic troubles after marriage or discontent and conflicts at workplace in shops, factory etc. and thereafter suffered from chronic mental and somatic disturbances. Male spirit-mediums have the similar experiences, and many are transvestite, being called the owner of a female ‘weak soul’ (Yos 2009).

As I have indicated before, the possessing spirits are derived from various sources, and the spirit cults are not specialized in curing, but responding to a quite wide range of demands of people, reflecting the recent social changes. Table 2 (Appendix, p. 24) shows categories of spirits and services of the spirit cults in Chiang Mai in 1985–86. The tutelary spirits possessing the spirit-mediums are divided analytically into two larger categories, which include different types: first, the tutelary spirits and others that frequently appear in traditional spirit rituals; and secondly the tutelary spirits generally called *phi chao nai* (high-ranking tutelary spirits) or *thepha chao* (tutelary deities). In 1985–86, 178 spirit-mediums out of 203 surveyed gave me detailed information on their cults. Generally speaking, a spirit-medium is normally possessed by several spirits, which are analytically belonging to different types and categories.

The total number of spirits possessed: 204 as shown in Table 2 therefore include the instances of 19 spirit-mediums possessed by different types of spirit.

### *Spirits of locality*

The first category includes six types amounting 100 instances: the ancestor spirits as I have mentioned before (38); village spirit (38); mueang spirit (6); monastery spirit (*phi suea wat*) (8); land spirit (*chao thi*) (7); and the spirit of 'bad death' (*phi tai hong*) caused by accident and strange illness (3). Although the spirit derived from bad death is regarded as a malevolent spirit (or ghost), it will be transformed into a tutelary power through a continual propitiation. The second category, including 104 instances, covers those tutelary spirits without conspicuous communal or sedentary background as in the former, which are basically associated with the traditional folk knowledge and the rather recently constructed mythology. We can detect two types within the second category, but the boundary between the two is rather blurred. Yet, we can still refer to some characteristics of the two as follows.

The first type includes those spirits, which have no personal name but are called by rather stereotypical terms such as the spirit of Grandfather (*chao pu*) or the spirit of ascetic (*chao roesi*). It also includes famous heroes and kings with personal name often appeared in the Khon Mueang mythology and history, such as Chao Luang Khamdaeng (the Lord of Reddish Gold), Chao Kho Mue Lek (the Lord with Iron hand), Chao Lak Mueang (the Lord of the Pillar of Chiang Mai), Chao Khun Suek, etc.

The second type extends to Hindu deities introduced recently from Bangkok such as Chao Pho Erawan (Phra Phrom statue located at the ex-Erawan Hotel), and historical figures in the history of the present Bangkok dynasty, which annexed Northern Thailand as a part of its nation-state since early twentieth century, such as King Chulalongkorn (ruled 1868–1910) and his related royalty and Buddhist monks<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that no name of spirit can be found, relating to the Chiang Mai's Kawila dynasty ruled the present Northern Thailand from the late 18th century to early 20th century.

It should also be noted that even in the 1980s there are the spirits derived from hill-dwelling ethnic groups such as Yao and Lisu, Kwan'in of Chinese Buddhism, the spirit of Chinese Kanfu practitioner, the Saudi Arabian deities that may reflect the growing number of Khon Mueang guest workers in the 1980s (cf. Shalardchai 1984; Anan 1992). Thus, within the second category as a whole, we find a variety of tutelary spirits ranging from the traditional ones to the new figures invented through the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. It is quite likely that among the 'traditional spirit-mediums' in the city and its vicinity there would be a considerable number of spirits rather detached from communities since the 1970–80s. However, it is only in recent decades that an explosive proliferation of new spirits occurred in response to the rapid economic and social transformation.

By classifying in this way, we find that there are a large number of newly emerging spirits as many as those regarded as traditional tutelary spirits. This indicates that the spirit cults active in Chiang Mai inherit tutelary spirits as appeared in traditional rituals, on the one hand, and there is a rapid emergence of new figures deterritorialized from the traditional symbolic system, reflecting the expanded and dispersed experiences of the people since the late 1980s, on the other.

Still through the 2000s and the early 2010s, we have come across, however, a number of long-standing spirit cults and their tutelary spirits which are still firmly attached to their localities, including their own village or particular legendary or historic places in the Chiang Mai city. As the recent studies on the urban spirit cults suggest, the persistence and vitality of the spirit mediumship has increasingly been related to the 'politics of difference' in diverse arenas such as gender, religious practice, local politics, and so on (Pattana 2003; Yos 2009; Fukuura 2011; Johnson 2011).

While relying partly on the traditional symbolic system, what a tutelary spirit signifies is, in fact, complex, contested, uncertain, and in flux in political terms. For instance, the festivity at the Three Kings Monument (constructed by the Fine Arts Department in 1983) of the centre of the Chiang Mai city has been organized

for spirit-mediums and peoples to promote ‘cultural heritage’ of the city since its first gathering in 1996. In recent years, as Kazuo Fukuura reveals, such a large festivity, as well as everyday gatherings of spirit-mediums, becomes sites for cultural production and resistance, including invention of new and hybrid rituals and the renovation of traditional practices (Fukuura 2011: 125). In the same festivity at the Three Kings Monument, Andrew Johnson argues that the spirit-mediums claim their centrality against the hegemonic discourses and practices derived from the centre of the nation-state, through appropriating the political power infused by the central government into that newly constructed monument (Johnson 2011: 522).

As such, the cults of spirit-mediums can be seen as ‘sites’ or contexts for event relations. The cults become an emergent property of their interacting spirits, spirit-mediums, participants, offerings, statues, historical places, etc. Although there has been proliferation of deterritorialized spirits for many decades, most spirit mediums, old and new, have persistently engaged in cultural production and even resistance through localizing their own practices and localities. The deterritorialization of tutelary spirits doesn’t ultimately mean the end of locality; the engagement of spirit-mediums in numerous routine rituals and practices, and occasional festivities make themselves ‘at home’ so that they are able to affectively and physically be located in the globalizing processes. This also suggests that the deterritorialization of tutelary spirits that became apparent at least since late 1980s has, in fact, always accompanied reterritorialization (cf. Tomlinson 1999: 147–149).

## **Becoming spirit**

### *Affective interactions*

When we understand the Khon Mueang’s spirit-possession in Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of ‘becoming’ (*devenir*), we should focus on the ‘affection’ (transformation) of spirit-medium’s body. The affection here denotes Spinoza-Deleuze’s concept of ‘affection’ (*affectio*). It means a state of body when it is acted upon by another body, a transformed state of one’s body that produced by an effect or action of another body through contact (Deleuze



1988: 49)<sup>6</sup>. In the case of spirit mediumship, a spirit-medium's body is a focal point upon which a power of another body or spirit acts, and receives the trace of another body as a possession state. Through such a process of bodily contact, the capacity ('the virtual') underlying the spirit-medium is transformed into actual and visible. This spirit-medium's actualization is possible, not because spirit-medium's body is passive to the power of the spirit, but conversely because spirit-medium's body can actively transform itself through a capacity of being affected. In other words, being affected by the external power, spirit-medium's body experiences 'active affection' that is internally elicited. Therefore, in the spirit-possession in the Khon Mueang society, affection of the body can be either passive or active that can explain the underlying processes of transformation from agony to joys involved in spirit-possession<sup>7</sup>.

Before being a spirit-medium they have had a quite wide range of mental and somatic disturbances, including those symptoms called in western medicine emotional instability, paralysis, arthralgia and swollen joint, vomit, lost consciousness, epileptic spasm, perception disturbances, and dissociative behaviour, etc. Obviously these symptoms have been cured or improved through various traditional medical treatments, but they have been invariably badly suffered for a prolonged period. They may be treated by spirit doctors or folk healers (*mo mueang*) with magic, herbal medicine, or astrology, and may certainly hold frequent merit-making rituals at monasteries.

They may visit modern medical institutions like hospital and clinic. However, they eventually find and understand a true cause of their illness when they meet spirit-mediums. A 'medical pluralism' ranging from traditional magic and herbal medicine, Buddhist merit-making to modern Western medicine is evident in their long

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Deleuze, 'affection [affectio] is a mixture of two bodies, one body which is said to act on another, and the other receives the trace of the first'; and it also indicates the nature of the modified body, the nature of the affectionate or affected body, the affection indicates the nature of the affected body much more than it does the nature of the affecting body' (Deleuze 1978: 5–6; also see Appendix).

<sup>7</sup> According to Michael Hardt, Spinoza's concept of 'affection' can be understood as the twofold one; the 'passive affection' which derives from only external things and powers, on the one hand, and the 'active affection' which derives internally from the body itself, on the other (Hardt 1993).

journey, but they are ultimately relieved from their suffering in a spirit-medium's cult<sup>8</sup>.

The affective and embodied interactions in spirit mediumship are most conspicuously depicted in a condensed form in the process by which a new spirit-medium is identified. To a visiting client or 'patient' who complains of sufferings and afflictions, the spirit-medium may declare that a particular spirit wants to his/her body to be a host or a 'horse to be ridden' (*ma khi*). A series of curing sessions are subsequently held with face-to-face interactions between the possessed spirit-medium and the patient. During this period, the patient may often experience mental and somatic disturbances, and frequently an acute violent possession. The spirit-medium persistently ask the patient what spirit is going to possess him/her and eventually she identifies the spirit which may be an ancestor spirit of the matrilineal kin, a village spirit, or, more likely, even a spirit with a name invented by the spirit-medium. Then, the spirit-medium insists that it should be in subordination to the spirit possessing her. And the patient begins to respond to her spirit with relief. After such dialogical interactions, the patient begins to feel that the spirit doesn't annoy her, but actually possessing her body in a steady state.

The repeated interactions, then, lead to a controlled state of possession, while shedding violent possession states and chronic disturbances. A new spirit-medium is thus 'born', or in other words, becoming-spirit is accomplished. This 'becoming-spirit' is marked by ritual of conferring the 'teacher's tray' (*khan khi*) to the newborn spirit-medium. The ritual of receiving the teacher's tray (*hap khan khi*) signifies that the spirit-medium confers a tray to the new disciple, through making homage to the teacher whom the spirit possessing the spirit-medium worships. Through this ritual the spirit-medium establishes a master-disciple relationship with the newborn spirit-medium, thereafter called 'disciple' (*luk sit*).

---

<sup>8</sup> The growing popularity of spirit cults, particularly till around the 1990s is, in part, derived from their relatively cheap cost for treatments, compared with the cases of modern hospitals and some of traditional folk healer whose management become similar to modern clinic. Needless to say, however, its relation with 'gift economy', in the midst of capitalist development, could be more relevant in considering the proliferation of spirit cults.

### ***Becoming and political power***

On the other hand, if we put it in a social context, the becoming-spirit by the current spirit mediumship involves considerable ambiguity towards the existing power relations. It can be noted considerable ambiguity in the utterances and attitudes of the spirit-mediums; some tutelary spirits are submissive to the discourse of the nation-state; and some show rather diverse counter-cultural/counter-hegemonic tendencies, perhaps articulated with the experiences of marginalized minorities and lower class peoples.

A tutelary spirit is a power, but it doesn't necessarily coincide with the present hegemony, along with its associated discourses. As the nation-state reproduces and disseminates selective powerful symbols through the media, education and ritual, for its continuation of paranoiac sovereignty, many spirit-mediums accept them apparently at face value as their own power. However, when these powerful symbols are acted out in the possession scenes, they are often done so in a playful and reshaped manner rather than being identical to what the hegemonic discourses intend to reproduce. King Chulalongkorn, Prince Mangrai, or any other powerful male figure may possess a spirit-medium, but the mimetic actions always produce endless proliferation of differences, which even exhibit a parody and distortion of the disseminated images.

Walter Irvine describes the nationalist features of many spirit-mediums in Chiang Mai in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Irvine 1982). This may be true because they responded sensitively to the critical situations where anti-Communist forces overwhelmingly dominated the society during that period. However, it would be rather plausible to assume that such external ideologies as nationalist or others can be easily incorporated and naturalized through the very nature of embodiment of spirit mediumship (cf. Lambek 1995: 276). Nonetheless, the utterances and performances of the spirit-mediums are more likely to show political ambiguity through the repeated differentiation from the hegemonic image production, also reflecting their localized contexts and morality.

To the contrary, ambiguity disappears in cases where subversive elements are involved in spirit mediumship. A recent anthropological

study of violent possession trance depicts overt resistance against capitalist work discipline and its violation of embodied gender distinction by female workers in a Malaysian multinational factory (Ong 1987). The Hauca movement in West Africa is also a prominent case of the embodied cultural resistance in more overt form in which Hauca spirit-mediums mime French colonial soldiers in an extremely detailed fashion. As Paul Stoller illuminates, the Hauca spirit-mediums perform and express their cultural resistance through their 'embodied memories' (Stoller 1995).

Yet in Chiang Mai cultural, resistance associated with spirit-possession and spirit mediumship is, instead, more implicit, also being minutely focused on more localized contexts. Thus, the possessing power sometimes involves alternative moral voices and corporeal critiques of hierarchies of gender, and national or global forces threatening local security and resources. During the interlude of curing and divinatory sessions, some spirit-mediums speak of the degradation of male human beings, of environmental concerns, presumably caused by the recent establishment of a multinational industrial estate, and of caricatures of corrupted politicians and monks. All these critical utterances are embodied in nature, and articulated with the spirit-medium's past affliction and personal and social trauma.

I would then argue that the ambiguous position of spirit mediumship in Chiang Mai is derived from its embodied and affective contacts and interactions; the body itself easily incorporates external existing powers, on the one hand, but it is also linked to cultural resistance in the form of moral critiques generated from their localized episodic and more socialized memory, on the other<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> In speeches of Khon Mueang peasant leaders, their episodic memories are often articulated with their means of cultural and political resistance. Paul Cohen illustrates subversive appropriation of elite discourse in his analysis of political rhetoric of a peasant leader (Cohen 1987). Also see (Tanabe 2004).

## **Becoming and affective contact**

The becoming proceeds in a real space and time in which the spirit-medium's affective contacts and her morality are played out through interactions with the participants involved. One of the salient features of the spirit cults is its theatrical character, which distinguishes it from many other more institutionalized rituals in the Khon Mueang society. It is a 'theatre of affect and contact' rather than merely a theatre of symbols. It creates contingency, anticipation, and astonishment, arousing strong affective, aesthetic and psychic effects among the people, alongside more boring feeling involved in ritualized and liturgical practices. The theatrical performances of the cult allow the participants to experience embodied interactions with the spirit-medium, i.e. the possessed tutelary spirit.

Any session of a cult always starts with the transformation of the spirit-medium into the tutelary spirit; after a few moments of agonies and dissociation on the part of the spirit-medium, the spirit begins to manifest itself through her body. Thereafter, the embodied spirit talks to a client, and divination, curing or whatever services are given according to his/her request. Most sessions consist of a series of neatly woven interactions between the spirit-medium and the client. Characteristic of these sessions are dialogical relations, in which, together with incoherent and chaotic utterances, gossip, jokes, parody of the gender relations and the local and national politics are frequently dominant. As I have earlier referred to, moral contentions and guidance to the client are often incorporated in these interactive processes, and in recent years a particular emphasis is laid on the Buddhist moral precepts.

As I have discussed before, affective contacts and interactions are dramatically played out when a new spirit-medium is born. Yet, even in routine sessions of divination and curing for clients who complain of less severe afflictions and pain, affective interactions are also predominant. The boundaries between the spirit-medium and the client or other participants are blurred in a direct communion where the spirit manifests itself in an embodied form. The spirit is acted out through the spirit-medium's bodily movement and speech,

to which the client is able to respond directly. These affective and embodied interactions enable the client and participants to develop new experiences of relief and liberation, which are becoming rather difficult to pursue particularly in urban and industrial settings (cf. Tanabe 2012).

Among matrilineal kin-groups such as phi mot and phi meng, the affective interactions are concentrated periodically in the occasions of collective possession dance dedicated to the ancestor spirits. However, in this case, the legitimacy of healing and relief is delimited within the boundaries of the kin-group. To the contrary, the cults of spirit-mediums provide relief to anyone who visits them as a client, including middle-class business people, labourers, vendors, refugees, and newcomers or settled peoples from Burma and other neighbouring countries.

In both cases the technology of stabilization utilizes affective interactions that allow the people to contact the external other to find ways of controlling their decision, achieving emotional stabilization, and acting out fantasy to gain a new status and situation. In short, the current spirit mediumship, together with the collective spirit-possession in more territorialized and sedentary settings, renders to the people the governance of their self, in which they deal with their fortune, misfortune and fantasy through affective interactions with the imagined other. In this regards, new types of cultural consumption are increasingly dominant in spirit cults, including technologies of dealing with chance, such as lottery drawings. As a most popular type of cultural consumption, divination is a way of dealing with chance through affective and embodied interactions, whether the outcomes may or may not be acceptable.

It would be pertinent here to note how such a form of affective and embodied interactions relates to what has been sociologically formulated as 'charismatic communion'. In the sociological tradition, the affective (or emotional) interactions as exemplified in spirit-possession and other similar situations are often explained as stemming from charismatic desire for loss of self or for dissolution of self and other, as exemplified in social psychology of crowd,

Fascism, or, in more 'postmodern' conditions, narcissism and consumerism (cf. Lindholm 1990).

It would be obvious that the notion of 'charismatic communion' is rather negatively constructed as opposed to the Euro-American conception, or rather obsession, of the 'individuated person'. The sociological theory as such eventually fails to account for the affective contacts and interactions so prevalent in Khon Mueang society, and elsewhere in South East Asia. This is because its very presumption of the delimited, individuated person is never formulated as relative to other possible forms of personhood. The embodied and affective relations of the Khon Mueang personhood is not restricted to spirit possession, but also widely extended to everyday situations, including face-to-face interactions.

For the Khon Mueang, spirit-possession is not an unsound and psychiatric phenomenon, but a possible or 'virtual' state of body-soul relations derived from the embodiment of their basic cognitive schema. What they experience in possession scenes is, therefore, not a loss of self, but a process through which the self and the other enter repeated negotiations and interactions to solve afflictions and fulfil desires. The interactions between the spirit-medium and the participants are also the locus where the affective relations and the accompanying affection (transformation) are cohesively experienced.

### ***Concluding remarks***

The spirit mediumship has grown quite rapidly in Chiang Mai and other Northern cities since the 1970s in response to the persisting and extensive capitalist development of Thailand. In this paper, I have revealed how it has been constructed and developed to deal with spirits as external, 'real' powers that could transform the relationship of body-soul unity, consequently effecting social and materials relations, as widely detectable in Khon Mueang rituals and social life in general. Under such ontological background, spirit-mediums are provided with a capacity of being affected by external powers, able to transform themselves into a source of power.

Spirit mediumship is generally resonant with sedentary bases, particularly in Northern Thailand and South East Asia in general. The Khon Mueang spirits, which possess spirit-mediums, are diverse. Yet, a considerable number of their tutelary or guardian spirits have been associated with particular social groups such as matrilineal kin-groups, and particular places such as villages, Buddhist monastery and mueang domains. This sedentary nature of possessing spirits has rendered to the people their 'locality', an imagined and then materially constructed place, within which they reproduce and maintain their social life. Certainly, globalization fundamentally transforms the relationship between the places they inhabit and their cultural practices, experiences and identities. As Néstor García Canclini illustrates, the term 'deterritorialization' explains the loss of the 'natural' relation of culture to geographical and social territories (García Canclini 1995: 229), in other words, the loss of 'locality'.

In the development of spirit mediumship in Northern Thailand, we have witnessed, especially since late 1980s, an apparent transformation from sedentary resources of power attached to particular places to more deterritorialized floating 'signs' of power. However, this 'deterritorialization' is, occurred at the level of sign, not a one-way process. As John Tomlinson plausibly points out, 'where there is deterritorialization there is also reterritorialization' (Tomlinson 1999: 148; cf. Nash 2005: 178). 'Reterritorialization' as an oppositional move can be discerned at the very heart of affective contacts and interactions intrinsic to the Khon Mueang spirit mediumship. Therefore, I would maintain that the affective contacts and embodied, localized knowledge and practices, encompassing spirit-mediums, clients and other participants alike, provide the persistent and cohesive drive towards attachment to the territories.

'Affects are becomings', say Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 256). 'Becoming-spirit' is, in fact, a way in which the spirit-medium actualizes, through affective and bodily contacts, the underlying capacity ('the virtual') in a visible form. This paper has illustrated this process of becoming when a new spirit-medium is born after repeated interactive sessions within the cult. Becoming is, indeed,



experienced by the newborn spirit-medium in such decisive moment, but also more widely spreads to the people involved in the routine sessions of spirit cults. Affective contacts, which drive to become other, could blur the boundaries between medium, client or other participants, leading continuously to new experiences of relief and liberation. This is possible because affect, not simply psychological 'emotion', can go much beyond the self, intruding into others, human or nonhuman, entering into alliances with them.

## Appendices

### *From mimesis to becoming*

Concerning the powers concretely and directly effecting objects, we have to notice individual cognitive faculty and processes concerning knowledge and practices of spirits. Since Plato's formulation, the Western traditional notion of mimesis is 'mimetic representation' by copying, connoting irrationality and the lack of reason. There is an irreconcilable cleavage between mimesis and rational action. For Walter Benjamin, however, mimesis is a fundamental human faculty in order to become something else through perceiving resemblance, though disappearing by the development of modern reproductive arts. Benjamin argues in 'On the mimetic faculty':

*'[H]is gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else' (Benjamin 1979: 160).*

Anthropologist Michael Taussig, inspired by Benjamin, refers to the two-layered notion of mimesis. The first is a copying or imitation, and the second is a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived. Contact and copy merge to become virtually identical, and therefore seeing something or hearing something is to be in contact with that something (Taussig 1993: 21). Thus, drawing on James Frazer's concept of 'sympathetic magic', Taussig sheds lights on the aspect in which mimesis is to perceive others through embodied actions:

*I call it the mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power' (Tausig 1993: xiii, emphases added).*

Becoming other, possession in order to behave like other, particularly the practices and faculty of the spirit-mediums by which they transform their own body and mind through being affected by external powers, is articulately concerned with the Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'becoming' (devenir). When Tausig speaks of 'to yield into and become other', such a mimetic action unarguably already steps into the process of becoming other (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 304–305). What Benjamin and Tausig call mimesis, as well as Frazer's 'sympathetic magic', inevitably enters into the area of becoming through copying, miming, making model, exploring difference, and finally through affective contact<sup>10</sup>.

In the case of Khon Mueang spirit mediumship, spirit-possession implies acquisition of powers by becoming external other. In other words, it refers to an action to internalize other's power and to transform oneself through bodily sensual experiences such as spells, dancing and spoken language, rather than through signs and letters. Such a way to acquire powers is nothing other than what Benjamin calls 'a rudiment of the powerful compulsion'. For Khon Mueang, mimesis is not only restricted to spirit-possession, but is one of the most fundamental forms of perception in representing objects and the other. Yet, it goes beyond miming the other; it is a manifestation of desire to transform oneself through becoming the other, and to incorporate the power of the other for enhancing spirit-medium's own activity (Tanabe 2002: 58). The Khon Mueang spirit-possession should be seen as 'a becoming' that emerges from affective contacts with the power of the other. Furthermore, the Khon-Mueang spirit-possession is a way of approaching new

---

<sup>10</sup>The becoming of spirit-mediums can be compared with that of artists. Deleuze and Guattari contend, 'No art is imitative, no art can be imitative or figurative. ... Thus, imitation self-destructs, since the imitator unknowingly enters into a becoming that conjugates with the unknowing becoming of that which he or she imitates' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 304–305).

experiences through the working of affects. As Stoller and Rosalind Morris, drawing on Benjamin, suggest, in the cases of Niger and Northern Thailand respectively, spirit-mediums want to experience and act out through the embodied memories of the other (Stoller 1995: 195), or through the viewpoint of the other like a camera (Morris 2000: 189–190).

If the manifest possession of spirit-mediums is to receive other's external power (Boddy 1994: 426; Lambek 1993), it would be possible to consider it in relation to the Latin term 'passiones' (not 'passion' in English). Following Godfrey Lienhardt, Fritz Kramer argues that the terms 'moved', 'filled', or 'possessed' in African spirit-possession refer to mental states corresponding to 'passiones' rather than 'actions' (Kramer 1993: 62).<sup>11</sup> Thus, in dealing with spirit-possession by the Khon Mueang spirit-mediums, or other forms of manifest possession in other cultures, we should regard it as a capacity of being affected like Nietzsche's 'the will to power', rather than ascribing it to a passive mental state.

Deleuze maintains that, for Nietzsche, 'the capacity of being affected is not necessarily a passivity but an affectivity [affectivité], a sensibility, a sensation' (Deleuze 1983: 62, emphasis original). For Nietzsche, pathos (Leidenschaft) is activity and the pathos of suffering has a capacity of being transformed into the pathos of joy. As Hardt claims, Nietzsche's pathos doesn't connote the body that experiences passion passively. Rather, it has an active and creative role (Hardt 1993).

---

<sup>11</sup> Lienhardt intends to see the spirits, divinities, and spirit-possession among the Dinka of Southern Sudan as 'passiones', which means the opposite of actions in relation to human self (Lienhardt 1961: 151–152). Kramer adds 'only with the aid of this counter-notion can we convey properly the concept of powers, the spirits and deities peculiar to the Dinka' (Kramer 1993: 58). Among the Dinka the powers of spirits or divinities are not to do with any theological discourse, but only understandable in terms of the 'passiones' which they actually experience in everyday contexts.

**Table 1: Number of spirit-mediums surveyed in the Chiang Mai city area, 1985-86**

Age	Male	Female	Total
21-30	2	1	3
31-40	7	18	25
41-50	4	43	47
51-60	5	54	59
61-70	4	31	35
71-80	2	7	9
81-90	—	3	3
No reply	2	20	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>26 (13%)</b>	<b>177 (87%)</b>	<b>203 (100%)</b>

**Table 2: Services given by spirit-mediums arranged by type of possessing spirit, 1985-86**

Type of Service	Type of possessing spirit							Total	% in 178 mediums
	Ancestor spirit	Village spirit	<i>Miang</i> spirit	Monastery spirit	Land spirit	Bad death spirit	<i>Chaonai</i> spirit		
1 Healing	23	13	22	7	3	2	87	157	88.2
2 Divination	14	28	1	5	2	2	82	134	74.7
3 <u>Business consultancy</u>	15	27	2	5	3	2	75	129	72.5
4 <u>Military service</u>	10	19	—	3	—	2	39	73	41.0
5 Love magic	4	12	—	1	1	2	41	61	34.3
6 Exorcism	3	8	—	1	1	—	26	39	21.9
7 Lost property	5	7	—	3	—	1	23	39	21.9
8 Counter-sorcery	2	10	1	1	1	—	18	33	18.5
9 <u>Lottery draw</u>	1	4	1	1	1	1	19	28	15.7
10 <u>Examination</u>	2	5	—	—	—	—	15	22	12.4
11 Inviting the dead	—	4	—	2	—	—	6	12	6.7
12 Sending khro	1	1	—	—	—	—	3	5	2.8
13 Making mad	—	1	—	—	—	1	2	4	2.2
14 Killing	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	2	1.1
15 Giving spell	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	0.6
16 <u>Law suit</u>	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	0.6
17 No service	1	—	—	—	—	—	6	7	3.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>443</b>	<b>747</b>	

Note: The total number of spirit-mediums surveyed is 203, and 178 of which gave detailed accounts of their activities. They are normally possessed by several different spirits and gave a variety of services. The services of Nos. 3, 4, 9, 10, and 16, underlined, represent newly emerging ones, while others are traditional.

## References

- Archaimbault Charles, 1964 — 'Religious structures in Laos', *Journal of the Siam Society* 52: 57-74.
- Althusser Louis, 1994(1970) — 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)', in Zizek, Slavoj (ed.) *Mapping Ideology*, London: Verso: 100-140; also in 1995 *Sur la reproduction*, Paris: PUF.
- Anan Ganjanapan, 1984 — 'The idiom of "phii ka": peasant conception of class differentiation in Northern Thailand', *Mankind* 14(4): 325-329.

- Anan Ganjanapan, 1992 — 'Northern Thai rituals and beliefs: the reproduction of morality', in *Proceedings of the First International Symposium to Present the Results of Projects Funded under the Toyota Foundation's International Grant Program*.
- Anderson Benedict, 1972 — 'The idea of power in Javanese culture', in Clare Holt (ed.) *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 1–69.
- Anderson Benedict, 1991(1983) — *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, London: Verso.
- Appadurai Arjun, 1996 — *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Benjamin Walter, 1979(1933) — 'Notes on mimetic faculty', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (trs.), London: Verso: 160–163.
- Bloch Maurice, 2004 — 'Ritual and deference', in Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (eds.) *Ritual and Memory: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press: 65–78.
- Boddy Janice, 1994 — 'Spirit possession revisited: beyond instrumentality', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23: 407–434.
- Cohen Paul, 1987 — 'From moral regeneration to confrontation: two paths to equality in the political rhetoric of a Northern Thai peasant leader', *Mankind* 17(2): 153–167.
- Comaroff Jean, 1994 — 'Defying disenchantment: reflections on ritual, power, and history', in Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre (eds.) *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press: 301–314.
- De Landa Manuel, 2002 — 'Deleuzian ontology: a sketch', in *New Ontologies: Transdisciplinary Objects*, Illinois University Press; also at : [www.situation.ru](http://www.situation.ru)
- De Landa Manuel, 2006 — *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, London: Continuum.
- Deleuze Gilles, 1978 — 'Spinoza', *Les cours de Gilles Deleuze*, 24/01/1978, [www.webdeleuze.com](http://www.webdeleuze.com)
- Deleuze Gilles, 1983(1962) — *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Hugh Tomlinson (tr.), London: Athlone Press.
- Deleuze Gilles, 1988(1981) — *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Robert Hurley (tr.), San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Deleuze Gilles, Félix Guattari, 1987(1980) — *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi (tr.), London: Athlone Press.
- Fukuura Kazuo, 2011 — 'A ritual community: the religious practices of spirit mediums who worship the spirit of the Chiang Mai city pillar', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 26(1): 105–127.

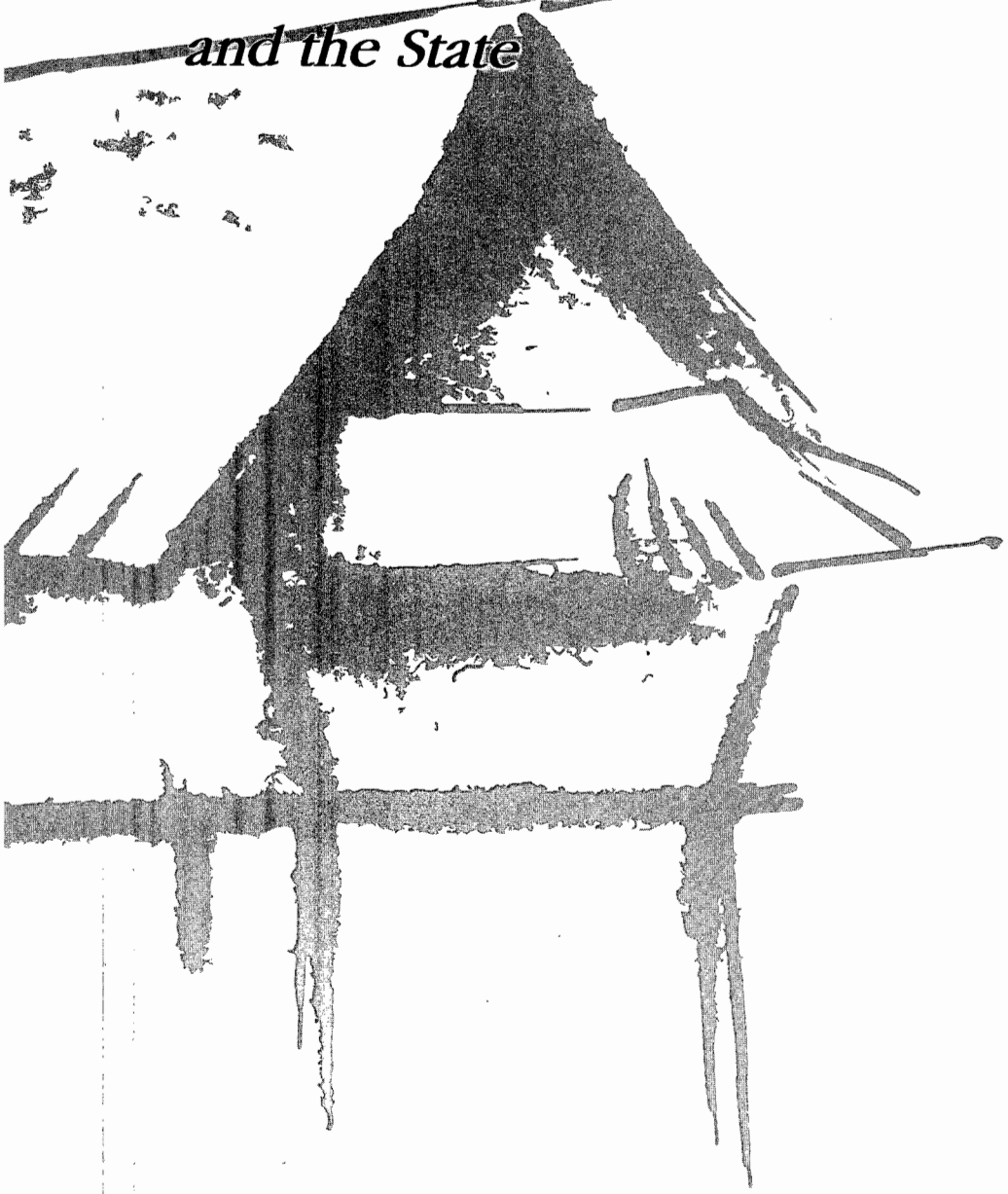
- García Canclini Néstor, 1995 — *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gupta Akhil, James Ferguson, 1997 — 'Beyond "culture": space, identity, and the politics of difference', in Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (eds.) *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Cultural Anthropology*, Durham: Duke University Press: 33–51.
- Hardt Michael 1993 — *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Irvine Walter, 1984 — 'Decline of village spirit cults and growth of urban spirit mediumship: the persistence of spirit beliefs, the position of women and modernization', *Mankind* 14(4): 315–324.
- Irvine Walter, 1985 — 'Northern Thai madness and nationalism', (MS).
- Johnson Andrew, 2011 — 'Re-centring the city: spirits, local wisdom, and urban design at the Three Kings Monument of Chiang Mai', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42(3): 511–531.
- Kanchana Kaewthep, 1982 — 'Bot wikhro "khwam klua nai sangkhom thai" (Analysis of 'fear in Thai society')', *Warasan setthasat kanmueang (Journal of Political Economy)* 2(2): 28–50. (in Thai)
- Keyes Charles F., 1983 — 'Merit-transference in the karmic theory of popular Theravada Buddhism', in Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel (eds.) *Karma, An Anthropological Inquiry*, Berkeley: University of California Press: 261–286.
- Kramer Fritz, 1993 — *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa*, Malcolm Green (tr.), London: Verso.
- Lambek Michael, 1993 — *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lambek Michael, 1995 — 'Choking on the Quran', in W. James (ed.), *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Formulations*, London: Routledge.
- Lienhardt Godfrey, 1961 — *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lindholm Charles, 1990 — *Charisma*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Morris, Rosalind 2000 — *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Muecke Marjorie, 1979 — 'An explication of "wind illness" in Northern Thailand', *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 3: 267–300.
- Nash June, 2005 — 'Defying deterritorialization: autonomy movements against globalization', in June Nash (ed.) *Social Movements: An Anthropological Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell: 177–186.
- Navaro-Yashin Yael, 2009 — 'Affective spaces, melancholic objects: ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 15: 1–18.
- Ong Aiwah, 1987 — *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory*

- Women in Malaysia, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Pattana Kitiarsa, 2003 — 'You may not believe, but never offend the spirits', in Timothy Craig and Richard King (eds.) *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Sanguan Chottisukharat, 1969 — *Prapheni thai phaknuea* (Customs in Northern Thailand), Bangkok: Samnakphim Odiansato. (in Thai)
- Shalardchai Ramitanondh, 1984 — *Phi chao nai* (The high-ranking tutelary spirits), Chiang Mai: Sun Nangsue Chiang Mai. (in Thai)
- Stoller Paul, 1995 — *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa*, New York: Routledge.
- Tanabe Shigeharu, 1984 — 'Ideological practice in peasant rebellions: Siam at the turn of the twentieth century', in Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe (eds.) *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia* (Senri Ethnological Studies, No.13): 75–110.
- Tanabe Shigeharu, 1991 — 'Spirits, power and the discourse of female gender: the phi meng cult of Northern Thailand', in Manas Chitakasem and Andrew Turton (eds.) *Thai Constructions of Knowledge*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies: 183–212.
- Tanabe Shigeharu, 2000a — 'Autochthony and the Inthakhin cult of Chiang Mai', in Andrew Turton (ed.) *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, London: Curzon: 294–318.
- Tanabe Shigeharu, 2000b — 'Memories displaced by ritual: cognitive processes in the spirit cults of Northern Thailand', *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology* 24(4): 707–726.
- Tanabe Shigeharu, 2002 — 'The person in transformation: body, mind and cultural appropriation', in Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes (eds.) *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, London: Routledge: 43–67.
- Tanabe Shigeharu, 2004(1986) — *Nung lueang nung dam: tamnan khong phunam chaona haeng lannathai, Phim khrang thi 2* (Wearing yellow robe, wearing black garb: a story of a peasant leader in Northern Thailand, 2nd Edition), Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press. (in Thai)
- Tanabe Shigeharu, 2012 (in press) — 'About the community of affect (affectus): a case of HIV/AIDS self-help groups in Northern Thailand', in Kyonosuke Hirai (ed.) *Communities as Practice*, Kyoto University Academic Press. (in Japanese)
- Taussig Michael, 1993 — *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, New York: Routledge.
- Tomlinson John, 1999 — *Globalization and Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Turton Andrew, 1978 — 'Architectural and political space in Thailand', in G.B. Milner (ed.) *Natural Symbols in South East Asia*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies: 113–132.

- Turton Andrew, 1984 — 'Limits of ideological domination and the formation of social consciousness', in Andrew Turton and Shigeharu Tanabe (eds.) *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia*, *Senri Ethnological Studies*, No.13, Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology: 19–73.
- Turton Andrew, 1991 — 'Invulnerability and local knowledge', in Manas Chitakasem and Andrew Turton (eds.) *Thai Constructions of Knowledge*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies: 155–182.
- Wijeyewardene Gehan, 1986 — *Place and Emotion in Northern Thai Ritual Behaviour*, Bangkok: Pandora.
- Yos Santasombat, 2009 — 'Spirit cults and mediumship: changing gender and power relations in Northern Thailand', Report of the International Workshop 'Asian Religious and Ritual Fields in Comparison: Cases from Thailand, China, and Japan': Kanazawa: Faculty of Letters, Kanazawa University: 43–63.



*II - Territories  
and the State*



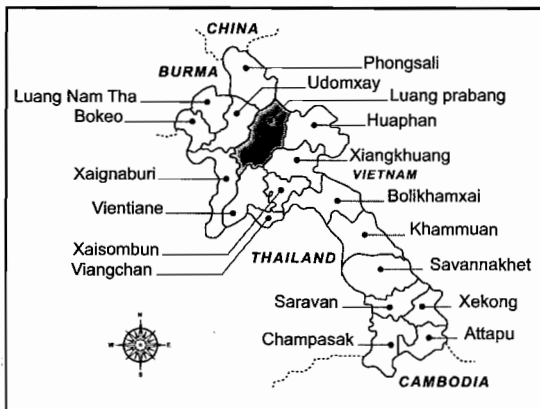


# 5 *The rural development policy and the transformation of upland/lowland relationships in Laos since 1975*



OLIVIER ÉVRARD

My paper gives an overview of the changes that occurred in rural areas of Laos since the start of the communist regime in 1975, in terms of mobility and relations to territory. It insists especially on the effect of the new State regulations concerning the mountain agriculture methods and the resettlement of highland villages to the lowlands. These regulations have transformed, rather than suppressed, traditional forms of mobility in a way that the State cannot always control.



Map of provinces of Lao P.D.R.

Since the independence in 1975 and the end of the war, Lao countryside has undergone a territorialization or “settling process” which has profoundly transformed social dynamics inside the villages as well as interethnic relationships. This territorialization process has gone along with huge migrations, many of them from highland to lowland areas, but also in the lowlands as well as towards neighbouring countries. Some of these dynamics are similar to those experienced in Thailand or in Vietnam but, as we will show, they nonetheless occur in a specific context, from a demographic, ethnic, geographic and political point of view. While Laos is culturally close to Thailand, the share of the ethnic minorities (who constitute overwhelming local majorities) and the ideological perspective which was adopted by the central regime after 1975 differ markedly from its neighbour where the minorities account for less of one per cent of the total population and have many difficulties to get the same legal position as other Thai citizens. Conversely, the Vietnamese interethnic and ideological context may seem close to the Laotian one but population density in the lowlands as well as the technical and human resources are much lower in Laos.

We propose to distinguish three periods in which this territorialization process occurred in a different ideological context and with different features: the immediate war aftermath from 1975 to the end of the Cold War; the period of the 90s and the period since 2000. These three periods have seen the remote ecological and cultural margins of the old Lao kingdom becoming buffers zones which needed to be secured, then borders to be conquered, exploited or developed; and finally transnational corridors to be opened in order to ensure the regional integration and the success of market-oriented policies. This evolution parallels the shift from a people-focused resource system in pre-colonial periods to systems that emphasize control of land and networks of communication: the lowlanders now need uplanders’ land much more than their products (Tannenbaum & Kammerer, 1996: 4). Such a chronology may prove too simplistic since these periods overlap and do not always apply equally to all local contexts in this country. However, it is useful as a first approximation and as a way to fit in the format and the time constraint imposed for this presentation.

## **From 1975 to the end of the 80s: From margins to buffer zones**

Prior to the establishment of the Lao PDR on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1975, two decades of an international and civil conflict have had a deep impact on the human geography of Laos. Between 1953, date of its formal independence from the *Union Française* and 1973, date of the disengagement of the American troops in Vietnam, the country was progressively divided into two major zones of influence. The lowlands and the Mekong valley were controlled by the royalist troops supported by the American Air Force, while the highlands and north-east were mostly occupied by the Pathet Lao army supported by North-Vietnamese forces. This very schematic overview would need to be detailed since there were actually some highland areas under the influence of royalists military and their American advisers, for instance in the mountainous areas of the South near Cambodia as well as in the North near Luang Nam Tha where most of my fieldwork has been conducted during the past 15 years.

What is important to keep in mind here is that highland areas were for the first time in history thrown in the front stage and became crucial zones to control in order to ensure security or shelter for the troops. They used to be loosely controlled remote areas at the margins of the main regional powers and in less than two decades, they become crucial issues. This was especially true for the highlands at the border of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia but also for those at the border with Thailand in Sayaburi and Bokeo provinces or near the Chinese border in Phongsali province. While a huge number and a great variety of migrations occurred during this period, two kinds of displacements concerned specifically the highlands and could be said to prefigure their systematic depopulation during the 90s: the displacements for security reasons and those undertaken by the villagers themselves to respond to the call of the new state.

### ***Managing the emergency and refilling the lowlands***

During the war, huge movements of population occurred between communist and royalist controlled areas: officially, 27,000 people were displaced in 1958, 90,000 in 1960, and 125,000 in 1962 and

up to 730,000 in 1973 during the cease-fire (Taillard, 1989: 95; Zasloff and Brown 1975: 274). After the change of regime in 1975, more than 300,000 people (including the majority of the country's technicians and well-qualified cadres as well as many members of ethnic minorities who had supported the royalists) fled to Thailand (Stuart-Fox, 1986: 52), from where many of them went to France and to the United States of America. Taking all these migrations together, more than half of the country's villages actually moved during this period of hostility (Goudineau, 1997: 11). These migrations and exodus chiefly concerned the lowlands areas and one of their results was the abandonment, or the under use of many paddy fields in the major plains of the country.

Simultaneously, the communist authorities invited the highlanders to come down and participate to the rebuilding of the country by repopulating the lowlands, refilling deserted towns and cultivating these abandoned fields. This situation was the logical outcome of the egalitarian perspective adopted by the Pathet Lao leaders during the war and the promises of development they had made to the highlanders. Such migrations started as early as the end of the 50s in some areas, especially in the Northern provinces of Luang Namtha, Phongsali and Samneua. They were voluntary, ideologically motivated and undertaken under the influence of local ethnic leaders who were rewarded later by official positions in the new provincial administrations (cases of Khmu and Phu Noi populations for instance, see Évrard 2011) as well as with material support (rice, cattle, construction wood) for their followers. These early migrations should also be seen in some cases as the first attempts to test a policy of collectivization of agriculture, which was later implemented at a national scale between 1975 and 1979 (Evans, 1990).

### ***Securing rebel areas***

The fighting during the war were bitter, long, and complex. They created divisions not only between ethnic groups but also within them. The mountainous terrain of Laos made for warfare of raiding, air strikes, and patrols, with conflicts occurring at the local scale over a number of years. First, the French, then the American-backed royalists, and then the eventually victorious Communist

Pathet Lao forces, allied selectively with some highlanders and fought continuously with others. When they finally took power in 1975, the Communists then asserted their control over the highlands. However, some areas were not completely pacified until the late 70s and even as late as the mid-80s. Paramilitary troops trained by the Americans and receiving support from abroad formed counter-revolutionary groups and continued to stage attacks on Lao territory. Often based in Thailand, these rebels looked for support among neighbouring highland villages (mainly Khmu, Hmong, Yao and Lahu in the Northern part of the country). In some instances, they forcibly requisitioned food and men<sup>1</sup>.

In order to keep control of the villages and cut off supplies to the rebels, the government decided to remove all villages from unsecured areas to sites along the main roads. This campaign against the subversive groups lasted until the end of the 1980s in several provinces and led to the nearly complete depopulation of entire areas located either along international borders (Phuvong district in Attapeu province at the border with Cambodia; eastern part of Phongsali and Xiengkhuang province at the border of Vietnam; central part of Sayaburi province at the border of Thailand) or forming internal margins inside Lao territory (Phu Bia range in Saysombun area ; Vieng Phu Kha plateau in Luang Nam Tha for instance). In such cases, only one or two villages were usually left on site with a heavy presence of army patrols in charge of watching over the border.

### **The 1990s: from buffer zones to “new frontiers”**

The transformation of the relations between lowlands and highlands areas during the 1990s should be considered first in the light of the shifts that occurred in the regional geopolitics at the end of the 1980s. The warming-up of the relationships between the Soviet Union and China was followed by the withdrawal of the Vietnamese army from Cambodia and the restoration of full diplomatic relations between Laos and China. It also led to a rapid and spectacular warm-up of the relations between Thailand and

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of counter-revolutionary armed groups among ethnic minorities of Laos after 1975 and their actions in the upland villages, see Stone, 1980.

Laos at the end of the 1980s, a few years only after the violent clashes that occurred at the border between Sayaburi and Nan provinces between Lao and Thai armies. The two countries thereafter agreed to set-up a joint Lao-Thai border committee, to bridge the Mekong and to facilitate trade.

Simultaneously, the Lao PDR government progressively accepted to liberalize the economy –while the Party still kept a firm control over the internal political scene. This turn had been initiated already in the early 80s and made official during the fourth Party Congress in 1986 when the “New Economic Mechanism” was officially endorsed. However, it was accelerated by the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the reduction of the Soviet aid, which was accounting for more than half the total foreign economic assistance received by Laos. The country therefore had to turn toward Western aid as well as toward bilateral agreements with capitalist states. This opened the way to massive investments in hydroelectric projects or in timber and mining industries, which are still on going today. It also meant that the Lao government had to implement development policies following the guidelines of the major international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB): that entails, among other things, new regulations on access to land.

### ***The state-led depopulation of the highlands...***

In this context, the highlands became valuable areas, new “Eldorado” to be conquered for their lushness (water, forest, soil) and used as commodities in exchange for external assistance and private investments. Simultaneously, they were constructed as zones of endemic poverty that had to be “developed”, that is economically and culturally integrated to the rest of the country. In both perspectives then, the highlands were turned as “new frontiers” for the development of the nation. As an outcome, resettlement of the highlanders to the lowlands became a crucial feature of the Lao rural development policy: it allows the State to better control its geographic and ecological margins while at the same time providing a radical method to integrate the ethnic minorities both economically and culturally in the lowland society.



Officially though, Lao government has always insisted on the fact that resettlement was not a policy but only a tool: “*chatsan asib khong ti*” (to create the conditions for a sustainable professional activity on one place) was the expression used to refer to the eradication of slash-and-burn practises, the merging of small settlement into bigger units and the settling of the population in the lowlands near markets and public services. It appears to be an attempt to rationalize the rural development practises: it is less expensive and more efficient from the Lao point of view to bring villagers from remote areas to the existing services, rather than to take the services out to them. It might also be considered a necessity, since there is an obvious lack of space for irrigated agriculture in upland territories: in a country with one of the lowest population densities in Asia, it could indeed make sense to offer these villagers a chance to settle in the larger river valleys (Goudineau, 1997: 17).

Concretely, this means that during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, local administrations have evaluated and mapped out the capacity of each district to develop specific economic activities (permanent inundated or irrigated rice fields, animal livestock, market gardening and cash crops etc.), as well as the estimated number of families that could be settled and provided with a decent standard of living through these new activities. Then, “*each district regarded as overpopulated according to these criteria organized the migration of its surplus population to other districts or areas that were supposed to have more space to settle new people*” (Goudineau, 1997: 20).

Crucial in this process was the definition of levels of “poverty” which were thereafter used to calculate not only the number of people to be resettled but also the amount of development funds given to the district administrations either by the central State or by the provinces -which are now supposed to find part of their budget themselves by contracting private donors or NGOs. The way this “poverty” is defined and calculated systematically favors lowland lifestyle<sup>2</sup> and perpetuates myths such as the “nomadic” (or

---

<sup>2</sup> When comparing the productivity of wet-rice and swidden agriculture for instance, the calculation only takes into account rice production per hectare, but does not include all the other kinds of food which a swidden provides (maize, taro, various vegetables) and therefore the security net it constitutes for local livelihoods.

“semi-nomadic”<sup>3</sup> lifestyle of the highlanders or their “subsistence economy” in order to better advocate the market integration. I am not arguing that there is no hardship in the highlands or that some villagers do not suffer from remoteness but, rather, that the idea of poverty is eminently relative. Highland lifestyles are not necessarily perpetuating it while, conversely, development policies do not always improve livelihoods; they can also generate “development-related kinds of poverty”, which are often more extreme than “pre-development kinds of poverty”: for instance, the poorest of the poor rely less on agriculture than on wage labour and are often found in peri-urban settings rather than in remote highland villages. In other words, poverty is socially constructed, both conceptually and in practice (Riggs, 2005). The current definition of rural poverty, which justifies most of the resettlements done in Laos, is part of a process by which the State also intends to have better access to peripheral land and better control over its people.

The state-led depopulation of highland areas is not an isolated case in Southeast Asia (similar dynamics are at stakes in Vietnam or in Malaysia for instance) nor is the use of resettlement for area-based development policy entirely new in Lao history<sup>4</sup>. However, what happened during the 1990s in Laos is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, resettlements have been massive relatively to the total population of the country: 50% of the highland villages everywhere in the country have disappeared and this ratio climbs up to 80% in some areas (Évrard and Goudineau, 2004). These massive resettlements are remarkable since Lao State did not have, at the beginning of the 1990s, human and technical resources comparable to those of neighbouring countries, such as Thailand or Malaysia, nor the power of coercion and control of Vietnam -where huge resettlements programs were also implemented but

---

<sup>3</sup> As many specialists of Southeast Asia have already noted, mobility has historically been higher in the lowlands than in the highlands. Today is no exception and the urbanization of the lowlands, while often referred to as a « sedentarization » process, implies indeed an increased ability for mobility.

<sup>4</sup> Prior to the 1990s, resettlement schemes had been implemented already by the French colonial administration on the Boloven Plateau (Riggs, 2005: 106), by the Royal Lao Government with American assistance around Luang Prabang and by the Pathet Lao in the mountainous area of Samneua. However, the Lao government had never defined, until that time, « any long-range program of resettlement for the tribal peoples » (Halpern, 1964: 71).

where a colonization of the uplands (plantation economy in the Central Highlands) by the lowlanders took place at the same time.

This leads to the second remarkable feature: such an ambitious resettlement programmes could not have been implemented in Laos without the technical and financial support of the international donors. It includes the main development agencies, especially the World Bank<sup>5</sup>, because they provided most of the funds used in rural development actions, but also NGOs whose projects have been usually directed towards already resettled villages rather than towards upland villages. Such dependency upon foreign aid was particularly clear in the implementation of the so-called “Focal Sites” which were conceived as “models” for the future of rural Laos. They were designed to receive most of the displaced villages and public investments and to experiment the implementation of new laws regarding forest and land allocation. In 1998, the Lao government announced the creation of 87 focal sites by 2002, gathering together 1,200 villages and 450,000 people (12 per cent of the rural population of the Lao PDR), half of them coming from displaced communities (Government of the Lao PDR, 1998: 26). These focal sites were, right from the start, heavily dependent upon international support: of the 154 billion Kips (around US\$ 115 million in January 1998) of public investment directed toward these Focal Zones in the 1998–2002 five year plan, 128 billion (83%) were mobilized from foreign funds (Government of the Lao PDR, 1998: 31).

### *...and its contrasted effects*

In the course of the last 15 years, this development policy has had contrasted impact at the national level. On the one hand, it allowed the provincial administrations, with the help of foreign aid, to provide basic service infrastructures to many villages, mainly access to clean water, school and roads. The positive impact

---

<sup>5</sup> In recent years, the World Bank has become the major international source of funding for land settlement schemes, for instance in Malaysia (the FELDA programme) and in the transmigration project in Indonesia (King, 1999: 80). It also adopted guidelines concerning involuntary resettlements induced by development projects but these guidelines appear less efficient when they are applied to a “settling process” as it is the case in Laos rather than to an involuntary resettlement in the strictest sense.

of these new infrastructures on the daily life of the villagers is obvious and major health or education indicators at the national level have greatly improved over the last two decades. On the other hand, resettlements were often poorly implemented, with sometime dramatic consequences for the villagers during the first years after they moved from their previous site: higher mortality rates, epizootics and insecure livelihoods<sup>6</sup>. There was also the emergence of new, development-induced forms of poverty, and of increased inequalities between and inside settlements. The land allocation programme in particular was considered as a source of impoverishment by the villagers because it directly reduced the amount of land legally available for swidden agriculture while at the same time, transition toward wet-paddy cultivation was hampered by geographic and technical constraints, especially in the North of the country (Chamberlain, 2001 & 2006). This led to a paradoxical situation where land shortage started to occur in some regions in a country that has the lowest human density in Asia (Riggs, 2005: 114; Évrard & Goudineau, 2004).

There were cases where resettlement provided the villagers with new opportunities and proved beneficial. Those who had cash at their disposal and access to institutional or economic networks (including transnational ones) could invest in new activities, such as rubber plantation, and rapidly make good benefits from it. The case of Hmong villagers of Hadyao in Luang Namtha, who resettled from Xiengkhuang at the beginning of the 1990s, is often cited as a good example of such a successful transition. However, the introduction of rubber in the village economies, while presented as a panacea by the local officials, often meets with contrasted results, depending on various factors such as human and social capital, land availability and ownership or food security among the local communities<sup>7</sup>. Since the early 2000s, various studies (see for instance Cohen, 2009) have underlined the limits of the “all rubber” strategy followed by the provincial governments in Laos

---

<sup>6</sup> There has been a huge amount of studies and reports on these questions. For a comprehensive overview, one can refer to Baird & Shoemaker, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> For a comparison between two resettled villages engaged in rubber strategy in Luang Namtha with contrasted results, see Phoukeo Saokhamkeo (2010) *Adaptive Livelihoods Strategies in Rubber Plantation of Small Scale Farmers in Luangnamtha Province, Lao PDR*, Master of Arts in Sustainable Development, The Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, 132 p.

and have insisted especially on the risks concerning ecosystems (a threat for the development of ecotourism), access to non-timber forest products (a threat for food security), land dispossession and landlessness (a threat for prosperity and social security), dependency over foreign markets as well as disproportion between planted area and available labour for harvest. The situation seems even more worrying in the South, where large-scale land concessions and rubber plantations have dramatically turned upland farmers into landless labourers, while in the Northern regions rubber cultivation has been implemented by Chinese companies mainly through contract farming systems, thereby allowing the farmers to retain their landownership (Pinkaew, 2012).

One of the paradoxes of the rural development policy implemented by the Lao government is that, while it officially aimed at “settling down” the highlanders, the resettlements and the transition to market-oriented economy contributed to increase mobility in the rural areas. Partly uncontrolled secondary movements (or “reterritorializations”) followed many resettlements: villagers decided to go back to their old site or they moved to a new one without waiting for the authorization of the district administrations. This could happen at the village level or involve groups of various shapes (household, groups of households, lineages or part of lineages etc.), which used their personal and institutional networks to seize opportunities of relocation in better lowland areas, often in the suburbs of the main cities. This process is particularly clear in Laos where many political leaders at the provincial level are from ethnic background and have encouraged and facilitated the migrations of their relatives towards the main plains and roads. Nowadays, the relocation of entire upland villages tend to become scarcer but migrations at individual or household level is more frequent. Further studies are required to better understand this “background mobility” for, while it is not an entirely new phenomenon, its contemporary characteristics differ markedly from the previous periods: regional contrasts (between South and North, but also inside ethnically homogenous upland areas), multi-ethnic contexts, semi-urbanized environments, transformation of age and gender patterns, new competitions for access to land, development of commercial agriculture, resurgence of transnational migrations networks etc.

## **Since 2000: from borders to transnational corridors**

Since nearly two decades, Mainland Southeast Asia is engaged in a movement of liberalization of flows, either material or human, which is supposed to peak with the implementation of the Free Trade Zone in 2015 among the countries members of ASEAN. Huge investments are currently directed towards roads infrastructures, bridges as well as trains to link China, Thailand and Vietnam, currently the most dynamic economies of the region, with Burma, Laos and Cambodia. International institutions support these investments, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the latter promoting the implementation of “corridors of development” under its motto “community, connectivity and communication”. Laos joined ASEAN in 1997 and since then it has made of regional integration a key term in the formulation of national development politics. Several bridges have been built over the Mekong<sup>8</sup>, new international checkpoints have been opened on Chinese and Vietnamese borders and major roads have been upgraded to facilitate trade and transit of goods and passengers. Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese private companies became major investors in Laos<sup>9</sup> and, in return for the construction of infrastructures in the countryside or in the capital Vientiane, they were granted concessions in border areas where they could either exploit natural resources (mostly timber, as in the case of Vietnam) or build “entertainment centres”, including casinos, such as Boten “Golden City” in Luang Namtha, or the “Golden Flower” tourist development centre in the Lao part of the Golden Triangle in Bokeo province. In post-war Laos, the old battlefields become the new market places (Dwyer, 2011).

### ***Land-locked to land-linked (again?)***

Several recent studies have already pointed out the dubious social impact of such « frontier capitalism » and what it says about the

---

<sup>8</sup> The upcoming 4th Thai-Lao friendship bridge between Chiang Khong and Houay Xay will form the remaining crucial link of the Asian Highway 3, connecting Bangkok to Kunming through Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces. China funds half the cost of the bridge which is expected to be completed between late 2012 to mid-2013.

<sup>9</sup> During the last decade, China has dislodged Thailand as the largest investor in Laos. Since 2000, Chinese investment has totalled US\$2.9 billion, compared to \$2.6 billion from Thailand and \$2.2 billion from Vietnam. (*Vientiane Times*, 16 July 2010, by Ekaphone Phouthonesy).

contemporary geopolitics of aid and economic development in Laos<sup>10</sup>. Here, I focus rather on the changing relations between people and places and on the transformations of mobility patterns as part as a transition to a so-called “modernity”. The view generally held among international experts as well as Lao officials is that the improvement of road systems and the trans-border connectivity that they supposedly allow are bringing new potentials for economic development as well as new threats (communicable diseases such as HIV, illegal migrations, drugs and security issues, pollution, ecological impoverishment for instance) which should be mitigated by “pre-emptive measures” (ADB 2009, 12).

It is not always clear though what exactly makes the “newness” of these expected benefits and foreseen dangers. Historically, roads, as well as navigable rivers, have always and everywhere been associated with trade opportunities and simultaneously with risks of invading armies, deadly viruses or various forms of exploitation. Geographically, most of the recently built transport infrastructures in Laos (but this is true in other neighbouring countries) are enlargements and improvements of previously existing roads and tracks that have been used for ages by villagers, traders and soldiers. In that sense, the current transition from “landlocked to land-linked” or from a “buffer state to a crossroads” (Pholsena and Banomyong, 2006) is as much a return to a pre-colonial situation, after a period of nearly complete closure, as a real innovation<sup>11</sup>. Finally, a quantitative argument is also deceiving: recent technological improvements led to an acceleration of flows but while peoples and goods are now moving quicker and in greater numbers, they also become passer-by, with fewer and shorter stops than the old mule caravans for instance. In sum, these arguments point out differences in degrees, not in nature, and they overlook two important dimensions.

---

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Cohen, 2009 for a comparison of Chinese and Western aid in the post-opium context of Northern Laos; Lyttleton and Nyiri 2011 on Chinese megaprojects and the issue of “extra-territoriality” in the history of China; Keney-Lazar 2010 and Pinkaew 2012 for their analysis of land concessions implementation and social impact in South Laos; Michael B. Dwyer 2011 for similar issues in the North.

<sup>11</sup> The main difference lies rather in the predominance of road transportation over fluvial trade, which used to be a major activity and greatly influenced territorial organization, interethnic relationships and economic life in pre-colonial Laos.

The first one is ideological and relates to the value attributed to borders and connectedness. Modern roads, as opposed to old caravan trails networks, were a direct consequence of State building. They were first conceived as a mean to facilitate the control of the national territory as well as of marginal (and often ethnically distinct) areas in a context of amenity between neighbours during the Cold War. Typically, they were connecting a national and a provincial capital, or a provincial capital with its districts, but they rarely extended across national borders. Toward the end of the 1990s, a switch occurred in the public discourse, from geopolitical management to economic growth: the modern roads were then presented as avenues out of poverty (equated with isolation and food insecurity) because they facilitated market integration. This argument was already present in the previous period but it was, so to speak, “contained” inside a national frame: poverty was presented more as a result of the inability of the State to reach marginal areas. Thereafter, it gained autonomy and led to a region-wide perspective in which market-oriented policies, understood as the key to alleviate poverty, aim at facilitating trans-border connectivity.

Secondly, the improvement of transport infrastructures contributed to redesign the social relations between localities as well as inside them. As noted above, the switch from fluvial to road transportation has had major consequences for a country where rivers have for long structured territorial practices and representations as well as economic calendar and interethnic relationships. Roads have contributed to redefine the relations between the lowlands and the highlands, most of the time in favour of the formers. In some cases only, upland villages which were not resettled in the lowlands benefited from the new opportunities offered by the road and were able to keep the economic specializations and advantages they had in previous times. Even those cases however, it is now impossible to keep the market at a distance, due to the increasing share of the cash crops in the local economies. Unfortunately, there are still very little alternative visions for the on-site development of the highland villages. Cattle raising for instance, which could be a profitable activity for them, suffers from the lack of veterinary networks. It is also losing ground due to the encroachment on grazing lands of cash crop plantations.



Besides, the intra-village hierarchies are becoming increasingly disconnected from the relations of production inside the settlements. They become the products of labour migrations or of small entrepreneurship involving in a way or another ability to move and to connect with other localities. Simultaneously, the construction or improvement of roads has been followed by huge resettlement dynamics (mostly from highlands to lowlands, but the reverse movement is also happening in Vietnam), which tend to homogenize the social landscape but which also created what has been labelled as a “new poverty” (Riggs, 2005). Therefore, the array of new economic opportunities brought by the new road is not equivalent for all and it interacts with embedded structures of inequalities at the local level as well as with previous patterns of mobility and territorial organization. In sum, what changed is less the number of people passing-by down the road than the relations between mobile and non-mobile populations, their “connectedness” so to speak.

***Labour migrations among highlanders:  
the transformations of old mobility patterns***

A good example of these processes is provided by the transformation of the labour migrations of the Mon-Khmer populations in North-West Laos toward Thailand. These migrations –unlike those of most other highland or lowland populations of Laos and Thailand—are quite an old pattern in this area (at least from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) and the upgrading of the A3 highway, a crucial axis in the so-called “Northern Economic Corridor” between China and Thailand has dramatically affected them<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, they represent an interesting topic of inquiry to understand what precisely changed in the relation of people to places and mobility in the course of the last 10 years and the opening of the “economic corridors”. I have already given an historical account of these migrations in previous publications (see Évrard, 2011: 90-95) and I will therefore only summarize here the main findings of my fieldwork.

---

<sup>12</sup> Constructed by Thai and Chinese companies, it was completed early 2008 and it reduced considerably the time of transport between the Chinese and the Thai borders, from more than one day in 2006 to just 4 hours in 2010. Meanwhile, a huge number of highland villages, mostly Khmu and Rmet, have been resettled along this road since the early 90s (see Évrard, 1997: 21-22).

Northern Mon-Khmer populations, and more precisely the Khmu, as well as the Rmet, have a long history of temporary labour migrations toward the main cities of Northern Thailand. Such labour migrations are not unusual for highlanders<sup>13</sup> in Southeast Asia but those of the Khmu—and of their close neighbours, the Rmet—are remarkable by their persistence over time (probably more than two centuries), their duration (usually several years) and the extended social networks which sustain them. Traditionally, young men travelled to the lowlands for several months, sometimes years, and sell their labour in order to acquire prestige goods, such as buffaloes, bronze drums or gongs which they thereafter brought back to their village. This mobility was then linked to old patterns of interdependence between lowland and highland populations as well as to the ritual economy of the highland villages. Prestige goods obtained through contacts with the outside world were traditionally used during marriages and funerals to perpetuate and reinforce the links between the wife-givers and the wife-takers on one hand, between the living and the ancestors on the other hand.

The origin of such migrations is difficult to trace precisely but it seems that they increased sharply in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century following the development of the teak industry by foreign (mostly British) companies in northern Siam and Burma<sup>14</sup>. Between the two World Wars, these labor migrations were less numerous due both to the economic crisis and the slowdown of the teak exploitation. But following the industrialization of Thailand after the Second World War the need of cheap labor grew, and companies started to diversify their activities to tobacco plantations, stick lac factories, and import-export activities. As soon as the 50s however, the migratory networks begun to be disturbed by the military and political situation in Northern Laos. From that time on up to the beginning of the 90s, labour migrations were drastically reduced, and those which took place were never completely disconnected from political situation in Laos, either as a motivation to leave or

---

<sup>13</sup> Lawa, as well as Karen also migrate in cities to find work, while some groups such as the Hmong and the Mien are known to avoid selling their labour. In the course of the last 20 years, temporary labour migrations also occurred among the lowland Lao.

<sup>14</sup> In 1902, there were 83 timber companies in Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Lampang, among which 59 were British and 22 Thai (Vatikiotis, 1984).

a factor preventing to return home —which remains true today, even if a different way. With the reopening of the borders in the mid- 90s, labour migrations to Thailand however increased again and they now concern a wider array of ethnic groups, including lowland Lao.

The biographies of the Khmu and Rmet migrants collected in Hueysay, Chiang Khong, Lampang and Chiang Mai show that their migration patterns have underwent several transformations since the pre-war period. First, new technologies (transports, communications) made the migration more individual and short-term planned than in the past. Young migrants look for jobs by calling friends who already work in Thailand. They usually leave Laos in groups of two to four people; before, these groups could be 15 or more. Some migrants even go alone and look for a job haphazardly by themselves, visiting factories or restaurants or gathering at certain points of the town. Secondly, while better roads have made traveling easier, the new political context tends conversely to make the migration more insecure. Migrants usually get a border pass on the Lao side, through their village headman<sup>15</sup>. This document allows them to stay three days in the Chiang Khong district only. The luckiest are able to apply for longer work permits and visas with the support of their company or patron but many just stay in Thailand illegally. Thirdly, these new political conditions explain why their travels tend to be geographically more restricted than in the past. The origin of migrants today also tends to be more restricted, with most coming from villages settled (or more precisely resettled) near the banks of the Mekong after the war, where temporary migration becomes a crucial component of the local economy.

---

<sup>15</sup> In Laos, village headmen may act as informal facilitators for such migrations. They provide migrants with contacts in Thailand and keep (unofficial) records of who leaves and returns. Some of them also collect money from migrants before their departure and after their return as a compensation for their silence and unofficial collaboration.

Fourth, while many of the jobs done by the migrants are similar to 50 years ago<sup>16</sup>, the social value and livelihood importance of migration, however, are now quite different. Khmu migrants in Thailand used to convert their savings into prestige goods such as bronze drums or gongs or in silver coins (several shops used to be specialized in this trade in Chiang Khong), which were used for ritual purposes in their own society. Today, migrants invest in wood (for houses), irrigated paddy land (which is scarce in resettled villages in Laos) as well as pay for special expenses such as medical cares or education fees. In other words wealth now relates to a house or an individual, not a lineage; it moves quicker than it used to; and the social value given to displaying the kind of wealth acquired through migration is now less. It seems that migration now contributes more significantly for basic needs than it used to do, and it provides a useful contingency plan in the event of emergencies, or the need to raise cash quickly<sup>17</sup>. In that sense, it can be said that labour migrations contribute, more than it used to do, to a general strategy of “livelihood in emergency”: consequently, they are often shorter but repeated several times over the bachelor years.

Finally, and not importantly, women are now involved in labor migrations to Thailand while they were nearly absent 50 years ago. They started migrating in the 1990s and now account for about 40 percent of Khmu laborers. Women work in factories, restaurants, shops and guesthouses or as maids. This growth in female migrants probably results from better access to primary education and transportation networks; a greater expectation of women to meet the financial needs of their families in resettled localities; and a growing desire to be part of modernity and to experience life outside the village. It has important consequences for the social life

---

<sup>16</sup> Some activities have nearly disappeared (such as timber extraction, mahout, or the production of stick lac), some older activities remain such as working in sawmills, rice mills and ceramic factories, or working as gardeners, cooks or waiters. A lot of migrants, both young and old, do also sell their labour on a daily basis, working in maize fields in Viang Kaen, loading trucks and boats in Chiang Khong, or carrying ice, rice or maize in Lampang. Their daily wages may be 100 to 300 baht depending on the kind of work. Monthly salaries vary from 3,000 to 8,000 baht. Many young people coming directly from Laos usually sleep and eat in their working place.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on the changes in the social meaning of wealth among the Rmet in Laos, which largely applies also to the Khmu, see Sprenger 2007.

of the villages in rural areas, especially the matrimonial practices, which tend to be increasingly oriented toward the outside, for both young men and young women (ADB, 2009: 15). It is therefore an important topic of inquiry to better understand the “hidden mobility” among the contemporary ethnic villages of Laos, be they resettled or not, as well as the relationship between people and places in a rapidly changing environment.

## Conclusion

As in other countries of Southeast Asia, the last four decades have seen the geographical and cultural margins of the old kingdom of Laos becoming increasingly “integrated” into the new Nation State, both politically and economically. Huge resettlement dynamics toward the lowlands have paralleled the (public or private) appropriation of natural resources in the uplands, the construction of an official discourse on poverty among the experts for rural development and, eventually, the (re)opening and the improvement of transnational economic corridors. The economic impacts of such changes vary greatly over time from one region to another, and even sometimes inside a single settlement. What is clear is that the access to modern communication systems, combined with market-oriented policies and resettlement, have profoundly changed the relationships between peoples and places: not only the patterns of mobility per se but also their social implications and the value attributed to connectedness.

## References

- Asian Development Bank, 2009 — *Build It and They Will Come: Lessons from the Northern Economic Corridor: Mitigating HIV and Other Diseases*, Manila : ADB, 38 p.
- Baird Ian G., Shoemaker, Bruce Aiding or Abetting.— *Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in the Lao PDR*, Toronto: Probe International, 49 p.
- Chamberlain James, 2001 — *Participatory Poverty Assessment*, Vientiane: Asian Development Bank and National Statistics center.
- Chamberlain James, 2006 — *Participatory Poverty Assessment II*. Vientiane: Asian Development Bank and National Statistics Center.

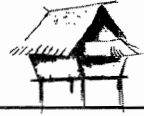
- Cohen Paul T., 2009 — « The post-opium scenario and rubber in northern Laos: Alternative Western and Chinese models of development ». *International Journal of Drug Policy* 20(5) 424-430.
- Dwyer Michael B., 2011 — *Territorial Affairs: turning battlefields into marketplaces in post-war Laos*, PhD dissertation, Berkeley: University of California, 177 p.
- Evans Grant, 1990 — *Lao peasant under socialism*, Yale University Press, 268 p.
- Évrard Olivier, 2011 — « Oral histories of livelihoods and migration under socialism and post socialism in Northern Laos » in Jean Michaud et Tim Forsyth (eds.) *Moving Mountains: livelihoods and identities in post socialist Southeast Asia*, University of British Columbia Press, pp.76-99.
- Évrard Olivier, Goudineau Yves, 2004 — “Planned resettlements, unexpected migrations and cultural trauma in Laos”, *Development and Change*, 35(5) 937-964.
- Goudineau Yves (ed.), 1997 — *Resettlement and social characteristics of new villages : basic needs for resettled communities in the Lao PDR*, Vientiane, Unesco-Pnud-Orstom, 2 vol., 392 p.
- Government of the Lao PDR, 1998 — *The Rural Development Programme 1998–2002: The Focal Site Strategy, Sixth Round Table Follow-Up Meeting*, Vientiane: Government of Lao PDR, .
- Halpern Joel M., 1964 — *Economy and Society in Laos. A Brief Survey*, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series n°5, 80 p. +annexes.
- Kammerer Ann, Tannenbaum Nicola (eds.), 1996 — *Merit and Blessing in mainland Southeast Asia in comparative perspective*, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies n°45, 263 p.
- Keynney-Lazar Miles 2010 — *Land Concessions, Land Tenure and Livelihood Changes: Plantation Development in Attapeu province, Southern Laos*, Fulbright & Faculty of Forestry, National University of Laos, 47 p.
- Lebar F., 1967 — Observations on the movement of Khmu into north Thailand. *Journal of Siam Society*, 55(1): 61-79.
- Lyttleton Chris, Nyíri Pal, 2011 — Dams, Casinos and Concessions: Chinese Megaprojects in Laos and Cambodia in Stanley Brunn (ed.) *Engineering Earth*, Springer, pp. 1243-1265.
- Pinkaew Laungaramsri, 2012 — “Frontier capitalism and the expansion of rubber plantations in southern Laos”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43(3) 463-477.
- Rigg Jonathan, 2005 — *Living with Transition in Laos: Market Integration in Southeast Asia*, New York: Routledge, 235 p.
- Sprenger Guido, 2007 — « From kettledrums to coins: Upland identity and the flow of valuables in northern Laos » in *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia: Reconsidering “Political Systems of Highland Burma”* by Edmund Leach. Vol. 18, Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 3: Southeast Asia, ed. F. Robinne and M. Sadan, 161-85. Leiden: Brill.

- Stone David, 1980 — “Nationalism and the Lao Resistance: A Personal View”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 2 (3) 250-280.
- Taillard Christian, 1989 — *Le Laos: stratégies d'un Etat-tampon*. Montpellier: Reclus, 200 p.
- Vatikiotis Michael R.J., 1984 — *Ethnic pluralism in the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai*, Phd thesis, St Catherin College, Oxford.
- Vatthana Pholsena, Ruth Banomyong, 2004 — *Le Laos au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Les défis de l'intégration régionale*, Bangkok, IRASEC, collection «Regards croisés», 237 p., glossaire, chronologie, index.
- Zasloff Joseph J., Brown Mac Alister, 1975 — *Communism in Indochina: New Perspectives*, Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 295 p.





## 6 *Kalayaniwattana District: A New Modern Space in Ethnic Cultural Area*



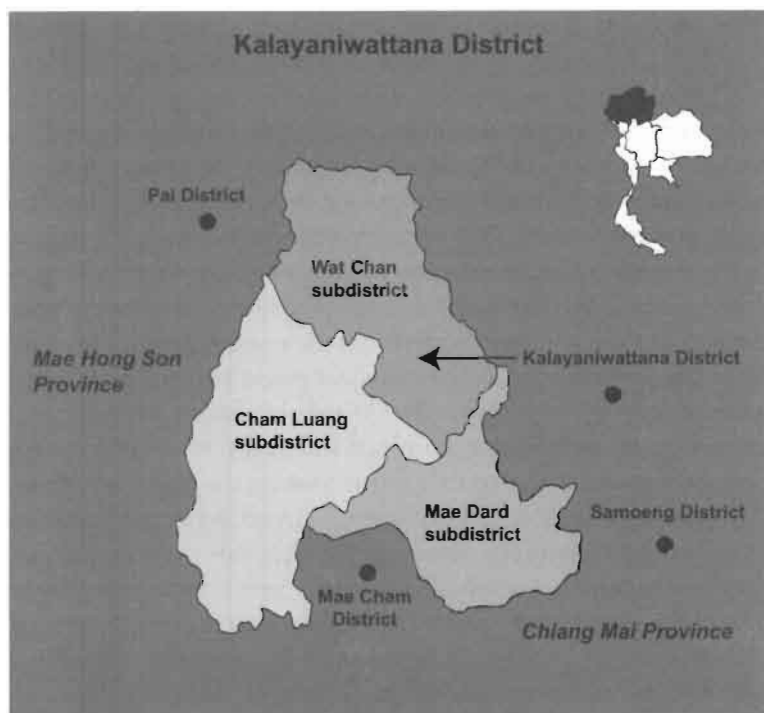
MALEE SITTTHIKRIENGRAI

In her article “Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality”, Margaret Rodman (2003) expresses concern about the attention paid to voice and place in anthropology. According to her, since the 1960, anthropology studies focus mostly on the study of people belonging to different cultures or living in different and often exotic, places. Place is too often mentioned only as the setting, or as the location where people settled with their beliefs system. In other words, anthropologists tend to consider places as being established without having their own life. Moreover, anthropologists too often view places as exotic locations and in that sense they have a perspective similar to that of tourists looking for places which are different from their daily environment. In so doing, they are not paying enough attention to the multiple meanings of places nor are they putting enough emphasis on local voices and interpretations of space. Margaret Rodman therefore urged to recognize that places, like voices, are local and multiple (Rodman 2003: 208). She proposes to study places within the context of power relations and to pay attention to the various local experiences of place through the concept of “multilocality”.

This article draws on Rodman’s conceptual framework and examines the changes which occurred recently when an ethnic highland area known as “*Mue Je Kbee*”<sup>1</sup> in Karen language became a

<sup>1</sup> See more detail of this word on the next part.

new district, “Kalayaniwattana”, in Chiang Mai province<sup>2</sup>. I explain how this place has been given a new meaning through this territorial and administrative reform, led both by the State and by the local inhabitants, who are known as Pga K’nyau<sup>3</sup>. I also explain how the Thai officials and the Pga K’nyau people developed their own agenda and their own discourses in order to claim their ownership of the place and their legitimacy over space. Using Rodman’s notion of multilocality, I focus on the power relations between these two groups and show how it has shaped the social relations inside the new territory created by the Thai State.



<sup>2</sup>This article is part of the research project entitled “Strengthening the Special Ethnic Cultural Zone: The Case Study of Kalayaniwattana District (phase I). The research is supported by the Thailand Research Fund. The first phase of the study was conducted during Nov 2010 – August 2011. Dr Chayan Vadharnaphuti is acting as the advisor to the research team which comprise of Dr Malee Simhikriengkrai, Dr Prasit Leepreecha, and Dr Panadda Boonyasaranai.

<sup>3</sup> The Karen people who live in the *Mue Je Kloe* area refer to themselves as Pga K’nyau.

### ***Mue Je Khee*: The land of water source of the Pga K'nyau people**

*Mue Je Khee* is the name in Karen language of the Mae Cham River watershed (*Mue Je* meaning Mae Cham River, and *Khee* meaning watershed), where the Mae Cham river takes its source. Several small streams converge to create the Mae Cham river which then runs through Mae Cham district until the Ping River. Hayami (2004) describes the *Mue Je Khee* area as “intermediate”, meaning that it is located in-between the highland and the lowland in a mountain valley. The small streams in this area are used by the Pga K'nyau for their current water supply as well as for creating rice terraces for wet-rice cultivation. Villagers also built small dams, a technique which they learned from the northern Thai Yuan or *khon muang* people, for irrigation. The streams not only provide the water source for farming, but also for several kinds of agricultural activities such as cattle raising: the water feeds the livestock, mainly cattle and buffaloes which the Pga K'nyau raise for agricultural work or to be used as capital to be sold when needed, for instance for their children's education or in time of sickness. Higher on the slopes, the villagers plant various species of trees as well as bamboos, fruit trees and others<sup>4</sup>. Some villages have also marshland for agricultural farming. Soils are fertile due to the water which flows for the whole year and brings natural fertilizers washed out of the mountain. In brief, the small streams which run throughout the valley are the basis of the subsistence for the ethnic Pga K'nyau as well as for the local lowland people.

Apart from being defined by streams which form the ecological basis of local livelihoods, *Mue Je Khee* is also a space of belonging, where the ethnic Pga K'nyau have settled and lived for probably several hundred years. They have migrated and extended their villages from what is today Wat Chan and Bor Kaew subdistrict in

---

<sup>4</sup> One of the characteristics of *Mue Je Khee* area is to be a mountainous zone covered by the pine tree forest on a surface of some 151,250 rai (60,500 acre), making it the largest natural pine forest in Thailand. There are also other hard-wood trees and fruit trees such as wild mango, local chestnut tree, a variety of mushroom which provides the food source for villagers. Villagers build their houses with pine wood, polish furniture with turpentine oil and use the resin for lacquer ware filling and polishing.

Samoeng district, toward the Mae Cham district, and in the adjacent areas of Mae La Noi, Khun Yuam and Pai districts, Mae Hong Son province.

In Pga K'nyau society, the elderly are much revered for their experience and knowledge. They often advise and intervene in conflicts in the village, and they also act as leaders in the village's rituals. In addition to the elderly, several specialists also have a special status such as the herbalist, the fortune teller, the silversmith, the sword dancing master, the chanter of "tha", etc, but not all of them can be found in every village. However, the most important ritual specialist among the Pga K'nyau communities is usually the "be kbo", the first founder of the village<sup>5</sup>. This title is inherited in patrilineal line and given to the eldest living male in the lineage. However, the new *be kbo* must wait for three years before he can officially take up the position and undergo the spirit feeding ritual. The *be kbo* is not just the ritual leader but is regarded as the representative of the community in their relations to the land and water guardian spirit (*tbi ka sa gor ka sa*). The community is conceived as a ritual and moral entity connected to supernatural forces through the *be kbo*. Thus the *be kbo* acts as the fortune teller in reading signs and connecting with the spirit world in order to ask for the protection of the community.

### **The transformation of an ethnic cultural place into a new State space**

The area known as *Mue Je Kbee* in Karen language was overlapping three subdistricts (*tambon*) in the Mae Cham district (*tambon* Ban Chan, *tambon* Cham Luang and *tambon* Mae Daed). Since 1993, local officials have been planning to separate these three subdistricts from Mae Cham but the process was interrupted by the financial crisis of 1997. The creation of this new district, Kalayaniwattana district, was announced in the Royal Gazette on 25 December 2009. Soon after, development projects started to flow into the

---

<sup>5</sup> The ethnic Pga K'nyau call the first founder of the village "pachorlorhee" or "sapaga be kbo", literally the first person who cut the first forest to open the new farm land, and sometimes also use the short expression "be kbo".

*Mue Je Khee* area, beginning with the building of the Government Centers, electrical system and tap water, road building and other infrastructures as well as land management.

Facing these changes, the Pga K'nyau, who represent the majority of the Kalayaniwattana district population, have found themselves in a state of astonishment, confusion, and uncertainty. A middle-age woman villager of *Ban Huay Poo* once told our research team at a meeting that she was “thrilled” —of which she meant distressed—, for not knowing the impact of this change on the future generation of the Pga K'nyau. Indeed, villagers were worried about the arrival of different groups of people and upset by rumors of all sorts which villagers could not verify. Therefore, they inquired among their neighbors, transferring information within the community.

The livelihoods in the ethnic Pga K'nyau space are in a close relation with nature, and the practice of state authorities determine whether changing this space into a new district will be easily done, or on the contrary face great difficulties. The proposal was made by villagers to consider this new administrative unit as a “*Mueang nai Fan*” (dreamed district). After all, villagers also want their place to be “developed” according to their own imagination. However, state authorities and local villagers are not the only groups who “imagine” a future for their place. One illustrating example was when news spread about the search for a construction site for the new district office. Before anything could be done, there had been speculations on the land located around the proposed areas by those who anticipated soaring land prices and the development of an economic zone. Some villagers had shared similar hopes as state officials suggested that the new district could become a new regional tourist attraction and challenge Pai—a neighboring tourist spot which has experienced economic stagnation in the recent years. However, one of the results of land speculation was that it led to a downsizing of available land, which in turn made them inappropriate for building the new district office.

As a result, authorities had to look for a new site to build the district office. Pga K'nyau villagers in tambon Chaem Luang agreed to donate some the lands they had been farming for several decades

to the Thai authorities. In return, they were compensated with plots outside the construction site, however of a smaller size or less fertile. Altogether, the local Pga K'nyau villagers donated some 82 rai of land for the construction of the new Kalayaniwattana district office. Their position therefore was that the development project implemented in this area should not be designed by the authorities alone.

Gradually, local Pga K'nyau villagers began to realize that changes were happening in their community at a pace that they were not certain they could keep up with. Dealing with the rising numbers of government officials who came to stay temporarily in their community is one example. Conflicts arose about diverging appreciations of social and cultural practices. For instance, government officials who rented a house in the Ban Mai Pattan village often drank alcohol at night, much to the discontent of the villagers. The Pga K'nyau villagers considered alcoholic drinking—a common practice among government officials sent to work in the rural areas—to be against their religious practice and contrary to village rules which forbid alcohol consumption and gambling. Eventually, these officials decided to move out and rented houses outside the village. This case reflected villagers' efforts to define their own cultural boundary. Their negotiation for meaningful participation in the decision regarding the development of their “dreamed” district has gained momentum when several government agencies started their own dreamed plans. Often, villagers had been called to attend a series of meetings by different governmental organizations which discussed the same issue. This led to confusion among villagers who gradually learned about the complexity of the civil service system.

### **Dreamed Land (*Mueang nai Fan*): planning of special space**

State authorities had prepared a development scheme for the new district by focusing on three villages: Ban Wat Chan, Ban Mai Pattana, Ban Sao Daeng and Ban Mae Ta La Hmong. The work had been planned and implemented under the responsibility of the Public Works and Urban Planning, according to the following steps.

1. The Master Plan for Community Development intended to limit the geographic expansion of the village and simultaneously to plan the implementation of new public services and activities which could ensure a sustainable development of the community: natural waste treatment, energy-saving transportation, health care for instance.
2. The planning document then set up the scope and details for the implementation of the various development projects included in the Master Plan, such as: water schemes, community sport centre, environmental management plan, community culture preservation plan, etc.
3. Landscape design: this plan focused on areas suitable for creating first impression and pride for the community – entrance gate, Wat Chan area, sport centre or community centre, tourist spots, main roads, landmark posts, etc. The development or adjustment of these key locations aimed at embellishing and efficiently using the areas for the mutual benefits of the visitors and the local people.
4. The manual for community improvement collected the experience of the development projects implemented in the four communities mentioned above and summarized them in a manual to be used as a guideline for local participative development in other communities. The manual contained information about area management, necessary regulations, management of infrastructures, environment, community landscape, disaster prevention, design of roads, public spaces and buildings, fences, public telephone, electrical system, as well as technical advice on problems resolution for water system, landfills, water drainage, waste treatment, etc.

This development plan was picturing a kind of “dreamed land” with basic infrastructures, good management of the environment, beautiful landscape, and preservation of local identities. It was hoped that the local communities, if successfully managed according to this plan, would attract large numbers of tourists and benefit from their pleasant geographical settings. Private operators had already started to invest in this area. For example, investors

from Rayong province and Chon Buri's Pattaya in the eastern part of Thailand had opened a restaurant in Ban Wat Chan.

### **The ambiguous “participative process” in Kalayaniwattana**

“*Karn Mee Saung Raum*” or “participation” is the term often heard in the sphere of development. Its meaning, however, is broad and vague, which leads to disappointment, low motivation and even resentment between different ethnic groups. This is what reveals the example of the central district government office's design. In Thailand, the rule has been set for a standardized design used for all district office's buildings all over the country. However, in the case of this new district of Kalayaniwattana, the architect was willing to reflect the place's identity in the architecture of its main building, and therefore he asked the local people to take part in the design. In parallel, officials had been sent into the area to study the pattern of the houses of Pga K'nyau villagers in Kalayaniwattana district. Three forms of design emerged and were proposed. According to the *Aae Mue Je Khee* Council<sup>6</sup>, all the three proposed designs failed to show the identity of the group. In response to these proposals, the council suggested to adopt the pattern of the traditional Pga K'nyau common house, “*blor*” - a large wooden structure which was used in the past as a place for meetings and rituals. The roof top of the blor is traditionally called “*plor*” and is a crescent-shaped structure at which end hangs the symbol of the rooster. As explained by the council, the *plor* has two meanings: first, it refers to the leader of the community of the highest position - here, the villagers say they wanted to refer to the King Bhumipol as the symbolic head of the country and a symbol of moral leadership; second, the shape of the *plor* refers to the cleverness of the leader.

The *Aae Mue Je Khee* council proposed nine plors at the rooftop of the building. This number is considered auspicious as the Kalayaniwattana district was named in honor of the late elder sister of King Bhumipol, the ninth King of the Chakri dynasty.

---

<sup>6</sup> This council is the community-based organization where villagers in the Mue Je Khee has formed. The council is the result of the finding by villagers that the “participation” promised by district officials during the process of the development of this district into the “model” or “dreamed district” turned out to be mere lip service.



This is also in accordance with the nine physical indicators of great quality according to the Pga K'nyau oral tradition, namely: big ears, long hands, long teeth, sharper than knife, sharper than needle, heavier than rock, lighter than cotton fiber, hotter than fire, cooler than water. In addition, the symbol of the rooster hanging at the bottom of the crescent-shape figure also meant that the local communities placed themselves under the reign of the King. The rooster, for three ethnic groups - the Pga K'nyau, the Hmong and the Lisu, represents the ritual symbol as it is normally used in ritual scarification. Metaphorically, the rooster also signifies that the civil servants must come to work early and must be diligent (see Suwichan 2007 for more detail).

During the only meeting, the Pga K'nyau villagers questioned the government's definition of participation in the design of the new district office. As one village headman reckoned:

*"We dreamed to have nine roosters atop the building. This animal means a lot to us. We, the Pga K'nyau, the Hmong and the Lisu are all similar in the way we use chickens in our ritual before rice growing or when we are sick. The roosters rise at dawn and wake us up. We chose nine roosters to represent all the past and present kings of the Chakkri dynasty. The number nine also shows that this district was built in the ninth reign. Therefore, we don't understand why district officials disapproved of our proposal to erect the symbol of nine roosters at the rooftop of the building. We wanted to participate from the very beginning. The process had a good start with the donation of our lands. Yet, when it came to the building of the new district office, we weren't allowed full participation. We became confused about what participation really meant?"*

Villagers and the leaders of the *Aae Mue Je Khee* council have expressed their opinion that their only participation was in finding the lands to build the Government Centre. When it came to discuss the symbols which would show their ethnic identity, the government officials ignored them. This particular event motivated the council to find ways to negotiate with the state authority. One of the experienced council members, famous for his mediating abilities and his popularity among the artists and the media, invited the Thai Public Broadcasting Station (Thai PBS) to co-organize

a public meeting<sup>7</sup> in the *Mue Je Khee* area in order to demand the authority's recognition of the participation of the locals in the preservation of their culture. The discussion failed to lead to any concrete agreement but it served as a platform to introduce the Kalayaniwattana district to the wider society and to publicize the situation the Karen people were facing.

However, after this public meeting, the district officials called another meeting with Pga K'nyau, Hmong, and Lisu villagers to consult them once again on the design of the building. This new meeting was little advertised among the local Pga K'nyau villagers and few of them attended it while, conversely, many Hmong and Lisu who knew nothing about the design proposed by the Pga K'nyau were present. Consequently, most of the participants voted for the design proposed by the government. Then the government officials could show the results of the vote as the proof of the villagers' acceptance of the new design through a process which they claimed to be participative, but which in fact had failed to reach a consensus among the local people, and which rather appears as a political manipulation. In the same perspective, the local district officials created an informal group called the "*Sapa Café*", which purpose was to counter the influence of the traditional Karen council *Aae Mue Je Khee*, that they were considering as an obstacle to their bureaucratic power.

### **The reinvention of space through ritual practices**

In Pga K'nyau culture, each newborn child is symbolically related to a tree. Just after the birth, the parents perform a ritual called *De Por Thoo* by putting the umbilical cord in a bamboo tube which they close with a cloth before tying it to a tree in the forested areas

---

<sup>7</sup> The public meeting entitled "The direction in the participatory development of the *Mue Je Khee* area (Mae Cham watershed)" was held at Ban Mai Pattana, tambon Wat Chan, Kalaya niwattana district on 13 June 2010. It was organized by the *Aae Mue Je Khee* council and the Thai PBS television. Participants included villagers, members of the council, representatives of government organizations such as the Chiang Mai Provincial Deputy Governor, the director of the Urban Planning Division, Royal Forestry officials, and scholars including lecturers from Chiang Mai University's Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, representative from the Thailand Research Funds and independent researchers on urban planning. Other participants were teachers and non-governmental organization workers.

close to the village. Through this ritual, it is believed that the child will be emotionally linked to the tree during his life. If the tree is destroyed, it is said that the essence of the child will also be affected unless a special ceremony is performed.

Within the context of environmental conservation in which the Pga K'nyau became the guardians of the forests (rather than “forest-destroyers” according to the cold-war era state discourse), the *de por thoo* ceremony was presented in academic writings and public media as a cultural symbol of the intimate relationships between Pga K'nyau people, forests and supernatural forces (even though this ritual is performed by the Christian Pga K'nyau). In the current situation, the *de por thoo* ritual became one of the revitalized symbols of Pga K'nyau identity and was used to assert their legitimacy and their control over a place which the State intended to control tighter than before.

Thereafter, more government agencies were coming into the new district, wishing to purchase more land than the 82-rai initially donated by the villagers. In response, the villagers performed twice the *de por thoo* ceremony. First in January 2010, at the pine forest in Moo Ban Kiew Pong, some distance away from the donated land. The villagers invited the first district chief officer of Kalayanivattana, and forestry and other officials to witness the ritual. A second ceremony was performed five months later in June.

That time, the villagers chose trees in the forested areas close to the donated land. They tied the bamboo trunk which contained the umbilical cord of the newborn and tagged the trees with the baby's name. They also erected permanent post on the soil at the demarcated areas, as if they wanted to secure their land from State intrusion. It should be noted also that it was the *Aae Mue Je Kbee* Council, and not the father of the newborn, which initiated and played a key role in this second ceremony. In sum, the *de por thoo* ritual is now performed in a new context and with a new political meaning: it has become the cultural and political symbol of the attempt by the villagers to control and to play a part in the reterritorialization process initiated by the State.

## Conclusion

This article has tried to show the relevance of the concepts of multilocality and multivocality for the understanding of the concept of “place” in anthropology: when a place receives a new meaning and is transformed from an ethnic borderland into a subdivision of the state territory, as in the case of the new district of Kalayaniwattana, new meanings are given to this place (multilocality) and at the same time multiple discourses and strategies arise among various actors (multivocality). Here, the Thai state has attempted to extend its power to control the local ethnic populations through a so-called “participatory” development process. While local population initially collaborated with the State official by donating some of their land, the local Pga K’nyau people thereafter contested the participatory nature of the development process and criticized the attitude of the state officials. This has led to the emergence of various voices and agendas not only among the villagers (the *Aae Mue Je Khee* council, the “coffee council”, and the other villagers who have not yet joined these two councils), but also among the State agencies themselves. For instance, the community development workers wanted to promote income generation and occupation; the Public Works and Urban Planning officials have drafted plans to develop “the dreamed town” and to build the district-level government office; the Royal Forestry officials wanted villagers to re-manage their lands; the Office of the Natural Resource and Environment wanted to turn the *Mue Je Khee* area into the special zone for environmental protection, etc. Therefore, this article argues that the development process is fundamentally multilocal and multivocal and that this reflects the various imaginations of the place’s future. It is not possible to clearly identify villagers as “conservationists” only or state officials as “developers” only, but we have to acknowledge diverse and complex power relationships between the agents of the state power and the villagers, between the villagers themselves and among different government agencies.

## References

- Rodman C. Margaret, 2003 — “Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality”. in *The anthropology of space and place locating culture*. Edited by Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga. United Kingdom: Backwell Publishing.
- Hayami Yoko, 2004 — “Between Hills and Plains: Power and Practice in Socio-religious Dynamics among Karen”. Japan: Kyoto University.
- Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan. 2007 — “Identity Preservation of the Pga K’nyau community in the Midth of Changes in Resources, Economy and Social Relations”. M.A. thesis. ChiangMai University.



# 7 Mental mapping of inter-ethnic relationships in Pak U District (Luang Prabang Province, North Laos)



MARIE GUÉMAS

The Lao PDR is known as a mosaic of ethnic minorities: this diversity requires an understanding of the forms of otherness. Each group develops a specific social and spatial behaviour which composes its “social space” as George Condominas (1980) defined it, a result of complex and multiple human interaction<sup>1</sup>. In general terms, ethnolinguistic phylogeny discerns four main groups in the Lao PDR: the Austroasiatic who are considered as the first modern inhabitants of the area, and whose villages are located to the hills. Coming from South China during the second millennium AD, the Tai-Kadai groups installed their villages along the riverbanks. The most recent installation is that of the Miao-Yao and Sino-Tibetan groups, which came from China during the two last centuries and implanted their villages on the hillcrests and mountain slopes. This geographical division has inspired the local classification of *Lao lum*, *Lao Thueng*, *Lao sung*<sup>2</sup>.

The modern context has widely upset these spatial distributions. New landscapes resulted from decades of resettlement policies, and there has been an increasing pressure of the state authorities in

<sup>1</sup> Social space is « the space determined by the whole systems of relationships that is characteristic of the group in question » (Condominas, 1980:14).

<sup>2</sup> Lowland, Midland and Highland Lao. This local classification is still used locally but it has no official character anymore.

the management of the marginal areas where some of the groups were implanted (Évrard and Goudineau, 2004). The resettlement operations and the improvement of the road network led to new geographical patterns. Villages located in the hills were resettled near the main roads or rivers, or were incorporated within existing villages along the rivers. The adoption of a national model of settlement that would be in accordance with an ideology of development undermined spatial diversity and reshaped the initial social space.

In this paper I discuss the evolution of the inter-ethnic relationships with an emphasis on local conceptions of these relations. Each social group developed with other groups specific relationships which are expressed in mental representations of the organisation of their settlements. Cognitive maps drawn by informers allow to model “ideal types” of relationships, that stretch from interdependency to relative autonomy.

Literally, Pak-U means the mouth of the U river (Nam-U), where the river flows into the Mekong (Fig. 1, location of Pak-U district). It also gave its name to the whole district located in the north of Luang Prabang Province. The ethnic groups Khmu, Tai Lao and Tai Lue together, and Hmong, represent the main three components of the population, and are distributed as previously described according to ecological levels: riverbanks, hill slopes, and hillcrests or mountains. In addition to the geographical and linguistic differences, there exist distinctive relationships between these groups.

### **The construction of interdependence between Tai and Khmu**

Khmu people are often presented as having a specific status, that of being the Tai's slaves, or *kha*. This submission/domination relationship expressed as such at a first level is rather simplistic. The Tai colonisation did entail the total assimilation of previous ethnic groups, on the contrary they have taken advantage of their local presence and of their specialisation as cultivators.





Fig. 1, location of Pak-U district

Economic, political and religious partnerships have existed between the two groups. Archival and bibliographic information described some of them.

Most of the descriptions date back to the colonial administration and state that during the times associated to the pre-colonial kingdom, the hills were described as “feeders of the valley” (Pavie, 1908 ; Robequain, 1925). Presently, the few local markets that still subsist are the remnants of these economic exchanges. Tai and Khmu people call them *talad nad*, which means literally “market meeting”.

Every ten days<sup>3</sup>, villagers from the valley met the hill people in a specific place in order to barter some rice against manufactured goods obtained from the Tai-Lao political centres. These markets are held at the confluence of tributaries to the Nam U. In the current district of Pak-U, the names of villages such as Ban Ladkok and Ban Ladthahe are built on the prefix *lad* meaning market: it is a direct reference to the first function of the place. Therefore, through these exchange networks, the presence of indigenous populations upstream could have been a decisive criterion in the choice of location of villages along the river.

This economic transaction reveals the political role of the rice producers. It is acknowledged that ancient Tai kingdoms, as Lan Xang for the Tai-Lao or Sipsong Panna for the Tai-Lue, were organised on a hierarchical basis, which distinguished classes of clergy, nobility and commoners. The village community gathered around the pagoda, which appears as the institution that expressed their sense of community. The daily offering, as a general religious participation, emerged as a condition to stake out a localised identity. Hours (1981:110) defined the pagoda as the instrument for the reproduction of social hierarchy. The commoners' duty was to feed the two other classes, in particular through tributes and offerings. Therefore, apart from their economic importance, production surpluses coming from the highlands had also an indirect political function in sustaining the established lowland order.

More directly, minorities were working as “guardians of the margins” (Bouté, 2006) of the Tai-Lao political centers, the *müang*<sup>4</sup>. This term refers to a territorial unit organised as a network linking a radiating structured centre and its outlying buffer spaces. Frontiers were often the theatre of conflict: therefore each *müang* ensured that the people in its buffer spaces recognised its sovereignty.

Furthermore, first settlers generally held the responsibilities of rituals. Groups share the animist belief that divinities have invested the land before that humans came. The first human settlers were

---

<sup>3</sup> This cycle corresponds to the both Khmu and Tai calendars. The Kammu, however, do not consider the cycle to have any beginning or end, and they do not number the terms (Tayanin ; 1994:61).

<sup>4</sup> *Muang* is the tai term which defines a unit of socio-political organisation. *Mueang* are organised as a network between a radiating structured centre and outlying buffer spaces.

believed to have entered into an agreement with those divinities, which allowed them to use and share the territory. As first settlers, the Austro-Asiatic groups, and more specifically the Khmu in this area, have inherited this proximity with chthonian divinities and are called in to oversee the rituals in the lowlands.

These economic, geographic and spiritual partnerships between Tai groups and autochthonous communities have been described by several authors (Formoso, 1996; Spangemächer, 1997; Évrard, 2006, 2008); in Pak-Ou district, they are the basis for the setting up of relationships between between the Tai Lao and Tai Lue on the one hand, and the Khmu on the other hand.

The field research I have undertaken in 2009-2011 enriches the general considerations about these relationships with a local scale approach. Exchanges between villages, sometimes between individuals, exist or have existed in the past. These partnerships involve Tai and Khmu partners, who come from nearby villages.

An indicative example of such partnership is the “green rice” system. Traditionally, Khmu households used old silver money<sup>5</sup> as bride-price in their matrimonial exchanges. They used to get such money by exchanging rice with the Tai lao and Tai lue. In order to pay the Tai, more rice was generally required than what was available in the Khmu household. This forced them to repay with the production from the next harvest. That is why such deferred payment bears the suggestive name of the “green (unripe) rice” system.

Moreover, this kind of commitment was often trans-generational. This entailed building trusting relationships between Tai and Khmu in order to provide mutual advantages to both sides, in the short and the long-term. Khmu could receive the silver money that was to increase their social status, and Tai lao and Tai lue could find the

---

<sup>5</sup> Silver bars. In the lowlands, they were used for their fiduciary value, as piastres were. But in the mountains where they were less frequent, they were involved in bridewealth payment, which gave them a ritual dimension. Tai commercial networks have certainly facilitated the circulation of these currencies, however, it is likely that similar goods have been used by the Khmu before the arrival of Tai in the region. Recent work indicates that Austroasiatic groups may already have manufactured metal in the 8th century in Northern Laos (Pryce *and al.*, 2011).

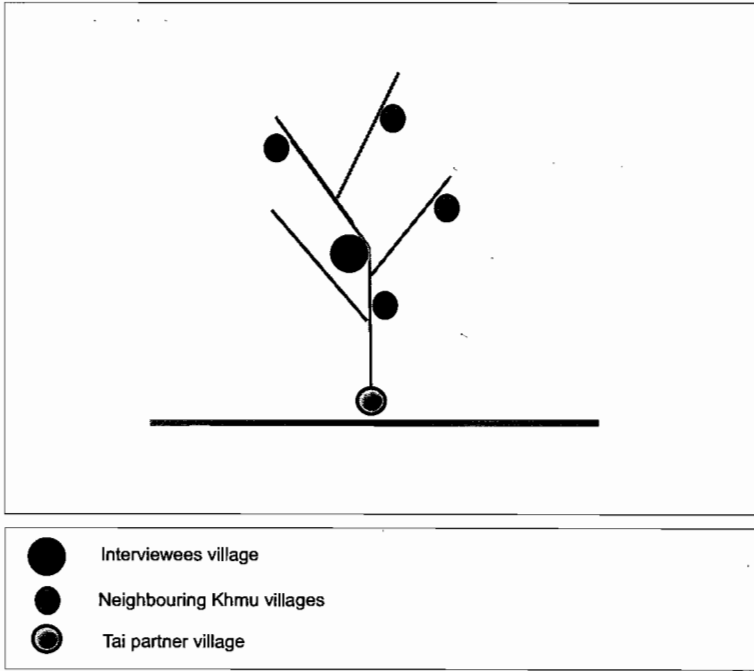


Fig. 2, Khmu cognitive map of proximity relationships

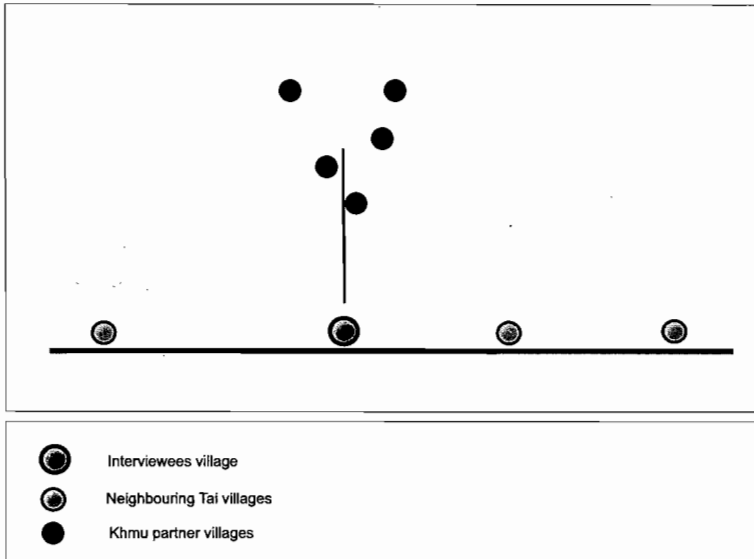


Fig. 3, Lao cognitive map of proximity relationships

way to garner rice, and on top of that to commit the hill people into a system of debt. This arrangement created village-to-village relationships between the different ecological zones.

Lowland people often used their Khmu partner-villages as places of refuge in case of necessity. Journals of explorers during the colonial period left testimonies of Lao people fleeing Chinese attacks and finding refuge in a Khmu village (Neis, 1888 ; Pavie, 1887-1888). The same happened more recently during the American military operations, when Lao and Lue people took refuge in the remote villages of their counterpart hill people. Today's interviewees describe how, during their temporary exile in Khmu territory, they benefited from their host's harvest when their lowland fields had been destroyed. They did not escape to random villages, but those with which they had contracted long-term partnerships.

Green rice exchanges and mutual protection were amongst the numerous aspects of this general reciprocity between partner villages. However, in the green rice system, Khmu are in a position of debtors that allows Tai villagers to obtain the rice supply they need for trading with third party villages.

Some groups are complementary in terms of protection or solidarity, but more generally, each group has integrated the presence of the other as a component of its social horizon, and interdependence affects all the fields of social life. Exchanges are necessary to the economical and political functioning of all groups, whether it be through the obtention of food or of rare goods. But at the local scale, lowland people seem to have an advantage in building a position that would be able to retain their partner relationship.

The following cognitive maps made by Khmu and Lao visualise their conceptions of territory and proximity (fig.2 and fig. 3).

Khmu people start with identifying the main stream of the river with its tributaries, each of which generally hosts another Khmu village. They locate the Nam-U river and only a lone settlement: their Tai partner-village downstream.

Likewise, Lao people draw first the Nam-U River; however they locate along the river their neighbour lao villages, the ones they

are related to during the Buddhist feasts. Afterwards they draw on the map the tributaries and point out, on these axis, the Khmu partner villages. These cognitive maps figure a tree structure that corresponds to a geographical unit: a sub-watershed. Each part is closely linked with the other parts, revealing the interdependence of partner villages.

The Khmu only identify a single partner village in the lowland, which reflects the exclusivity of the relationship. Tai identify the Khmu villages with which they are involved in this proximity partnership within a double axis “river / stream”, where their villages are at the crossroads, and this vision reveals a much wider network.

### **A logic of opportunism : the arrival of the Hmong**

Hmong settlements are more recent in the area (mostly the last two centuries) and they don't respond to the same partnership logics. The issue is not a comparison between the groups, but an identification of their patterns of settlement and relationship.

The Hmong's arrival is consistent with a “history of runaways” in the words of J.C. Scott (Scott, 2009). Coming from south China Hmong people had already made the choice to live in a relative isolation from the major dominating groups (Han in China, Lao Tai in Laos). All the Hmong interviewees describe their ancestors as arriving from some areas of China, passing through different Vietnamese provinces, and finally settling down in a series of Lao districts. It is to be noted that the Indochina war resulted later on in the migration of a large part of the Hmong community to western countries: mainly USA, France and Australia.

Several socio-cultural characteristics of the Hmong facilitate this capacity for mobility, a significant one being the organisation of parenthood. For J. Lemoine (1972), a Hmong defines himself through a “triple belonging” which involves the household, the lineage and the clan. This means that an individual refers to more and more complex levels of networks, from local to transnational and international. Hmong people are renown for their strong intra-ethnic networks. They also took advantage of the geographical proximity with other groups.

Their settlement on the mountain crests is not only due to an ecological preference. Arriving in the present-day Lao PDR the Hmong found a settlement pattern that was already well established, but rather than settling territories that were already occupied, they chose available spaces, mostly summits and crests of the hills. They exploited marginal areas, which were relatively free from occupation and from political influence.

In those available spaces, they benefited from the favourable conditions to cultivate poppy (*papaver somniferum*), taking advantage of the proximity of Khmu groups to use them as manpower in the poppy fields. Opium production gave them a strong position in the transactions with different groups. They used it as a good for sale as well as a currency. They enhanced their strong economic position by creating opium addictions amongst their neighbours (Cohen, 1984; Rapin, 2007). The Hmong mainly grow maize, for the agricultural calendar allows this production that takes place at another season than that of opium (Walker, 1980; Dufumier, 1996).

The surplus production of maize is sold and plant residues are fed to animals. Before arriving in Laos, maize was already the staple diet of these mountaineers, yet meanwhile, trade with Tai and Khmu group has led them to adopt rice into their food habits<sup>6</sup>.

Hmong interviewees explained that before the resettlement operations and the development of road transportation, they used to trade with a lot of different villages, according to the specificities of each. These relationships with other groups were rather occasional and irregular. One specific deal could justify several days of walk. In his description of the cyclical market system *talad nad*, Neis (op.cit) wrote about of Hmong participation, being very stealthy; preferring to sell wholesale the day before in order to get quickly back to their highland villages.

Even now, many testimonies emphasise the opportunistic behaviour of Hmong people: they remain mobile, free of any liabilities, and yet are taking advantage of the dependency of other

---

<sup>6</sup> When the Hmong started to arrive and settle on the hillcrests, rice became the most common barter product that they used in their local exchanges. Its adoption could have emerged as a necessity for their integration into the economic landscape of the region.

groups. Hmong used to remain in control of their relationships with others, managing relative isolation and avoiding too much commitment with other groups. Their cognitive maps depict such a situation (fig. 4): when informers mean to indicate other Hmong villages, they draw the axis of mountain crests. Locating Tai and Khmu villages, they point out both slopes of the mountain, as they use to select the interaction according to their needs.

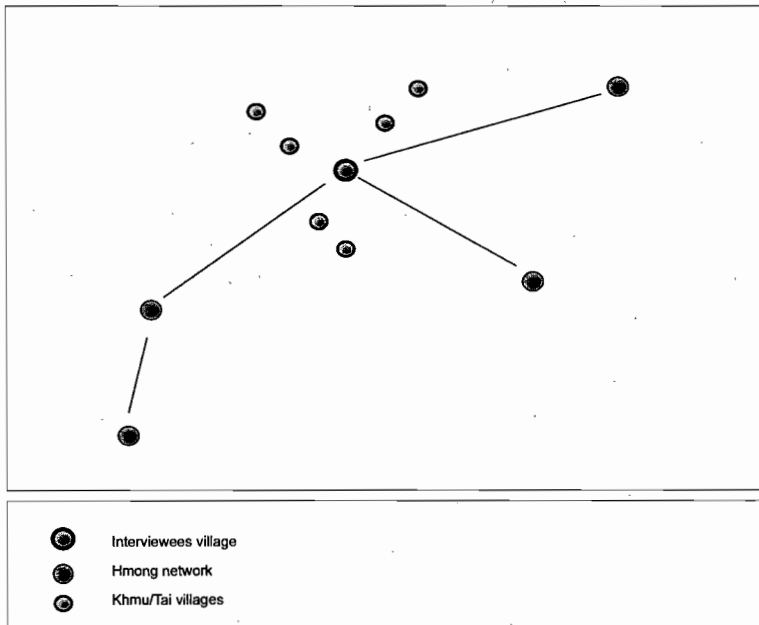


Fig. 4, Hmong cognitive map of proximity relationships

### An unbalanced system?

The socio-spatial approach leads us to read networks as a dynamic combination of dependency and opportunism within an ethnic mosaic. Each group represents a sub-system in a larger socio-economic and geographical area, combining social exchanges and spatial production: these relationships tie together a larger social space.



The resettlement operations and the improvement of the road network led to new geographical proximities. Hmong and Khmu villages were resettled near the main road, along the rivers. Policies focused on breaking isolation, which was a crucial element in Hmong relationship to others. Yet, they manage to reorganise themselves by buying collectively plots of land in which they can reconstruct their original isolation.

Present day partnerships such as the “green rice” system still exist but they have formal contracts employing legal terminology, like, interest rates and repayment deadlines. Today, the increasing proportion of land dedicated to commercial crops, combined to the limitation by the government of the surface allotted to each family, has resulted in such a reduced rice production that the payment of the debt in the green rice system puts the Khmu in difficult situations of indebtedness. The Tai people often benefit from this situation as they use their larger geographical and political networks to sell the production obtained from their debtors. The new landscapes shaped by modern Laos has altered the interactions between groups, but its substance is still responding to the old logics of dependency and opportunism, showing the continuity, in the modern context, with the pre-existing social space.

## References

- Aubertin Catherine, 2003 — « La forêt laotienne redessinée par les politiques environnementales », *Bois et forêts des tropiques*, n°278 (4), pp. 39-50
- Bordes-Benayoun Chantal, Schnapper Dominique, 2006 — *Diasporas et Nations*, Paris, Odile Jacob.
- Bouté Vanina, 2005 — « Des gardiens des confins aux bâtisseurs des plaines : le parcours d'une population tibéto-birmane du Laos. », *Mousson*, n°8, pp. 35-60.
- Cernea Michael M., 1998 — « La sociologie des déplacements forcés : un modèle théorique », *Autrepart* n°5, pp. 11-28.
- Cohen Paul T., 1984 — « Opium and the Karen : A study of indebtedness in Northern Thailand », *Journal of southeast asian studies*, vol. XV, n°1, pp. 148-

165.

- Condominas Georges, 2006 (1980) — *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie du Sud-Est*, Paris, Flammarion.
- Condominas Georges, 1982, (1957) — *Nous avons mangé la forêt*, Paris, Flammarion.
- Ducourtieux Olivier, Laffort Jean-Richard, Sacklokham Silinthone, 2004 — «La réforme foncière au Laos, une politique hasardeuse pour les paysans» *Revue Tiers Monde*, n° 177 (XLV), pp. 207-229.
- Dufumier Marc, 1996 — « Minorités ethniques et agriculture d'abattis-brûlis au Laos », in *Cahiers des sciences humaines*, n°32 (1), pp. 195-208.
- Évrard Olivier, Goudineau Yves, 2004 — "Planned Resettlement, Unexpected Migrations and Cultural Trauma in Laos", *Development and change*, n°35(5), pp.937-962.
- Évrard Olivier, 2006 — *Chroniques des cendres: Anthropologie des sociétés Khmu et dynamiques interethniques du Nord-Laos*, Paris, Coll. A travers champs, IRD éditions.
- Évrard Olivier, 2008 — «Atténuation et perpétuation des frontières ethniques : notes sur la «Taisation» des populations Khmu du Nord Laos», Goudineau, Yves (ED), Lorillard, M. (ED), *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos*, n°18, Paris. EFEO.
- Hours Bernard, 1981 — « Pouvoirs et territoires bouddhistes », *l'Homme*, n°21 (3), pp. 95-113.
- Hours Bernard, Selim Monique, 1997 — *Essai d'anthropologie politique sur le Laos contemporain : Marché socialisme et génies*, Paris, Coll. Recherches Asiatiques, L'harmattan.
- King Victor T., Wilder William D., 2006 (2003) — *The modern anthropology of South-East Asia*, London, Routledge Curzon.
- Lemoine Jacques, 1972 — *Un village Hmong Vert du Haut Laos. Milieu technique et organisation sociale*, Paris, Editions du CNRS.
- Neis Paul, 1888 — «Les frontières du Tonkin», *Le tour du monde*, Paris, Hachette et Cie.
- Pavie Auguste, 1887/1888 (2006) — « 1898-1919, Passage du Mékong au Tonkin, *La mission Pavie en Indochine* », (VI), Paris, Leroux.
- Petit Pierre, 2006 — «Migrations, ethnicité et nouveaux villages au Laos : L'implantation des Hmong, Tai Dam et Khmu à Thongnamy (province de Bolikhamsay)» *Asénia*, (18), pp. 15-45.
- Proshan Franck, 1997 — « We are all Kmhmu, just the same : ethnonyms, ethnic identities, and ethnic groups », *American ethnologist*, vol. 24 (1), pp. 91-113.
- Pryce Thomas Oliver *et al.*, 2011 — « An 8th-9th century AD iron. Smelting work-shop near Saphim village, NW Lao PDR », *historical metallurgy*, 45 (2), pp. 81-89.
- Rapin Ami-Jacques, 2007 — *Opium et société dans le Laos précolonial et colonial*, Paris, L'harmattan, Coll. Recherches Asiatiques.

Scott James C., 2009 — *The Art of Not Being Governed. An anarchist history of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 442 p.

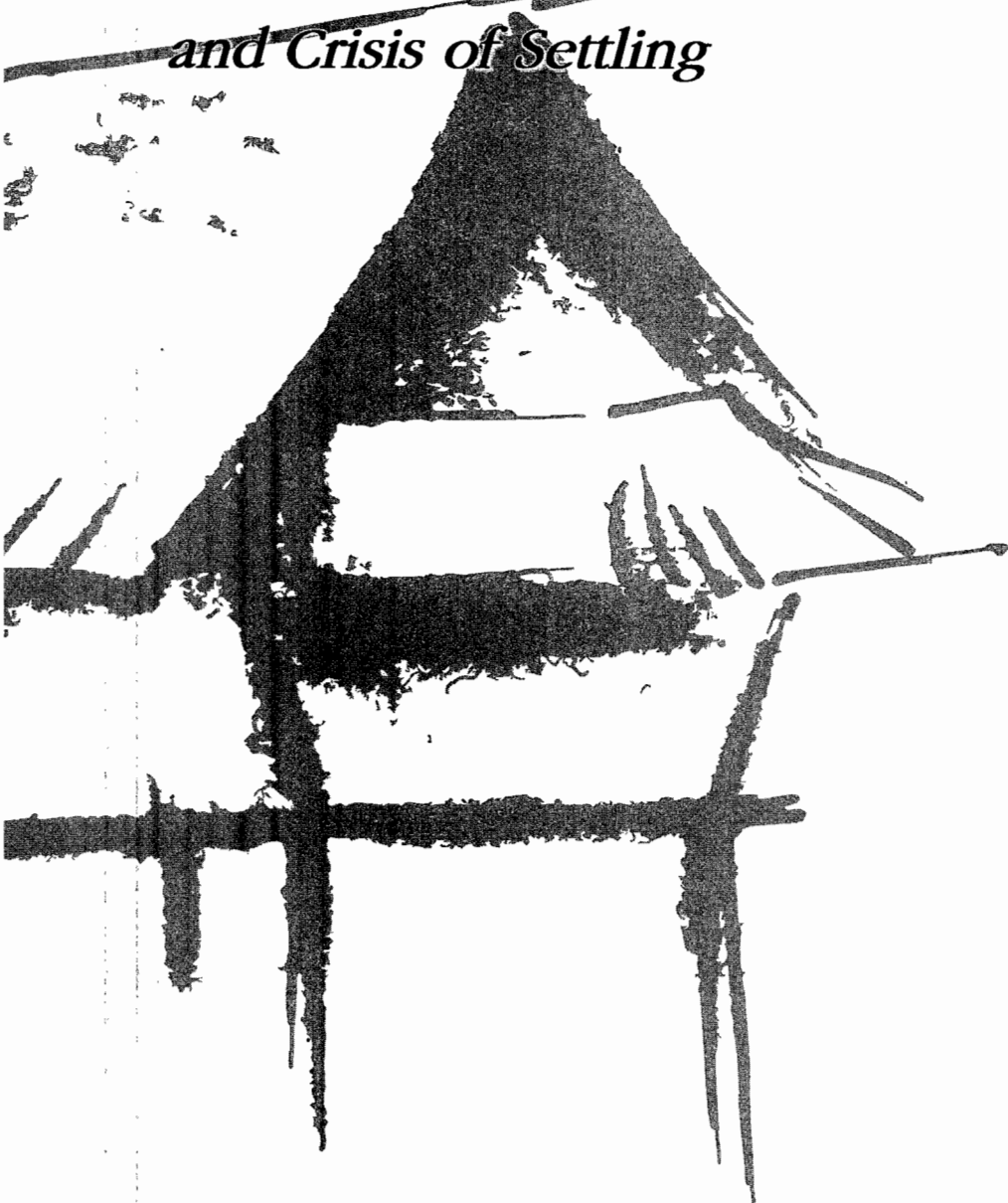
Spangemächer Anne, 1997 — «Les systèmes politiques des Plang dans le contexte de la société féodale thaï au Sipsong Panna (Chine du Sud Ouest) in *Péninsule* 35 (2), pp. 117-130.

Tayanin Damrong, 1994 — *Being Kammu : my village, my life*, New-York, Cornell South East Asia Program.

Walker Anthony R., 1980 — « The production and use of opium in the northern Thai Uplands » in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 2 (2), pp. 134-154.



*III - Borders  
and Crisis of Settling*





## 8 *Borderland economy: contract farming and labor mobility in the zone of conflict along the Thai Burma border*



---

CHAYAN VADDHANAPHUTI

The borderland between Thailand and Burma in Tak Province has been a space of production, extraction and trade. The river Moei runs through the borderland and forms a natural border line separating Thailand from Burma, but in reality people of both countries belong to the same ethnic group, Karen, speak the same language and many of them are relatives. For several decades, people on both sides have been trading and exchanging. This borderland trade is now one of the key strategies in the provincial development plan of Tak province. The recent intensification of agricultural production in Tak's districts of Mae Sot, Pop Phra and Umphang, and to some degree Tha Song Yang has led to a demand for wage labor.

Due to its position close to a major gateway to Burma, Myawaddy, and to the availability of labor supply from Burma, Mae Sot (Fig. 1) has become an emerging and unique industrial center drawing domestic and foreign investment to open up small- and medium-size factories. Investors benefit from tax measurement and investment support in relocating their production to Mae Sot. Besides, the Cabinet Resolution has also designated it as a special economic development zone in trade and tourism. Out of the 522 factories in Tak province (the majority of them are small-size factories), 286 (54.79 per cent) are located in Mae Sot, according to the Tak Provincial Industrial Situation Report in 2007. Most of these factories are garment and textile factories, and to a lesser



Fig. 1: Mae Sot at the borderland between Thailand and Burma

degree pottery, plastic, kitchenware, and furniture factories. In total, these factories employ some 47,818 migrant workers from Burma. Out of these, 24,649 are employed in textile and 17,796 in garment factories. To these manufactures, one should also add hundreds of small sawmills and wood processing factories scattered along the Moei river. Most of the workers are Burmese, Mon and Arakanese, while the Karen are usually employed in domestic work or agricultural fields. The local economy of Mae Sot has recently flourished due to the expansion of these industries as well as to the consumption practices of these workers and to all the border economy, which includes trade in cattle, gems, agricultural products, etc.



This paper intends to show that relations between people and places retain a different configuration in borderlands areas compared to other regions. In the case that we study, borderlands are shaped by three main forces. Firstly, the recent expansion of the capitalist system in the Thai-Burma border gave rise to a demand for land and labor for agricultural production. Secondly, conflict in Burma between the State and ethnic armed groups hampered a similar development on the Burmese side of the border and created an everyday insecurity for the villagers. This generated the economic contrast between the two sides of the border, thereby encouraging flows of labor migrants toward Thailand. Thirdly, the Thai state tried to limit the number of Burmese Karen labor migrants by encouraging the development of cash crops production in the Karen villages located on the Burmese side of the border. In other words, the borderlands are special places because they exemplify the contradiction between the flows of capitals, which are encouraged and largely deregulated, and the flows of people, which are more controlled.

The economic structure of the borderland relies on three main types of activities: subsistence economy; logging and wood processing; cash crops production. Subsistence economy includes small-scale trade and exchanges of goods such as betel nuts, chilies, pumpkins, bamboo shoots, forest products (wild orchids and vegetables), etc. These goods are mostly from the Burmese side; they are sold directly to Thai villagers, or Thai traders cross the border to buy them in Burma. Conversely, the Karen from the Burmese side cross the border to buy necessary items such as clothes, slippers, medicine, tin fish, salt, oil, monosodium glutamate, etc., in the Thai market. Trade is often conducted directly between villagers but sometimes also through middlemen.

The second important kind of activities relates to wood processing and sawmills. Since forest is rich and abundant on the Burma side, logging has become an important economic activity in the forest along the border. Thai businessmen hired local villagers to cut trees, mostly teak and hard wood, setting up small-scale and medium scale sawmills (with up to 20 workers) and to transport the wood across the border. However, the local businessmen face

some problems regarding the import of wood and wood products into Thailand. Firstly, they have to pay “taxes” to different armed groups controlling the area. Secondly, different government offices impose different rules and regulations; procedures are complex and in most cases local importers find it difficult to provide evidence as to the origin and certified qualification of the products, according to the report by officials of the Border Trade Centre. Some Karen villagers, both from Thailand and Burma<sup>1</sup>, are employed in this small-scale logging and sawmilling industry and some of them even own the sawmills. In fact, there are small and medium sawmills owned by Karen, Burmese, Mon or Thai. Besides, Karen armed groups who control the area get a financial income from giving permission for sawmills’ operation.

Thirdly, there is the cash crop economy. Tak province which is located in the investment promotion zone (region 3) produces a variety of major cash crops, mainly corn<sup>2</sup>, roses, rice, orange, beans, longan fruits, soybean, a variety of banana, macadamia nuts, lychee; as well as a variety of vegetables such as garlic, onion, cabbage. Pop Phra and Mae Ra Mad, the two districts in the western part of Tak province bordering Burma, are the major bases for these cash crops.

Most of the Karen villagers living on the Thai side of the border have been engaged in the cash crops sector for more than two decades. They are relatively numerous and use tractors in their farms. They grow corn, peanut, mung bean, cassava and coconut in their fields, and soybean in their paddy field during the dry season. Over the last five years, agribusiness companies have introduced a new variety of corn through a wide network of local dealers. Those who are able to cultivate 30 *rais* of corn field with the labor of local and displaced Karen can get over a million Baht of return on investment per year.

The Karen living on the Burmese side usually grow rice, banana, corn, rubber, tobacco and oranges. There is also a large orange orchard owned by a Thai Muslim businessman. Some of the Karen

---

<sup>1</sup> It was reported that one sawmill had 20 displaced people working.

<sup>2</sup> The annual production of corn in this province is 453,109 tons representing a commercial value of 1.876 billion Baht, according to Tak Provincial Industrial Situation Report in 2007.

also earn in living by producing charcoal, working in sawmills, collecting sawdust, picking vegetables in the forest, catching fish in the rivers. Some villagers raise buffalos and cows but most of them have chickens and pigs. Their wooden houses have zinc and thatched roof. They are not rich, neither poor. Many of these Burmese Karen cross the border to find work in Thailand, especially when when labor is needed on the Thai side of the border for the plantation or harvest of crops such as corn or cassava. Besides, land on the Burma side has become much more difficult to exploit because of the landmines on the one hand and the fighting between the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) soldiers and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) troops on the other hand. This year, the corn production has been reduced because of the fighting in an area on the Burma side, north of Mae Sot.

Many of the Karen labor migrants from Burma do not have to go to Thailand to find work: employers come from Thailand to recruit them directly and send them to Thailand to work in farms. Local Karen farmers in Thailand prepare their fields for cultivation (corn, mung bean, roses, sugar cane, banana, papaya, orange etc.) and hire the displaced people for the planting. The local farmers also hire Burmese Karen to prepare the paddy fields before planting rice. Daily wages for low-skilled labor vary from 60 to 120 Baht; while children between 12 and 16 get about 60 Baht, adult workers get 80 Baht if their employer provides lunch and 100 Baht if they bring their own lunch. Higher daily wages of about 120-150 Baht are paid for workers who do strenuous work such as ploughing and sawing.

The intensification of cash crop farming on the Thai-Burma borderland has become a channel through which local economy flourishes. Since land on the Burma side is considered more fertile and abundant, villagers from the Thai side cross the border to grow corn, peanut, and rice. Indeed, recent trade initiatives have emphasized the importance of contract farming which, according to the Tak Office of Provincial Commerce, is a major strategy of border trading. This office's program aims at developing a cooperation between Thai and Burmese farmers to grow boom crops such as corn and mung bean. Local middle farmers in Thailand are invited by provincial commerce officials to participate in the program in order to support Burmese farmers to grow the

plants in Burma and to buy them their production at fair price. The Thai government plays a supporting role by exempting import tax. By promoting such contract farming, the Thai authorities hope to increase the value of border trade and to create a beneficial situation for all: Thai farmers can get benefits of tax exemption and low cost production while simultaneously, the farmers in Burma can earn income and stay in their country instead of illegally crossing the border to work in Thailand. However, this program of trans-border contract farming has got mitigated results, mainly because of complex and strict custom regulations involved in the import of agricultural products, according to the report by the Tak Office of Provincial Commerce. As a result, Thai farmers who participate in the scheme either have to pay tax or decide to import the products through illegal channels.

Problems notwithstanding, contract farming has been introduced in the Burmese side of the border since the late 2000s and has durably modified the economic and social landscape of the area. Cash crop farming has provided the Burmese Karen, including the displaced people, with job opportunity and a better food security. Conversely, the Thai side of the border has become heavily dependent upon the Burmese Karen labor. Growing corn, for example, largely depends on the pool of labor available across the border and of the social management of seeds' distribution that ensure beneficial economic return. In these processes distributors locate their "head points" – e.g. reliable figures who identify corn farmers in their areas to whom seeds are sold on credit. These borderland farmers in turn employ Karen labors, mostly from Burma side, in all stages of plantation, from preparation of soils to weeding, planting, spraying of pesticide, and harvesting.

Importantly, the "head point" people take responsibility in ensuring that farmers sold their products to them or face "penalties" if they fail to do so. The processes are similar in both sides of the border except that in Burma, a powerful figure that reports directly to the leader of the armed group controlling cultivation areas plays a vital role in giving the contract. The "head points" are usually chosen from influential or powerful people – in most cases, former

or current village heads or commune heads, merchants, or shop owners — and therefore this seeds' distribution structure is akin to canvasser politics in Thailand.

Corn growing is a labor-intensive agricultural activity and it involves various expenses mainly for wage labor, weeding, and fertilizing as illustrated by a case of one Thai farmer which I interviewed. This man has rented 14 *rais* of land for planting corn and another 20 *rais* for paddy. The rental fees were 40,000 in total. The farmer first borrowed the loan from the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operative. The loan was given on the requirement that the farmer took also the seeds and weeding chemical. Normally, one bag of corn seeds costs 1,630 Baht. This farmer needed four bags for the cultivation of 14 *rais*. When planting season of corn began (April-May), he hired migrant labors from Burma to prepare the soil. The farmer had to pay a fee of 500 Baht for each of these workers, to register them as agricultural migrant worker. The farmer paid about 6,000 Baht for the plough work. By late May, he employed 10 workers for digging the soil and another 15 workers to plant the seeds with a daily wage of 100 Baht per worker. After one week of planting, the farmer had to spray four boxes of chemical for weed control that cost about 480 Baht in total. When the corn was one-month old, workers sprayed for the second time which cost another 1,000 Baht. The third spraying was done before harvesting in order to control weeds and preparing the soil for planting mung bean. Fertilizer was used twice when the corn was 15 days old. A sack of fertilizer costs some 700 Baht, of which the farmer needed 10. Rice planting began in June in the nearby plot carried out by migrant workers. By August, the farmer hired workers on a lump-sum payment to harvest corn and plant mung bean. By November, workers harvested rice and mung bean. All together, the Karen migrant workers stayed seven months in Thailand before going back to Burma.

Corn cultivation is the leading contract farming actively promoted in the borderland area. Cheap labor is needed in order to maximize profits. Karen laborers from Burma often cross the border to work in Thailand during agricultural season. Many of them have

established good contact with Thai farmers and landowners (either Karen or Tai<sup>3</sup>), ensuring re-employment in the next season. Many also come to seek off-farm employment in Tak province and beyond.

The Thai-Burma borderland is often seen solely as a zone of conflict but it is also a zone of production, extraction and trade. The introduction of cash crops over the past two decades, along with earlier forms of economic relations across the border, as well as small-scale logging, wood processing and sawmill manufacture has provided a crucial economic base which the Karen in the borderland have strategically use as a foundation for their livelihood. In the process, the Burmese Karen essentially ‘transformed’ themselves socially and economically into cheap labor for the fluid borderland economy.

It is important to note, however, that while corn cultivation expands fast on the Thai side of the border, with the help of the cheap labor provided by the Burmese Karen, some Thai farmers have also expanded their corn production into many ethnic villages along the border inside Burma. But the challenge for them was to ensure that once they got the seeds, the contract farmers in Burma side would really sell the corn to them. Since the area was under the control of several armed forces (the Burmese military, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army –DKBA- and Karen National Union –KNU), the farmers needed to seek protection from those who had power and this could vary both in space and in time.

Contract farming on the Burmese side of the border has then become inevitably intertwined with ethnic conflicts (fig.2). A certain amount of “taxes” has to be paid equally to the ethnic armed groups and to the military in order for the landowners to be able to grow corn and sell it to the businessmen on the Thai side. However, the agreement remains informal and the situation can quickly deteriorate. This was the case for instance after the November 7, 2010 general election in Burma, when conflicts

---

<sup>3</sup> The word « Thai » refers to a nationality while « Tai » refers to an ethnic identity (all the Tai speaking populations, which include Siamese (Tai from Central Thailand), Isan, Yuan, Lue etc.

occurred on the Burmese side of the border and contract farming decreased significantly. Later on however, it returned to the normal situation. Capitalism flourishes in the borderland whether peace or conflict prevails.

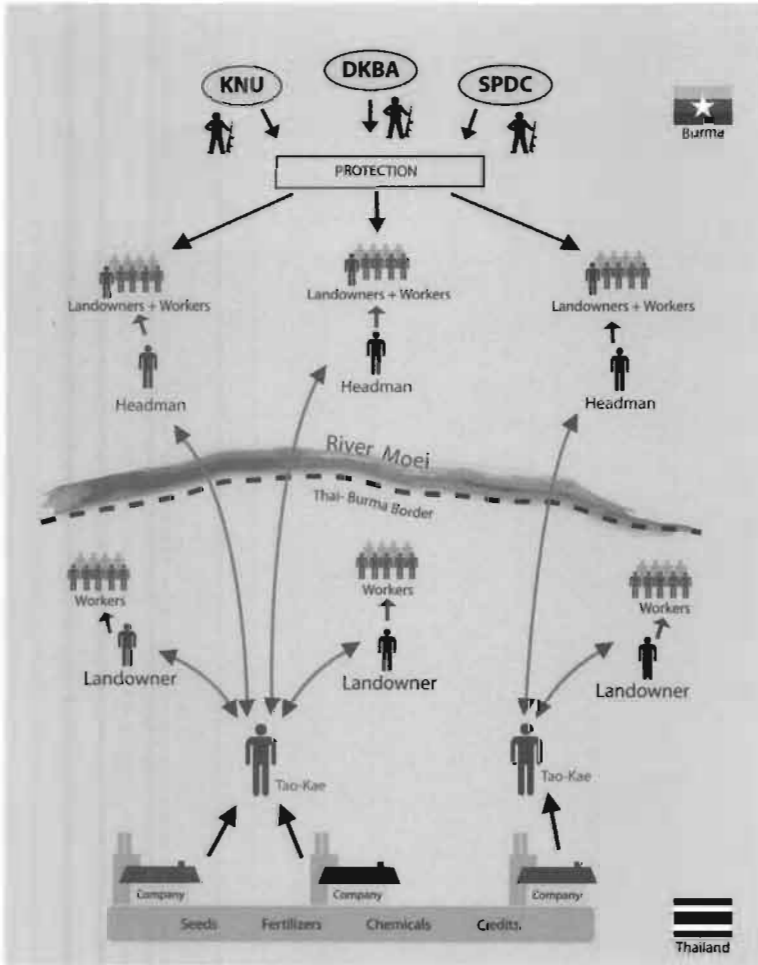


Fig. 2: Structure of borderland economy near Mae Sot.





# 9 *Talaku Movement among the Karen on the Thai-Burma Borderland: Territorialization and Deterritorialization Processes*



---

KWANCHEWAN BUADAENG

The Talaku is one of the many Karen religious movements found near the Thai-Burma borderland<sup>1</sup>. *Talaku* in Sgaw Karen or *Talakhong* in Pwo Karen dialect comes from a Mon word designing the one who possesses (*tala*) merit/truth (*khong*). The movement was said to emerge around the middle of the nineteenth century, during the times when many revolts against British forces had been going on (Stern 1968). According to a study conducted by the Border Patrol Police (BPP Report 1998), the Karen people had fled to Thailand (then Siam) when Burmese forces invaded their former settlements, and had founded the Talaku community in the remote and harsh environment there. Later, when the international border between Siam and Burma was drawn in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Talaku community, representing many small villages, was located near the border on both Thailand and Burma side. The center of the Talaku movement is currently at Letongkhu village, residence of the hermit head of the Talaku, and located right on the border, in Mae Chan Subdistrict, Umphang District in Thailand. Every three months, when a special religious ceremony is organized, Talaku members from other villages come to Letongkhu to participate in “making merit”.

---

<sup>1</sup> Burma became Myanmar in 1989. The article sometimes mention events occurred before 1989 so only the term Burma is used here for the sake of consistency.

Until the 1950s, the Talaku have maintained their autonomy over their territory and also retained their distinctive cultural and religious practices. The deep forest, which was not accessible to the Burmese army, became for a long time their zone of refuge, a “shatter zone” or “flight zone”, in James Scott’s words (2009). After the 1950s, however, these borderlands acquired a new value: from places of ‘low state-making potential’, also in Scott’s terms (2011), they became valuable ones, with intensified struggle and contestation by many centers of power. This process was part of the “territorialization” of the borderlands, which means the control over people and resources within the claimed boundaries. As exemplified by Vandergeest and Peluso (1995: 285), the three processes of territorialization carried out by the modern Thai state are: “the creation and mapping of land boundaries, the allocation of land rights to so-called private actors, and the designation of specific resources (including land) uses by both state and “private” actors according to territorial criteria.” Besides the Thai state, the Karen state-making organizations and army have also simultaneously fought with the Burmese state to control resources and people on the borderlands.

While encountering territorialization processes launched by many centers of power, the Talaku community has experienced many “deterritorializing trajectories” and answered to them by alternative “reterritorializing strategies”, in the attempt to maintain its control over its territory and its members. The conceptual framework set up by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980), *deterritorialization* shall be understood not only in its geographic meaning (resettlement out of the original territory) but in a broader sense as a change in peoples’ way of life in all its ecological, cultural and technical dimensions. Conversely, the *reterritorialization* process shall be understood as the multiple and sometimes contradictory attempts made by people to adjust to the state power and to reconfigure their social space. Few studies yet have used these concepts to analyze the changes experienced by Southeast Asian highlanders, including Évrard and Goudineau (2004) in their work on resettlement in Laos. This paper draws upon this conceptual framework to analyze the changes experienced by Talaku people over the last decades. It aims at exploring how Talaku people rearranged their space and

relationships in order to set themselves free from state or state-like power control and from the forces of modernization. After an historical background on the Talaku movement, it analyzes their encounter with the territorialization process led by the state and by various non-state actors.

### **Talaku movement: its background and territory**

The Talaku movement was founded in Kyaing, the main town of the Karen state in present Burma in the 1860s (Hayami 2011). According to the legend recalled by local leaders in Letongkhu village, they were originally united under the leadership of Yaw Hae, the first Karen to be converted to Buddhism. Yaw Hae encouraged the Karen people to worship Buddha and to observe his five precepts: no killing, no lying, no stealing, no adultery, and no alcohol drinking. The Karen people gathered and settled down in a big town around a stupa which contained Buddha's relic and lived there for many generations. Later, the Burmese invaded their town and chased them away. They had to flee to many places until they arrived in the area where they still live today, in present day Thailand. Then the Karen leader climbed up the cliff and lied down above a waterfall. He had a vision that the place would be the permanent settlement of his people. He then chose the village name 'Letongkhu,' which means literally, "above the rock". He became the first religious leader of the Talaku community and was called *Phue I-Si*, a Pali word for "hermit" (BPP Report 1998). When he died, the Talaku selected his most senior disciple as his successor and it has been so since that time during more than a hundred years. The current religious leader of the Talaku movement is said to be the 11<sup>th</sup> ermit since the time of the founder.

Talaku identity has formed gradually since the time of the first hermit. The current distinctive practices that differentiate Talaku from non-Talaku are, to mention the most important ones, unique costumes and the topknot hairstyle of the Talaku men; as well as the prohibition of raising pigs and chicken and of eating pork and chicken meat. Other prohibitions in relation to Buddhist precepts, namely alcohol drinking and adultery, are also strictly applied. Anyone who commits adultery will be chased away from the village

territory. Some of these prohibitions have been applied since the beginning of the Talaku movement, while others are more recent. For example, the prohibition over pigs and chicken was a rule since the beginning because, as one group explained, when they fled from the Burmese invasion, pigs and chicken which were usually raised by Karen elsewhere made a loud noise which made hiding difficult. Pigs and chicken would be full of evils since that time and not good to raise nor eat. In another explanation, all evils in people's bodies were removed and put in pigs and chicken, so that they can magically make themselves invisible to the eyes of the Burmese. Conversely, some rituals, for example the bonfire, have been practiced since the time of the third hermit to commemorate the second hermit who is said to have immolated himself as a sacrifice for the Talaku<sup>2</sup>.

Talaku identity has been maintained for many generations with the role of hermit, village and family institution. The hermit always lives in a religious compound secluded from village areas. Every year, young boys are ordained to become *ta waw bu*, to be trained by the hermit and by elders in order to gain ritual knowledge and be skillful in organizing Talaku ceremonies, which require many types of handicraft making. *Ta waw bu* spend at least three years in the compound before they can go out of the area. The hermit let the *ta waw bu* cultivate their own land and cook their own food. The hermit and his *ta waw bu* disciples observe more precepts than usual Talaku people, and no intimate relationship with woman is allowed for them. Once a year, the hermit undergoes fasting. At community level, a religious committee, *bu kbo*, includes former *ta waw bu* and is led by the religious leader. This committee coordinates, together with the hermit, the preparation of rituals organized in the monastery and they also consult him on religious matters to be handled among the Talaku community. The religious leader, together with other elders, also organize village rituals, which are held outside the monastery compound. Finally, at family level, elders and parents are also important actors in maintaining Talaku practices and living styles. They teach their children dressing style, eating taboos etc.

---

<sup>2</sup> See more details on the historical/mythical stories of each hermit, the Talaku structure and rituals in Kwanchewan (2008).

At present, around 20 Talaku villages altogether are settled along the Thai/Burma border. Most villages are in Burmese territory while four villages are in Thailand, in the area of Tambon Mae Chan, Umphang District of Tak Province. The number of Talaku villages and Talaku members has reduced through time. Several decades ago, many Talaku villages were found beyond the present territory: to the South which is now in Sangklaburi District of Kanjanaburi Province, and to the West which is around the town of Kyone Doh and Kawkareik, Pa-an District, the Karen State of Burma. In 2005, when I visited a village, near Kyone Doh town, which had been set up by Talaku from Letongkhu, a 68 year old man told me that they were no longer Talaku, but simply Buddhists because they could not maintain the link with the hermit center at Letongkhu. His late father had once walked for 6 day to Letongkhu to participate to the ceremony every year. But later on the security deteriorated and it was not safe anymore to join the ceremonies organized in Letongku and consequently boys could not be ordained there anymore. I also met a 90-year-old man who used to live in Letongku but later on went to Pa-an. He had been a *ta waw bu* at the hermit monastery in Letongkhu when he was 12 years old. He still identified himself as a Talaku.

The Talaku territory can be defined as the physical area in which Talaku ritual and behaviors are followed. It is a sacred area in which former hermits who have now become mythical and sacred beings have set up the customary practices. Violating the ritual rules is considered as desacralizing or polluting the area. Private spaces include all the households where it is forbidden to bring pork or chicken. If this happens, a cleansing ritual has to take place right away. Besides Talaku rituals, traditional rituals found in other Karen villages can be practiced here, though they are not exactly the same in every household. The public area is the village area and the hermit religious compound. Inside this compound, the area is classified in three zones, the outer area where Talaku men and women can enter; the middle area where only Talaku men can enter, and the inner one, which is strictly reserved to the hermit and *ta waw bu*. In order to limit the polluted impact from non-Talaku visitors, the village also constructed a guesthouse to accommodate visitors.

As long as the intrusion of the state and other external powerful actors remained minimal, the Talaku easily managed to maintain their distinctive practices. Non-Talaku neighboring Karen recognized Talaku identity and respected the group as a high moral and non-political people. Most of the Talaku who could not comply with all the rules left the village. However, the change of the political landscape in this borderland area has deeply affected the boundaries of the Talaku group. On the Burma side, as mentioned above, the link with Talaku community at Letongkhu has been severed by the war between ethnic secessionist movements and the Burmese army, and the villages have gradually become Buddhists. In Thailand, there has been no war but the territorialization imposed by the Thai state has greatly affected Talaku identity.

### **Territorialization by the States and Other Powerful Actors**

The borders between Thailand (Siam until 1939) and neighboring countries have been demarcated since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thai state started to set up district offices, police stations, schools and dispensaries in the main townships but it could not really control every part of the borderlands, due to limited number of staff and the low quality of transportation networks. Therefore, there was no systematic control over the movement of people and commodities across the border. That is why, until the 1960s, the Talaku communities were rather autonomous in their administration and management of natural resources with little interference from Thai and Burmese state agencies.

The situation in the Talaku territory started to change in the 1960s, first with the incursion of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT)<sup>3</sup> and also later on of the Karen National Union (KNU) who set up its strongholds on the Thai side with the support of the Thai State. After the defeat of CPT in 1982, Thai state armed forces and agencies launched many development projects in the Talaku area. Road, solar power and other modern projects were implemented. In the meantime, Christian missionaries progressively gained more influence in the area.

---

<sup>3</sup> For the history of CPT, consult for example Rousset (2009)

Christian missionaries from the Church of Christ in Thailand and the United Christian Missionary Society went to meet the 8th Talaku hermit at Letongkhu in 1962 in order to convert him and his followers (Stern 1968: 323). They found out that there were only five Talaku villages in Thailand while the rest of the nearly 7000 followers were living in Burma. The report written after this first visit mentions that the Talaku people “(...) feel free to travel back and forth across the border” (Church of Christ News, 1963). If this first mission received a warm welcome, conversion did not happen. The missionaries found out that the main concern of the hermit “was for the present peace and prosperity of his people. He asked first of all that the US should withdraw all arms from both the Burmese and the Karen rebels, so that his people might have peace...” (Church of Christ News, 1963). The missionaries came back to Letongkhu every year until 1967 but had to stop afterwards because of the political situation. The 8th hermit incited Talaku members and some KNU’s soldiers to fight against Burmese forces but they were defeated. He was then executed by KNU force in Burmese territory (Smith 1999: 455). In 1969, when missionaries went to Letongkhu again, they found out that the monastery was in ruin and that some Talaku villagers had moved out of the village. Only a few villagers were still conducting the rituals that could normally be done only in presence of the hermit (Hovemyr 1997).

During this time of disarray many Talaku members joined the CPT force together with other non-Talaku people, Karen from many different villages. Today, they like to recall their experiences working with the CPT while they were trained to be nurses, soldiers, etc. They remember revolutionary songs and have good memories of Thai friends, many of whom were university students who joined the CPT after the massacre in 1976 and returned to the cities in the early 1980s. The Talaku who joined the CPT decided to change their dressing style, cut their hair, wear trousers etc. and abandoned their religious practices. Some of them however returned to Letongkhu to live a Talaku normal life. After the defeat of the CPT, one of the former hermit’s disciple was invited to a Talaku village on the Burmese side of the border and became thereafter the new hermit of Letongku. Meanwhile, the village headman, who was himself a former CPT soldier, started to work actively for the strengthening

of the Talaku practices in Letongku as well as neighboring villages by organizing regular ceremonies. In a sense, the influence of the CPT on Talaku movement has been quite superficial and short-lived.

The deepest and strongest impact on Talaku's livelihood, religious and cultural practices came from Thai state agencies. The Border Patrol Police (BPP) set up their station in Letongkhu, although the village could be accessed only by a eight-hour walk or by helicopter. In 1989, a BPP high-rank officer came to visit the station in Letongkhu and found out that only 2 people in Letongkhu could speak a little bit of Thai<sup>4</sup>. He decided to coordinate the "development" of Letongkhu village with the Non-Formal Education Center and the Hilltribe Development and Welfare Center of Tak Province. A BPP school was finally set up in the village in 1989 after a long process of negotiation. Initially, Talaku villagers rejected the plan to set up a school in the village, saying that it was contrary to their tradition. After repeated visits and discussions with the BPP, the villagers finally gave their agreement but under several conditions. First, no pork, chicken, alcohol nor drug would be brought into the village. Second, the school staff would not interfere with their cultural practices nor raise pig, duck and chicken. The first BPP teacher agreed upon these conditions and gave a ceremonial vow at the hermit's office, but the Talaku people were still worried and hesitant. When an epidemic broke out a few months later, it was attributed to the newly constructed school and the villagers asked that it be removed. It took some time until they agreed to let the school operate again without any protest (Boonruang Wantha, n.d.).

After the 1990s, things changed. New BPP teachers broke the promise done by their predecessor, and they now eat pork and chicken, they drink alcohol and try to instill modern thinking and behaviors to their students. Some villagers still complain about the school and regret the decision made in the 1980s. As one of them said, "We thought that they would stay only temporarily but we were wrong. Anyway we cannot do anything, we cannot prevent them to do this. They first lived far away but now they come much

---

<sup>4</sup> They are the first and second official headman who had joined the CPT and thus gained some Thai language ability.



closer” (interview 2005). In 2012, the school is expanding with more students from Letongkhu as well as from other villages on the borderland, both on Thailand and Burma sides. It has managed to send students to further their studies in secondary schools and colleges in the district town and elsewhere. In towns and cities, students feel embarrassed to continue their distinctive religious practices and to keep wearing their traditional costume.

In the meantime, Talaku villagers are increasingly incorporated into the modern and commercial world. With village fund provided by the government in late 1990s, some Talaku bought small tractors to replace the cattle formerly used to plough the land. With improved roads, these tractors are also used, at least in dry season, to transport goods from the nearest town. Need for cash is increasing as they have to pay back village fund and to buy more facilities including motorcycles and electric appliances. Some villagers also started to go out to work for cash in non-agricultural sectors in remote provinces.

In the Burmese borderlands in the 1990s, the territory previously controlled by KNU was divided into many places controlled by different Karen and Burmese armed forces. While the Burmese army managed to control important border check points, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Karen Peace Forces (KPF), two groups which mutinied against the Karen National Union (KNU), have also gained control over some parts of the border area<sup>5</sup>. In the past, some Talaku members of Letongkhu who inherited land from parents who originally lived in Burma easily went back across the border to cultivate the land during the planting season. Nowadays, they would be frequently taxed by the different armed forces who control the area they have to pass by, either in cash or kind.

The territorialization process initiated by many parties has therefore threatened Talaku’s autonomy in the management of their political, economic, religious and cultural matters. It has taken away the aura and the mystical conception of Talaku territory, and turned it into a

---

<sup>5</sup> In 1995, the KNU lost its stronghold, Manerplaw, to the Burmese army and the DKBA. See further details of conflict between DKBA and KNU in Gravers (1996) and Smith (1999)

secular one which is considered by the Talaku as polluted and evil. Talaku villagers are to be “developed” by the Thai state to become modern citizens. They are also exploited by many powerful groups across the border, when they want to maintain the use of resources there as they have done in the past.

### **Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization Strategies**

In the territorialization process, modern states control their territory by regulating border crossing; they control the use of natural resources by classifying forest lands and by regulating the use of natural resources within these lands; and finally they also control the people’s actions by imposing nationalist and modern ideas, conveyed by formal education, media and administrations. Confronted to these conditions, some Talaku have left their territory and way of life: they became deterritorialized. Most of them, however, refused to leave the area, and they tried to reconfigure their territory by adjusting their religious practices and negotiating the use of resources across the border, as described below.

The first strategy is to make Talaku territorial boundary more flexible but also more enduring to ensure the continuation of Talaku identity. We have seen previously that the Talaku villagers felt that the BPP school had violated their code of moral conduct. However, as the Talaku had no way to control the school which was expanding each year and has greater influence on the children’s minds and behaviors, they decided to redefine the area where the primary school and other government service centers were set up as an outside space inside Talaku territory. Consequently, polluted activities conducted in this area could not affect Talaku community anymore. A similar issue concerns the increasing number of Talaku students who continue their study in secondary school in the nearby district town or even in bigger cities. These students have difficulty to maintain their Talaku practices and symbols of identity, in particular the topknot hairstyle worn by the men and the typical costumes of their community. It is also difficult for them to completely avoid pork and chicken in their meals. Therefore, the Talaku consider these students as temporarily out of the Talaku community. When they come back to the village, they have to stay in the school, considered as a non-Talaku polluted space, until

they undergo a purifying ritual allowing them to come home. The same regulation applies for Talaku members who leave the village for off-farm jobs in other cities. However, the efficiency of this strategy in maintaining Talaku identity can be questioned because an increasing number of young people leave the village for study and work, and when they come back, they may neither undergo a purifying ritual, nor return to the Talaku way of life.

A second strategy is to negotiate the access to the paddy fields which lie across the Burmese border, as Letongkhu territory overlaps the international border between Thailand and Burma. In the past, Talaku villagers always crossed the border to gather food in the forest, to catch fish and other aquatic animals in the rivers on the Burmese side, and also to visit relatives and friends in other Talaku villages there. Since intermarriage between Talaku members of different villages is a common practice, some households in Letongkhu have inherited paddy fields which are located on the Burmese side of the border<sup>6</sup>. During the 4-months rainy season, they usually cross the border to cultivate those fields and stay there most of the time before returning to Letongkhu in Thailand after the harvest. In the past, when the KNU was the only force controlling the area, Talaku villagers from Letongkhu had no problem crossing the border to cultivate their fields, as the KNU and other non-Talaku Karen understood that the Talaku were religious people who were neutral and not harmful. Besides, they could easily differentiate the Talaku based on their dress and hair style, and that is why they let them travel freely.

Things changed when the border became a disputed territory between many armed forces: KNU, KPF, DKBA, and the Burmese army. Thereafter, the Talaku had to pay taxes to the different forces if they wanted to go on cultivating their paddy fields in Burma and to transport rice back to Letongkhu. The Talaku also complained that the Burmese army used them as a force labor and requisitioned their tractors for their logistic needs. Also, the Talaku had to show

---

<sup>6</sup> In 2012, 32 households out of 258 households have crossed the border to cultivate their paddy fields. The number of households having paddy fields in Burma side is higher than this but due to difficulties in crossing the border, some households chose to leave their fields in fallow or ask local people to cultivate them instead.

their good will toward DKBA by helping to construct pagodas on the top of the main hills of the area. Such a situation put a lot of pressure on the Talaku headman, who had to take care of Talaku villagers' well being and to find a compromise with the different actors. However, after the former experienced headman was killed in 2008 (more on this below) and was replaced by a younger and less experienced one, the relations between the various armed factions in Burma and the Talaku deteriorated. Some miscommunication and lost of trust occurred between the two sides. In 2011, the headman, assistant headman and a Talaku elder crossed the border to attend to a meeting to negotiate the cultivation of paddy fields. On the way back to Letongkhu, the assistant headman was assassinated by unknown forces on the Burma side, very close to the Thai border. As a result, in 2011, no household went to cultivate their land in Burma. In 2012, with renewed negotiation and guarantee from all forces in Burma, some households decided to cross the border to cultivate their land again.

A third strategy is the conversion to Christianity, considered as a mean to escape growing tensions inside the Talaku community. In 2008, forty-six years after their first visit, the missionaries have been able to convert the first Talaku. At that time, growing tensions and disputes between the Talaku members over the choices imposed by the increasing pressure of the State and other regional actors, led to the emergence of factions among them. There were multiple opinions of how the Talaku community should evolve in the modern world. For example, the former headman was willing to modernize the hermit compound with a concrete structure and electricity produced by a diesel generator. Some people did not agree, saying that the structure should remain the same as in the old days with an easy-made and temporary construction. The highest tension occurred when the former headman gave a pair of elephant tusks belonging to the hermit center to the leader of DKBA in Burma, as a gift showing the good will of the Talaku community. Some Talaku protested then and organized demonstrations at the District Office to ask that the elephant tusks be given back to their community. This conflict went on for many years and led to the assassination of the former headman in 2008. Right after his death, his wife, family members, brother and relatives decided to

convert to Christianity. Although they did not move out of the village, they became “deterritorialized” in the way that they were not a part of Talaku community anymore. Simultaneously, they tried to “reterritorialize” themselves around the Christian faith by showing their belief in God and by following scrupulously the Christian ritual practices. They also built their own church in the village. An interview with the headman’s wife clearly shows that the severance from Talaku community was unavoidable, for the level of disappointment and distrust of other groups in the same village was very high. So she chose to join another community, which offers her more love and compassion. She said, “It is time. After the headman died, the village is divided into two... we know that one day we will have to separate like a tree branch. There is an old saying that one branch points up to the sky, another points down to the water. The one points to the sky will never points down to the water... my husband died, I am sorrowful. I will do what I want...”

The last strategy relates to the reinforcement or the intensification of the ritual practices to escape the secularization implemented by the State. In 2008, the 10<sup>th</sup> hermit and the former headman asked Talaku villagers in Letongkhu to be vegetarians for three years and three months as an experimental period. Becoming vegetarians was an entirely new practice at that time because although Talaku people do not eat pork, chicken or duck meat, they can hunt and fish in the wild for consumption. The idea of vegetarianism emerged when the former headman’s visited several charismatic Buddhist monks who practiced vegetarianism in Burma. Working closely with the former headman, the hermit promoted this idea and said that it was the mean to prevent some Talaku to become Christians (interview assistant headman, 2011). The hermit also said that becoming vegetarian was necessary to prepare the society for the coming of Phra Sri Ariya, the fifth Buddha<sup>7</sup>. “If we do not practice vegetarianism, we will also loose our Talaku identity” (hermit

---

<sup>7</sup> In popular belief, the present Buddha worshipped by Buddhists is the fourth Buddha. Phra Sri Ariyametrai is the fifth Buddha who will be coming on the condition that people strictly observe moral conduct. In the reign of Phra Sri Ariyametrai, the society will be prosperous and peaceful. The belief in the coming of the fifth Buddha is found in many millenarian movements among many ethnic groups who have associated with Buddhist neighbors (see Stern 1968, Gravers 2001)

interview, 2011). During three years and three months, most of the Talaku villagers practiced vegetarianism with the belief in the hermit's hint that that they would meet unexpected high benefit at the end of the experimental period.

In 2011, at the end of this experimental period, the hermit asked the Talaku members not to stop but to continue being vegetarians forever. Most Talaku members did not agree and returned to their previous Talaku habits. They argued that they had to work hard and needed energy from meat. They also said that they didn't have enough money to buy soybean products which would add more protein in their dishes. Another important reason cited for not becoming vegetarians was that some households still carry on their ancestral worship rituals in which a bamboo rat, a wild animal, is caught, prepared as food for ancestral spirits worship and consumed by household members after the ritual. However, the hermit insisted and as a pressure on Talaku members to become vegetarians, he declared that only vegetarian Talaku would be allowed into the religious compound. Consequently, the non-vegetarian Talaku, who are the majority, could not join the important ceremonies which took place in the hermit center in 2011. Non-vegetarian Talaku elders in particular felt very upset and sad about this discrimination. Toward the end of 2011, the tension between non-vegetarian Talaku members on one side, and the hermit and his vegetarian Talaku on the other side, was heightening. Non-vegetarian Talaku then asked the hermit to leave the center. The hermit said that it already was his plan to do so, because his vegetarian Talaku followers on the Burmese side of the border had already constructed a new religious center there. After the hermit left, Letongkhu villagers selected one of the eldest hermit's disciples to become the new 11<sup>th</sup> hermit.

## **Conclusion**

Hermits, religious leaders and village elders have created the Talaku territory along the Thai-Burma border many centuries ago and have promoted a strict regulation of cultural and moral conducts. The Talaku community, which includes many villages on both sides of the border, has adjusted its physical boundary as well as religious and cultural practices through time. However, it faced great challenges since the mid-twentieth century. Many

different external institutions and actors have fought, contested and competed with each other to control the territory, its natural resources (minerals, forests) and the people who inhabit it. Each party wants to be the gatekeepers in order to collect large amounts of taxes from traders and people who cross the border. For the Thai state, which is the strongest actor operating in Talaku villages on the Thai side, territorializing people means turning the Talaku into Thai modern citizen. This means integrating the Talaku into the centralized political, economic and socio-cultural projects, and to promote a development toward commercialization and a scientific mode of thinking as well as adopting Thai nationalist ideas.

Facing these territorialization attempts, the Talaku people have used multiple strategies to keep some of their autonomy.

Their main concern was to maintain their Talaku identity amidst the pressure to change. They felt that both outsiders and insiders who infringed upon the code of conducts increasingly polluted their territory. In the course of this adaptation process, some decided to leave the Talaku territory, some chose to adopt stricter ritual practices while others decided to convert to either Christianity or Buddhism. These processes are fundamentally complex and multifaceted and none of the actors involved can fully control all of their aspects. The Talaku became increasingly fragmented with multi-layers identities, which are the outcomes of multiple deterritorialization and reterritorialization strategies or, in Deleuzian terms, a becoming process (Patton, 2000). Thus, it is hard to imagine what will be the future of the Talaku for “(...) a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination... A line of becoming has only a middle. The middle is not an average; it is fast motion, ... A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between...” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 293).

## References

- Boonruang Wantha, 1991 — “Prawat kwam pen ma khong ban letongkhu lae latthi ruesi” [History of Letongkhu village and hermit cult]. A manuscript.
- BPP Report. 1998. “Talakhon at Letawkho,” A study conducted by the 34th Border Patrol Police Force. (in Thai)
- Church of Christ News. 1963 — “Report on the First Visit to the Talakon Sect of the Karen Peoples of Thailand and Burma,” No. 167 (Feb. 1963).
- Deleuze Gilles, Guattari Felix, 1987(1980 — *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Évrard Olivier, Goudineau Yves, 2004 — “Planned Resettlements, Unexpected Migrations and Cultural Trauma in Laos”, *Development and Change*, 35(5) 937-962.
- Gravers Mikael, 1996 — “The Karen Making of a Nation”, in *Asian Forms of the Nation*. Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov eds. Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Gravers Mikael, 2001 — “Cosmology, Prophets, and Rebellion Among the Buddhist Karen in Burma and Thailand.” *Moussons* 4: 3–31.
- Hayami Yoko, 2011 — “Pagodas and Prophets: Contesting Sacred Space and Power among Buddhist Karen in Karen State,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70(4): 1083-1105.
- Hovemyr Maria. 1997 — *A Bruised Reed Shall He not Break...* Chiang Mai: Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand.
- Kwancheuan Buadaeng. 2008 — “Constructing and Maintaining the Ta-la-ku Community: The Karen along the Thai-Myanmar Border”, in Shigeharu Tanabe ed. *Imagining Communities in Thailand: Ethnographic Approaches*. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press.
- Patton Paul, 2000 — *Deleuze and the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Rousset Pierre, 2009 — “Thai Communist Party” in the *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*. Ness, Immanuel (ed). Blackwell Publishing.
- Scott James, 2009 — *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University.
- Scott James, 2011 — “The Art of Anticipating Criticism”, paper presented at the international workshop on RADICALLY ENVISIONING A DIFFERENT SOUTHEAST ASIA: FROM A NON-STATE PERSPECTIVE organized by Asian CORE Program, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports, Japan on 18-19 January 2011 in Kyoto, Japan.
- Smith Martin, 1999 — *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. London: Zed Books.



- Stern Theodore, 1968 — “Ariya and the Golden Book: Millenarian Buddhist Sect among the Karen.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 27: 297-328.
- Vanderveest Peter, Peluso Nancy Lee, 1995 — “Territorialization and State Power in Thailand,” *Theory and Society* 24: 385-426.



# 10 *The impossible Sedentism: The Lao Hmong “Illegal Immigrants” in Thailand*



---

PRASIT LEEPREECHA

## **Abstract**

This article investigates the mobility of the Lao Hmong across the boundary of Laos and Thailand, both voluntary or under the constraints of state authorities. It also explores the different strategies the Lao Hmong used for escaping pressures and confinements from Lao and Thai state authorities. Once a highly mobile highland group fleeing persecutions in China and looking for new agricultural land in Southeast Asia, the Hmong have been deeply impacted by the two Indochina wars that created divisions among them and determined their relations with the nation state in the post-war period. While some were able to take advantage of the new policies of “attachment to place” and implementation of rural development programs, other ended up enclosed in refugee camps in Thailand. Some of the latter never obtained the official status of refugees and were therefore considered as illegal immigrants in Thailand. They nevertheless used their transnational networks to escape state control and negotiate with different stakeholders for their benefits. Although those Lao Hmong “illegal immigrants” were repatriated to reside in a resettlement site provided by Laotian government, in late 2009, most of them finally escaped again and ended up in settling in different destinations, both inside and outside Laos. Information provided in this article was drawn from personal observation and interviews with key informants in the field site of Huay Nam Khao village in Phetchabun province, interviews with relevant peoples, and various kinds of archive.

## Introduction

In 1976, Geddes published his book entitled “*Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecological of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand*”, based on his ethnographic study in a Hmong village in Chiang Mai province of Northern Thailand. The main argument of this book is that Hmong people are permanent migrants. Their mobility is linked to opium cultivation and resource scarcity. In other words, Geddes was considering Hmong mobility as a voluntary and open-ended one. However, if we take a long-term perspective on the migrations of the Hmong from China to Southeast Asia since the middle of the 19th century, it turns out that war and insecurity were major factors and therefore that these migrations were mostly constrained (Culas and Michaud 2004, Hostetler 1995 and 2001, and Mottin 1980). Besides, Hmong people are nowadays spread all over Southeast Asia and they have become citizens of different states. The existence of modern boundaries and the increasing power of national administrations in peripheral areas mean that their mobility cannot be an open-ended one but is instead constrained by sedentarization policies implemented by southeast Asian states (see Mandoff 1967 and Alton and Rattanavong 2004). Crossing state boundaries, either temporarily or permanently, is now difficult since they have to follow state policies, laws, and immigration procedures. For some of them, it is even an impossible task because they do not possess an official status in the country they live in and they constantly face the threat of an expulsion, therefore being simultaneously incompletely sedentarized but at the same time prevented to move.

Laos officially recognizes 49 ethnic groups in its territory. The Hmong account for only 6% of the total population but their weight, both from a political and symbolic perspective, is actually much more important than that. Their role during the two Indochina wars (part of them allied with the royalist forces, the others with the communist troops of the Pathet Lao), their alleged participation to anti-government activities, their involvement in opium production in the past, their relatively recent immigration in Laos (mid-18<sup>th</sup> century), the presence of an important Hmong diaspora in Thailand and in Western countries which keeps contacts with Hmong living in Laos: all these factors concurred to position

Hmong ethnicity as “the other within”, to use Thongchai’s term and concept (Thongchai 1994). At the same time a substantial number of Hmong from Laos migrated illegally to Thailand during the past decades where they could not get the status of refugees. They were then forcibly repatriated to Laos, where their ability to integrate both to existing Hmong settlements and to Lao society as a whole was unsure. My article focus on this experience of migration and repatriation to show that for some of the Hmong people from Laos, a sedentary lifestyle is both dreamed of and impossible in practice.

I take the example of 4,350 Hmong from Huay Nam Khao village of Petchabun province who have been forcibly repatriated to Laos in the end of 2009 despite protests by international institutions and human rights groups (Nipat 2011). I argue that the existence of such “illegal immigrants” as Lao Hmong in Thailand is a long-term consequence of four different factors: the emergence of modern boundaries and nation-states in this region which subjected the Hmong to be citizens of different nation-states; the legacy of Cold War which created deep political groups among the Hmong in Laos; the attitude and operation of the Communist Lao government toward those Hmong who were considered “rebels” since the end of the Cold War; and, finally, the connection of transnational Hmong people in the contemporary globalization context. In addition, I will show that this group of “illegal immigrants” of Lao Hmong in Thailand have developed different strategies to respond to pressures and confinements of the Thai and Lao authorities. These strategies, which could be called “weapons of the weak” following James Scott’s book (Scott 1985) on forms of resistance among Malaysian peasants, range from fighting against Laotian government, fleeing from jungles in Laos, crossing state boundary into Thailand, protesting against pressures of Thai state authorities, and escaping from resettlement site provided by Lao government.

### **Illegal Lao Hmong Immigrants in Thailand: An Overview of the Recent Period**

Late 2009, after four years of negotiation between Lao Hmong immigrants, Thai government, Laotian government, and international agencies, the Thai government decided to repatriate

to Laos 4,350 Lao Hmong living in Huay Nam Khao village of Petchabun province as well as 158 Hmong immigrants who were detained in Nong Khai Immigration Center since late 2006 (Nipat 2011). Who are those Hmong and why are they considered as “illegal immigrants” in Thailand?

Part of the Hmong living in Huay Nam Khao are refugees, originally from Laos since 1975, who didn't want to resettle in third countries and escaped from refugee camps along the border of Thai and Laos to reside in Tham Krabok Monastery. In 1997, the New York Times reported that there were 17,000 Hmong in Tham Krabok (New York Times 1997). Following a long process of negotiation between Thai government, US government, and Hmong organizations in the USA, the American government finally agreed to take this group of Hmong to the USA in December 2003. Interview and resettlement processes started in early 2004. In June 2004, a first group of 24 Hmong from Tham Krabok reached America (BBC News, 2004). According to the same source, there were 14,300 Hmong living in Tham Krabok at that time.

After the registration process started, three additional groups of Hmong peoples attempted to enter the monastery, in order to register and get a chance to leave for the US. The first group concerns those Lao Hmong refugees who travelled in and out of the monastery and Thai Hmong villages in Northern Thailand. The second group corresponds to the Lao Hmong who were settled in regular villages in Laos and were told by relatives in the US that they would get a chance to go to the US if they entered Tham Krabok monastery and followed the registration procedures. The last group concerns the “Chao Fa” Hmong from Laos who had fought against Laotian government in the jungle for about three decades<sup>1</sup>.

Most of these additional Hmong populations were not allowed to enter the camp and register as refugees. Therefore, in early 2005,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Chao Fa” is a Lao term, literary means king of sky or monarchy. It was one of the political Hmong groups in Laos set up during the Cold War period. Instead of becoming refugee in Thailand, this group went to the jungle and fought against Communist Lao government who took over the country in 1975 (see Piriya 2000). In the Lao jungle, they separated into several groups, scattered in the conjunction area of Xieng Khoung, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane provinces. During late 1900s to early 2000sm, some groups gradually surrendered to the Lao government, while some groups escaped to Thailand (see Somber 2005).

some of them went back to Thai Hmong villages, especially in Khao Kho district of Phetchabun province, while some hid nearby Bangkok and tried to reach UNHCR office in Bangkok in order to be registered as asylum seekers. A few months later, 153 Hmong were arrested by Thai officers nearby Bangkok and sent to Nong Khai in preparation for their deportation to Laos. However, they resisted in different ways, so Thai government didn't succeed in deporting them to Laos but detained them in Nong Khai Immigrant Detained Center. Finally, late December of 2009, this group of Hmong immigrants was sent back to Laos together with the group from Huay Nam Khao.



Figure 1 : Map of Saraburi, Phetchabun, and Nong Khai provinces

The group of Lao Hmong who gradually gathered and showed up in Thai Hmong villages in Khao Kho district of Phetchabun province in 2005 was closely followed by local Thai authorities. They finally ended up settling in Huay Nam Khao village, a few kilometers before the Thai Hmong village of Huay Nam Khao. They built temporary shelters in Thai Hmong fields for residing, while waiting with the hope to be registered for leaving for the US. Although the pioneer group of Lao Hmong immigrants had settled in Huay Nam Khao with no chance to register in Tham Krabok, more and more Lao Hmong escaped into Thailand and ended up in this village. The Thai authorities attempted to deport

them back to Laos. According to the Bangkok Post (2004), 150 Lao Hmong were raided in Thai Hmong villages in Khao Kho district for preparing to deport to Laos, via Chiang Kham checkpoint in Loei province. The same source said there were around 1,000 Lao Hmong in Khao Kho district. Those peoples illegally entered Thailand between June and August 2004. In 2005, the Bangkok Post reported that there were 6,558 people (Wasana 2005d), while in late 2009 Thai authorities mentioned only 4,350 Lao Hmong that were repatriated to Laos (Nipat 2011).

### **Lao Hmong Refugees in Thailand: A Historical Perspective**

The presence in Thailand of illegal Lao Hmong immigrants who ended up at Huay Nam Khao village of Phetchabun province and Nong Khai Immigration Detained Center shall be considered as the outcome of four different historical factors: the emergence of modern states in this region; the legacy of the Cold War; the conflict between “Chao Fa” groups of Hmong and Communist Lao government; and the contemporary “connectivity” between various groups of Hmong throughout the world.

Firstly, the emergence of modern nation-states during and after the colonial period meant that the Hmong who were scattered all over Southeast Asia were citizens of different countries. In addition, the adoption of Western concepts of international laws and regulations on citizenship by the various governments has literally “created” illegal migrants, especially among those populations who had a long history of regular trans-border mobility. According to Culas and Michaud (2004), Hostetler (1995 and 2001), and Mottin (1980), the Hmong have migrated from Southwestern China and settled in upper Mainland Southeast Asia since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the current state boundaries between Laos and Thailand were not existing yet (they would be created only five decades later, in 1909 and officially set up after the Second World War, see Thongchai 1994: 128-129).

The territorialization of the state power in peripheral area meant that different national laws of access to citizenship started to apply on highland peoples depending on which side of the border they



were living in. In Thailand, identification cards are compulsory and Hmong began to get them as soon as 1962. However, full Thai citizenship is difficult to get and many of them are still in the process of applying for it. In Laos, the context is different: while the ID cards have become compulsory only very recently, many people still do not possess any. However, access to citizenship is not a problem here for the Hmong since the Lao State acknowledges all highlanders living on its territory as citizens, and does not distinguish between different kinds of citizenship, as in Thailand. These different legal contexts, added to an increased surveillance of the borders, have caused tremendous obstacles for the mobility of the Hmong people, when compared to the pre-modern state period.

Secondly, the recent incidence of illegal Hmong immigrants in Thailand is the legacy of the Cold War. In Laos, the Cold War divided Hmong people in two opposite political groups during late 1950s to 1975. One group was supported by CIA, under the leadership of the former General Vang Pao, who promoted democracy and the former royal Laotian government. The opposite side led by Fai Dang Laobliayao joined the Pathet Lao and some of its members acquired important positions in the new state. After the Pathet Lao took control over the entire country in 1975, the majority of Hmong people who had followed General Vang Pao fled out of the country and became refugees in Thailand and part of them were finally resettled in western countries. Those remaining in Laos became known as “Chao Fa” groups. They hid in the jungle around Phu Bia mountainous area and fought against the Pathet Lao government (Lee 2004).

Thirdly, the military actions implemented by the Lao government upon those “Chao Fa” groups caused new waves of migration of Lao Hmong into Thailand. In the early 2000’s, the Lao government launched massive military operations to get rid of the “Chao Fa” militants who fought against the government (Bangkok Post 2007b, Sommer 2005, Perrin 2003), accusing them of conducting violent actions and robbery on public transport buses. Later on, some members of these groups decided to surrender to the Lao government. In 2006, more than 400 people, mostly children and women, led by Moua Tua Ter, turned to the Laotian government

in Xieng Kouang province (Bangkok Post 2006a). However, other groups tried to escape to Thailand, since they didn't trust the Lao army for treating them correctly.

The globalization context also influences the migration of Lao Hmong into Thailand and, furthermore, benefits them in responding to the repatriation procedures implemented by Thai and Lao governments. Even the "Chao Fa" Hmong who have lived in the jungle for almost three decades were not isolated but regularly contacted by outsiders, including Hmong in western countries, either via personal or long distant communication. These contacts allowed some of them to evacuate to Thailand where they tried, without success, to contact UNHCR people in Bangkok. Some were arrested and sent to Nong Khai immigration detention center prior to their deportation to Laos, while others joined the two other Hmong groups who gathered at Huay Nam Khao village in Phetchabun province.

### **What place and what space for Lao Hmong Immigrants?**

By fleeing from Laos to Thailand and seeking to be resettled in a third country as political refugees, these groups of Lao Hmong became temporarily stateless people. Neither Thailand nor the US accepted to take them on their territory and initially Laos refused also to welcome them back. It is only after a long process of negotiation between the three countries that Laos accepted to recognize them as Lao citizens and to take them back on its territory, even if the concerned people did not want to be repatriated there. In other words, these people were temporarily located in the limbo of borderlands, without official status or place to settle down. The following paragraphs give more details about what happened during this transitional period.

In January 2005, the Internal Security Operations Command (Isoc)<sup>2</sup> in Thailand asked the Third Army Region to set up a refugee camp

---

<sup>2</sup> Internal Security Operations Command (Isoc) is a national agency of Thailand in charge of the issues of groups representing a potential threat to national security, according to the state government. This agency is structured to control the policy and to command over other state agencies dealing with security issues.

to accommodate the Hmong recent immigrants. “*Isoc has to act on this issue because it could undermine our bilateral relations with a neighboring country*”, said General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, the director of Isoc (Wasana 2005a). In the middle of 2005, the Pha Muang Task Force (a branch of the Thai army in charge of the police operations along the border with Laos) was instructed to strictly control the Hmong group (Wasana 2005b). Local NGO workers brought foods and basic goods to the Hmong for humanitarian help but they did so without official authorizations. According to a Hmong NGO worker “*We brought foods and clothes to them but were compelled to stop doing that just after a few days we went there*”. At that time, the government wanted to restrict humanitarian help to the migrants in hope that they would leave the territory. Only some international relief organizations were officially allowed to help them. Late 2005, after the International Rescue Committee (IRC) had left, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) were allowed to provide medical care, water supply system, sanitary services, and relief items (Constantine 2007).

As humanitarian help was kept minimal and the number of migrants continued to rise, the migrants started to build temporary shelters on the land of local Thai Hmong in Ban Huay Nam Khao. According to Wasana (2005d) the number of Lao Hmong in Ban Huay Nam Khao in September 2005 amounted to 6,558 persons. In the middle of 2006, a combined force of 140 soldiers, polices, and local authorities were deployed at Ban Huay Nam Khao to seal off the area (Wasana 2006). Under the operation, four local Hmong landowners were arrested, for allegedly providing shelter to illegal migrants. They were judged shortly after and sentenced to jail for six months. The illegal Lao Hmong migrants then moved out from local Thai Hmong lands and built new temporary shelters along the road to Ban Huay Nam Khao, which was a public property. In June 2007, the Thai government relocated these refugees to a new site approximately three kilometers North of the village. The camp, roughly 20 hectares (49 acres) was settled on a hillside with only one access point controlled by the Thai military. The camp was enclosed with barbed-wire fencing (Constantine 2007: 14).

During that period, a representative of the Thai government clearly stated that Thailand didn't want them to settle down on its land.

“If Laos refuses to take the Hmong back, the authorities will take all means necessary to push them back across the border. The Thai government has no policy to open a refugee camp to house illegal immigrants and shoulder this burden. If they were allowed to stay on Thai land, the Hmong in Huay Nam Khao would pose problems to the country. If we let them stay here any longer, they will form a settlement and become a ‘second Tham Krabok’. Our country will be forced to shoulder a big burden. We just closed down the Hmong settlement at Wat Tham Krabok and don’t want to see such a thing again”, said General Panllop Pinmanee, deputy director of the Internal Security Operations Command (Isoc). He also added “Now we are waiting for the appropriate time. We will truck them to the border regardless of whether the Lao authorities accept them or not. We cannot allow these people to live in our country” (Wasana and Bhanravee, 2005). Meanwhile, the US government also refused to welcome the Hmong migrants on its soil despite their repeated demands. As noted by Wasana, “The United States has no policy to resettle the thousands of ethnic Hmong who had taken refuge in Ban Huay Nam Khao, in Petchabun province, US public relations chief Mark Larsen said yesterday. The resettlement of 15,000 Hmong living at Wat Tham Krabok in Saraburi province will be completed in September but the US had no plan to resettle any other group of Hmong refugees. Mr Larsen suggested that the Hmong in Petchabun seeked help from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) instead” (Wasana 2005f).

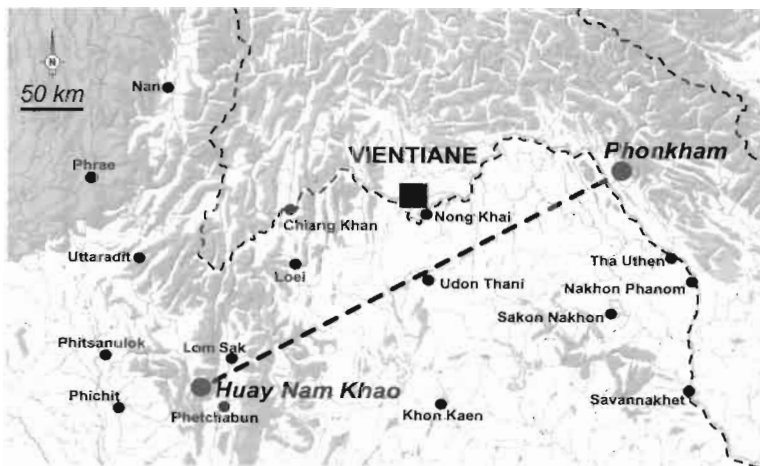


Figure 2: Map of Huay Nam Khao and Phonkham sites

The situation was further complicated by the fact that the Lao government refused to consider that those migrants were indeed citizen from Laos (Wasana 2005d). Late 2006, Mr. Yong Chanthalangsy, the Lao Ministry spokesman, gave an interview and reluctantly confessed that “*there were negotiations between the two sides, and the Thais requested Laos to consider taking those people back to Laos. The Lao side told Thailand that we were willing to consider the list of names if they provide us with all the details – the names, their address, date and place of birth – so we can prove that they are Lao citizens*” (Bangkok Post 2006b). Negotiation between both sides went on for several months. It was not until the middle of 2007, during the visit of Lao Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh to Thailand in December 18, 2007<sup>3</sup> that the Hmong issue was discussed and that the Lao leader officially accepted to consider these migrants as Lao citizens and to take them back home (Bangkok Post 2007a). However, even after, some Lao officials were still denying that those Hmong in Ban Huay Nam Khao were refugees. Brig-Gen Buasing Champaphan, co-chairman of Thai-Laos border sub-committee, said there were no war nor anti-government activities within Laos. Such statement was made due to claims of “ethnic cleansing” by Hmong human rights watch groups in western countries. The Lao government replied that some Hmong who were earlier repatriated to Laos were safely placed in different provinces. He also promised that if the rest Hmong in Ban Huay Nam Khao return home, they would not be punished (Achara 2007).

Late December 2009, after a long process of negotiation between Thai and Lao governments, and also with international agencies, the repatriation was completed. 4,350 Lao Hmong in Huay Nam Khao and 152 Hmong in Nong Khai were handed over from Thai government to Laotian government. They were resettled in the Phonkham resettlement site set up by Lao government, in the city of Paksan in Bolikhamsay province (Nipat 2011). During the forced resettlement from Ban Huay Nam Khao to Laos, a Hmong woman was quoted saying that “the life of the Hmong people is like dried leaves. It depends on which way the wind blows” (Nipat 2011).

---

<sup>3</sup> He discussed with Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont the joint preparation for the next two days of the opening of the Thai-Lao bridge across the Mekong River in the Mukdahan province, and the buying of hydropower electricity from Laos.

It is important to observe that the forced repatriation was operated just a few days after the Southeast Asian games in Vientiane, held on 9-18 December 2009, to avoid the operation to be reported and blamed by international reporters, and to prevent political groups who did not agree with this operation to cause fear to the SEA games participants with acts of terrorism in the country.

### **Hmong Strategies against Dominant Powers**

The Hmong immigrants followed various strategies to deal with the state authorities of both Thailand and Laos. Besides, via transnational Hmong networks and modern technologies of communication, they publicized their struggles in the media and among international organizations. A first strategy was to surrender only partially to the Lao government and to protect the most politically exposed leaders. Among the Chao Fa Hmong group who fought against the Lao Communist government, only women, children, and old people surrendered while the male fighters escaped to Thailand. The Bangkok Post reported for instance that “... 170 women, children, and old people from the Hmong ethnic minority – which was once part of a US backed secret army fighting Communist in Laos – emerged from their jungle hideouts yesterday to surrender to the government” (Bangkok Post 2005a: 4). Ed Szendrey, an independent reporter, confirmed that “the group – mostly women, children, and elderly, and all relatives of Hmong fighters who have resisted Lao government for 30 years – carried handmade signs with “I surrender” written in Lao” (Bangkok Post 2005b: 9). Such defiant attitude was linked to previous experiences of other Hmong groups. According to a Chao Fa Hmong leader, “We had heard and learned from the former groups who surrendered to Lao government, and later on their leaders had disappeared. Therefore, we decided to send only our women, children, and elders to surrender but not men who were leaders. After they surrendered, we, the leaders, flew to Thailand and ended up in Huay Nam Khao” (Tooj 2005).

A second strategy was to use the informal networks along the Thai-Lao border. Indeed, most of the Hmong migrants found their way across the border to Thailand without any obstruction from state authorities. According to the Bangkok Post (2004: 4), “The Hmong were brought across the border at Pak Chom and Chiang Khan districts in Loei by gangs in pick-up trucks who charged them 2,500 baht for a trip and

\$250 per head for promises to help them to migrate to the US". General Winai Pattiyakul, the secretary of the National Security Council confirmed that "there must be gangs who benefited from bringing these people into the country and we must take action" (Bangkok Post 2005c: 4). Those migrants mostly ended up in Huay Nam Khao village of Petchabun province but some of them were also brought to Erawan Resort in Pong Yaeng sub-district, Mae Rim district of Chiang Mai province<sup>4</sup>.

How did the Lao Hmong immigrants cross the border into Thailand without any obstruction from local Thai authorities, and who were the people who took them into Thailand? Some of them said that they crossed the Mekong River and the border during the night, some other said during the day. Most of them crossed the border away from checkpoints. They hired local Laotians and Thais to help them cross the river by boat and to drive them in pick-up trucks to Huay Nam Khao village. A Lao Hmong man said, "*We were arrested by local authorities but we paid some money to them, so they let us come*" (Long 2006). However, Lao Hmong immigrants also chose to walk along mountain ranges to the final destination at Huay Nam Khao. As for those who were later detained in Nong Khai, they came from Laos separately but finally gathered in Bangkok and nearby provinces in 2003 and attempted to reach UNHCR to ask for help and registration. They rented an apartment near the UN office in Bangkok, until the Thai and Lao governments sent officers to arrest them. By the end of the year 2004, a total of 153 Hmong were arrested in Bangkok and taken in Nong Khai from where they were later sent to Laos.

A third strategy consisted in organizing the daily resistance inside the camp. When Thai authorities set up draconian rules inside the settlement of Huay Nam Khao (ban on alcohol consumption, on travels outside the settlement etc.) and menaced to arrest those who were not complying, the Lao Hmong were able to cope and avoid being arrested. But they refused to show up when authorities

---

<sup>4</sup> This resort was controlled by a group of former army soldiers who ran the Thai Highlander Foundation. The resort was finally raided by local policemen who found many illegal Lao Hmong immigrants and weapons on the site. Later on, those Hmong immigrants gradually disappeared.

called them for whatever purpose of meeting, visiting doctors for receiving birth control pills, etc. In addition, they occasionally went on a hunger strike and protested against state authorities whenever they were treated unfairly (Hmoob Moj Them, n. d). Some of them even threatened to commit suicide if they were sent back to Laos (Wasana and AP 2005: 2). In June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Lee Sue, a Hmong leader, was arrested due to an interview he gave to Radio Asia. Around 200 Hmong came out and protested in front of the government office. The state authorities then took him to sit down outside the metal-fence. To prevent him being deported to Laos, his wife took a big chain and key and locked his leg with the fence.

Among the group of Hmong who were detained in Nong Khai, day-to-day resistance also occurred. After they were arrested in Bangkok and nearby provinces, they were sent to the Nong Khai immigration center to process documents before being deported to Laos in 2004. Thai authorities had attempted several times to deport to Laos the Hmong from the Nong Khai center but did not succeed. The Hmong used their clothes to tie and lock the door of the detention room, so that the officers could not get inside to arrest them. In addition, they burned joss sticks, blew the smoke outside, while some phoned local journalists to investigate and report to the public that officers beat and tortured them. Such practices had caused attention of media and officials of foreign embassies in Thailand to investigate and blame Thai government. Ultimately, Thai government failed to deport them to Laos, but detained them for five years.

A fourth strategy was to organize a demonstration in front of the UN office in Bangkok. The Lao Hmong faced heavy pressures from Thai authorities: attempts on blocking media people and aid NGOs from outside to enter Huay Nam Khao, having their mobile phone taken away. One of their prominent reactions was to start a long march from the camp to Bangkok, which is about 340 kilometers away. The march started in early morning of June 20, 2008. Around 5,000 Lao Hmong left the camp and begun the rally at 5 am. First they were stopped twice, but there were not enough soldiers to block them. After 5 kilometers, a group of around 100 soldiers blocked their rally and pushed them back for 2 days, while



a negotiation started. Finally, they decided to return to the camp. Because of this incident, around 200 of their leaders were arrested and deported to Laos (Hmoob Moj Them, n.d.).

A fifth strategy, the Hmong migrants managed successfully to make their voices heard in the national and international media, including Thai television programs and newspapers, Hmong radio programs and newspapers in America, Radio Asia, CNN, etc. I was surprised when I made a visit to a shortwave Hmong radio station in Minnesota in the middle of 2009 to hear a live report of a Hmong man from Huay Nam Khao, via telephone. Update news of problems in Huay Nam Khao and Nong Khai were reported in both Hmong television programs and Hmong Newspapers in Minnesota. In addition, one could easily find news about such events in websites both in Hmong and English languages.

In June 20, 2008, when the UN Secretary stopped in Bangkok on his way to Burma, the houses of Huay Nam Khao camp were set on fire. The Thai authorities said that the Hmong intentionally started the fire in order to call for attention from the UN, while the Hmong blamed the Thai authorities for the blaze, saying that they were trying to force them to go back to Laos. The issue of Lao Hmong in Thailand was a serious concern for the US government, due to the important Hmong community living in the US. A good example is that when Secretary General Hillary Clinton made a visit to Thailand mid-July 2009, one of the main issues she raised was the US concern about Thai government's attitude toward the Lao Hmong and their intention to repatriate them back to Laos without international involvement and transparency. Later on, US Assistant Secretary Schwartz visited the Hmong in both Huay Nam Khao and Nong Khai (Achara 2008, Fry 2009).

Finally, such a resistance from the Lao Hmong did not end up with their forced repatriation to Laos. Among those who were repatriated from Huay Nam Khao, many found a way to escape the resettlement site in Laos, called Ban Phonkham, near Paksan city in Bolikhamsay province, and settled down in other places, both in Laos and foreign countries. Of the 158 Hmong who were detained in Nong Khai, nearly all of them fled Laos across the border back

to Thailand, contacted officials of foreign embassies in Bangkok of Thailand; and were finally resettled in third countries in Europe and America.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Highland ethnic groups such as the Hmong have scattered in a large area of Mainland Southeast Asia in the past centuries. Some of them did so for ecological reasons, due to their practice of swidden agriculture that requires maintaining a low demographic pressure and long fallow cycles (Geddes 1976). In recent times, the establishment of modern borders and state powers has initiated new forms of “attachment to places”, including agricultural sedentarization programs, merging of hamlets, resettlement in the lowlands etc. The Thai government set up Hill Tribe Resettlement Sites (or Nihom Songkhroh Chaokhao) in the mid-1960s to gather highland villagers from nearby hamlets, to stop deforestation and to allow government officials to reach and bring development to them (Männorff 1967). In Laos, the sedentarization of hill peoples has not been launched before the 1990s. Attempts of government’s constrained settlement have been operated under the policy of eradication of swidden agriculture (Alton and Houmphanh 2004) and so-called “consolidation” of rural villages.

Besides this context, which applies equally to all highland groups in Southeast Asia, the Hmong have a special history of relations with states, and especially with the Lao state. Their relations with the colonial government (late 1880s to end of Second World War), the Laotian Democratic government under the monarchy (after Second World War to 1975), and the Communist government (1975-present), have generated a division in two political factions. The massive migrations that occurred after 1975 are partly the results of these divisions. The first turning point was in 1975, when the communists took over the country. Many Hmong escaped the country then and became refugees in Thailand and, later on, were resettled in third countries, especially in America and France. Later on, these migrations went on, stimulated by the improvement of communication means and contacts between those who were already refugees and those who were still living in Laos.

Another turning point was in late 2004, when the US government announced that it would accept the remaining Hmong refugees of Tham Krabok monastery in Saraburi province of central part of Thailand to resettle in America. This henceforth encouraged other Hmong groups, both in regular villages and the Chao Fa groups in jungles, to migrate to Thailand. However, they ended up gathered at Huay Nam Khao village in Petchabun province, because they were not allowed to register and join the Hmong group in Tham Krabok to resettle in America. They were finally repatriated to Laos, in most cases against their will, but managed to escape their resettlement site again later and crossed the border into Thailand.

In other words, while modern States and globalization brought new limitations and new forms of enclosures for the highland groups of Southeast Asia —or so to speak new forms of “constrained attachment” to places- they also created new forms of mobility which often appear as “escapes” attempts and which create ambiguous legal status for these people. Some of the Hmong groups in Laos but also some of the Karen from Burma or, in a different context again, the Rohingya in Arakan State of Burma, provide examples of such escapes and “impossible sedentism”. They also underline the role played by the media and the new technologies on the creation of networks, opportunities and decisions to move (or not). These transnational migrations linked to political problems will be a major issue to solve for Asean countries in the perspective of the 2015 agreement on common market and free circulation of people and goods.

## References

- Achara Ashayagachat, 2007 — “Laos defends move to bring Hmong home”, *Bangkok Post*, 5 September, p. 4.
- Achara Ashayagachat, 2008 — “Clinton voices concern over plight of Hmong refugees”, *Bangkok Post*.
- Alton Charles, Houmphanh Rattanavong, 2004 — *Service Delivery and Resettlement: Options for Development Planning*. Lao/03/A01 UNDP/ECHO. Final Report Livelihoods Study. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

- Bangkok Post, 2004 — “Border Patrol Raids Net 150 Hmong Refugees”, *Bangkok Post*, 10 November, p. 4.
- Bangkok Post, 2005a — “Hmong Group Surrenders to Lao Force”, *Bangkok Post*, 5 June, p. 4.
- Bangkok Post, 2005b — “Hmong Rebels had ‘No Future in Mountains,’” *Bangkok Post*, 9 June, p. 9.
- Bangkok Post, 2005c — “NSC Wants 6,500 Hmong Out”, *Bangkok Post*, 22 May, p. 4.
- Bangkok Post, 2006a — “Four Hundred Hmong Turn Selves in”, *Bangkok Post*, 14 December.
- Bangkok Post, 2006b — “Laos Demands to See Proof Before Transfer”, *Bangkok Post*, 1 December.
- Bangkok Post, 2007a — “Deal Linked to Deport Hmong: Bouasone Agrees to Up Power Supplies”, *Bangkok Post*, December 19.
- Bangkok Post, 2007b — “Lao Army is Still Hunting Hmong”, *Bangkok Post*, March 3, p. 6.
- Bangkok Post, 2010 — “US officials pay visit to Hmong refugees”, *Bangkok Post*, January 12, p. 4.
- BBC News, 2004 — “Hmong Refugees Reach US”. 22 June.
- Constantine Greg, 2007 — Special Report Fearing a Forced Return: The Situation of the Lao Hmong Refugees in Petchabun, Thailand. <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/article.cfm?id=2705> (accessed 3 September 2009).
- Culas C., J. Michaud, 2004 — “A Contribution to the Study of Hmong (Miao) Migrations and History.” In Tapp, N., Michaud, J., Culas, C., and Lee, G.Y. (eds.). *Hmong/Miao in Asia*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silksworm Books. Pp. 61-96.
- Fry Erica, 2009 — “The unwanted”, *Bangkok Post*, December 27. Pp. 3-4.
- Hmoob Moj Them, n. d., Hmoob Thoj Nam Nyob Dej Dawb, Thaib Teb (a documentary DVD on Hmong Refugees at Huay Nam Khao, Thailand).
- Hostetler Laura, 1995 — Chinese Ethnography in the Eighteenth Century: Miao Albums of Guizhou Province. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Hostetler Laura, 2001 — *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lee Gar Yia, 2004 — “Transnational Adaptation: An Overview of the Hmong of Laos”, *Hmong/Miao in Asia*. Nicholas Tapp, et al., eds. Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books. Pp. 441-456.
- Manndorff Hans, 1967 — “The Hill Tribe Program of the Public Welfare Department, Ministry of Interior, Thailand: Research and Socio-Economic Development”, *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*,

- Vol. II. Peter Kunstadter, ed. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Pp. 525-552.
- Mottin Jean, 1980 — *The History of the Hmong (Meo)*. Bangkok: Rung Ruang Ratana Printing.
- New York Times, 1997 — “Nomads of Laos: Last Leftovers of Vietnam War”. 12 March. ([www.nytimes.com/yr/mo/day/news/world/thailand-refugees.html](http://www.nytimes.com/yr/mo/day/news/world/thailand-refugees.html)) (Accessed 28 August 2008).
- Nipat Thonglek General, 2011 — “The Repatriation of Ban Huay Nam Khao and Nong Khai Lao Hmong back to Laos”, in *The Lao Hmong in Thailand: State Policies and Operations (1975-2009)*, Supang Chantavanich and Tawin Pleansri (eds.). Bangkok: Sriboon Computer-Printing Limited Partnership. Pp. 124-157.
- Perrin Andrew, 2003 — “In Laos’ Heart of Darkness”, *Phnom Penh Post*, October 10-23, pp. 7-9.
- Piriya Panasuwan, 2000 — *Chao Fa: A History that Could be true*. Chiang Mai: Benya.
- Scott James C., 1985 — *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Sommer Rebecca, 2005 — *Hunted Like Animals*. A documentary film about the Chao Fa Hmong in Laos and Thailand.
- Thairath, 2010 — Sor Sor Saharath yuenyan chao Hmong yudee mai thuk tharunkam. January 15.
- Thongchai Winichakul, 1994 — *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Vimon Kidchob, 2010 — “Hmong Repatriation: No Fear and Loathing”, *Bangkok Post*, January 14, 2010, p. 9.
- Wasana Nanuam, 2005a — “Army to Put Hmong in Camp”, *Bangkok Post*, 12 January, p. 4.
- Wasana Nanuam, 2005b — “Authorities Voice Concern over Hmong”, *Bangkok Post*, 14 June, p. 4.
- Wasana Nanuam, 2005c — “Hmong Cry Out for US Savior”, *Bangkok Post*, 19 June, pp. 1-2.
- Wasana Nanuam, 2005d — “Laos refuses to take back Hmong”, *Bangkok Post*, 9 July, p. 4.
- Wasana Nanuam, 2005f — “No Chance of US Home for Thousands of Evicted Refugees”, *Bangkok Post*. 7 July, p. 2.
- Wasana Nanuam and Bhanravee, 2005 — “Hmong ‘Will Be Forced Back’: Laos Taking Steps to Prevent Their Return”, *Bangkok Post*, 7 July, p. 4.
- Wasana Nanuam and IP, 2005 — “Hmong Vow to Kill Themselves,” *Bangkok Post*, 6 July, p. 2.

### **Interviewed with**

Long Yang (pseudo-name), a Lao Hmong immigrant, interviewed in 14 June 2006.

Tooj Xyooj (pseudo-name), a former Chao Fa Hmong leader, interviewed in 13 June 2006.

### **Websites**

<http://www.pr-inside.com/laos-extracts-forced-confessions-to-r1744211.htm> (accessed Feb 27, 2010).

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3ajTD\\_Daaw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3ajTD_Daaw) (accessed November 16, 2012).

# 11 *The Incomplete Sedentarization of Nomadic Populations: The Case of the Mlabri*



SAKKARIN NA NAN

## **Abstract**

This paper is based on a survey on the so-called “sedentarization” of the Mlabri in Thailand. It argues that this does not represent a “normal” transition from an hunter-gatherer to an agriculturalist society as would be assumed in an evolutionist perspective, for at least three reasons. First, this transition does not relate to a “natural” or inevitable pattern because it has been largely a State-led process initiated through development projects. Secondly, it does not have the same characteristics everywhere; it depends on social networks as well as on historical and geographical factors: the Mlabri sedentarization cannot be fully understood without paying attention to the relationships of the Mlabri with other ethnic groups, especially the Hmong. Finally, it is an open-ended process which has no obvious and predetermined end: as the Mlabri interact with their neighbours and the various development projects, they still move from one settlement to another one according to their own agenda.

## **Introduction**

The term, “Mlabri” consists of two words; Mla means “people” and Bri is “forest”. Early ethnographic works (eg. Bernatzik 1951, Young 1961) proposed the term ‘Yumbri’, which has also the same meaning. Thai and Lao people call them “Kha Tong Lueang” or “Phi

Tong Lueang” (“spirits of the yellow leaves”). The expression was coined to represent the nomadic lifestyle of the Mlabri: according to the Thai’s perspective, this nomadic group would move to another place whenever the banana leaves (*tong*) covering their shelters’ roof were becoming yellow (*lueang*), and it was said that they could move quickly as if they were spirits (*phi*). Most studies about the Mlabri prior the 1970s described them as a nomadic group living in the jungle having occasional contacts with outsiders for exchanging forest resources against tools and rice (see Bernatzik 1951; Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda and Hartland-Swan 1962; Seidenfaden 1919; Winit Wanadorn 1926). Studies about the Mlabri after 1970s started to mention a transition in the patterns of exchange: not only were goods bartered, but also labor was sold in exchange for goods, especially for food (see Trier 1992; Sakkarin Na Nan 2005 (ศักรินทร์ ณ น่าน 2548); Surin Pookajorn, *et al.* 1983(สุรินทร์ ภูัจจรและคณะ 2526)). Later on, while the Mlabri started to settle in permanent places and while the amplitude of their movements tended to decrease, they became even less understood by their neighbours and also by the scholars community.

This paper is mainly based on a survey I conducted in 2009-2010 in order to understand the state-led sedentarization process as a part of the socio-economic transition of the Mlabri in Thailand. I take as starting point the study of Ikeya and Nakai (2009) who proposed to consider the interactions between Mlabri and Hmong as an example of symbiotic relations (the so-called “coexistence model”, see Morrison and Junker, 2002: 131-166). Both ethnic groups, though having different patterns of mobility, had highly mobile ways of life and gradually adopted a permanent settlement in Thailand. Ikeya and Nakai (2009) proposed a model that divided the relationship between the Mlabri and Hmong into three stages. In the first stage (1919-1980), the Mlabri were forest hunters and gatherers while Hmong were highly mobile farmers (as well as occasional hunters and gatherers, but living in permanent villages). In the second stage (1980-1998), the Mlabri remained nomadic hunters while the Hmong settled in the areas where they have continued to live until the present. During the third stage (1998-2004) the Mlabri regrouped and started a sedentary lifestyle under the Thai government initiative, living in many different places near already settled Hmong communities. It seems to me that this



model is oversimplistic, mainly for two reasons. First, the so-called “sedentarization” of the Mlabri is not as complete as the Hmong’s and calls for further analysis. Second, Ikeya and Nakai do not pay attention to the role played by the Thai State in this process, thereby letting the reader believe that such process is a “natural” one while indeed the Mlabri have been under close and constant scrutiny by State-led development projects.

There are four main parts in this paper. The first one provides demographic data and background of five surveyed sites in Thailand. Another part periodizes the history of the state-led sedentarization and the efforts made by the different actors who make this statecraft possible. The third presents a tragic case of a Mlabri band and of their failed settlement in a village close to the border with Laos. The last part summarizes and discusses my findings.

### **Surveyed Sites and Demographic background**

Mlabri populations have been foraging for many years in the mountainous areas at the border of Thailand and Laos but they are now much more numerous on the Thai side, while there are reports that they are on the verge of extinction on the Laos side. In the past decades, eight main sites were identified by Thai officials, journalists and scholars who made several records of the number of Mlabri living in these areas (see Bernatzik 1951, Kraisi Nimmanahaeminda and Hartland-Swan 1962, Kraisi Nimmanahaeminda 1963, Surin Pookajorn et. al 1992 and Trier 1992). Currently, as shown by my 2009-10 survey, there are only five Mlabri sites for a total of 356 persons and all are located in Nan and Phrae provinces. Next to the map and the table below, the demographic data I collected from the identification of Thai officials, journalists and scholars show the dynamics of population in those 5 areas.

#### ***Huai Yuak village, Mae Kaning subdistrict, Wiangsa district, Nan province***

This village was initially a Hmong village which had moved in 1975 from Doi Phukeng village located on mount Phukeng close to the Huai Yuak valley. However, the Mlabri have been living and

moving in the forests around this area long before the Hmong community had settled there. In 1999 the government started the Mlabri development project and convinced them to settle together on a single location near the Hmong. Since that time, the population has gradually increased as shown in the table below, comparing the significant population numbers between 1995 (before the settlement project) and 1998-1999 (at the beginning of the state-led settlement project).

**Mlabri settlements in Nan province 2010**

3 sites	M	F	Total
Huay Yuak (HY)	72	100	172
Phu Fa Development Center (PF)	27	34	61
Don Prai Wan (DW)	3	2	5
		<b>Total</b>	<b>238</b>

**Mlabri settlements in Phrae province 2010**

2 sites	M	F	Total
Huay Hom* (2009)	- (90)	- (63)	82 (153)
Tha Wa**	19	17	36
		<b>Total</b>	<b>118</b>

**Grand Total 2010 356**

\*For Huai Hom the data are only available for the total population. Only in the year 2009 is there a mention that the total Mlabri population amounts to 153; 90 males and 63 females.

\*\*For Tawa village there are no data available on the population by age

***Don Priwan village, Pong sub district, Santisuk district, Nan province***

Don Priwan is a Hmong village, located on the eastern part of Nan province, close to the border between Thailand and Laos. The few Mlabri currently living here are part of a larger group who moved in alongside with Tin people (also known as Lua or Hmal, or Pray in Laos) to Pua district around 1967, in order to escape the war (see Trier 2008). The initial Mlabri population was 15 but there are currently only five survivors at the present: two Mlabri

men live in in the village; two Mlabri women married and moved to other villages, and one man left the village and sells his labor in neighbouring settlements.

***Phu Fah development centre, Phasuk village,  
Phu Fah sub district, Bo Kluea district, Nan province***

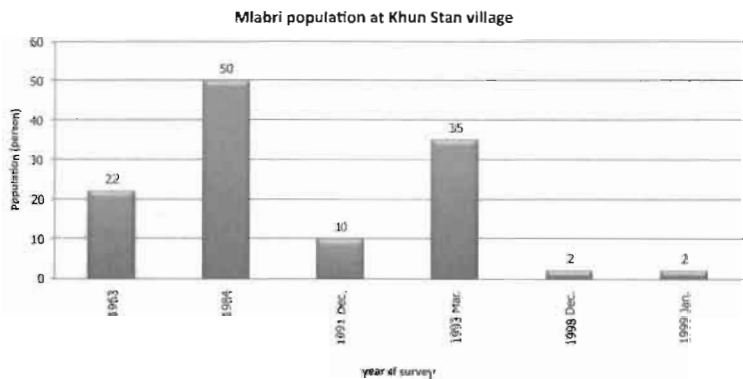
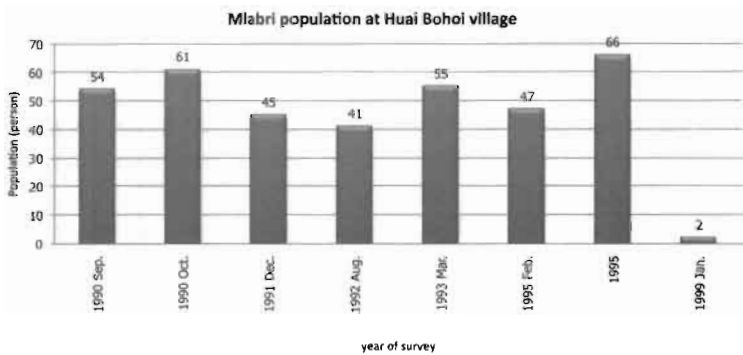
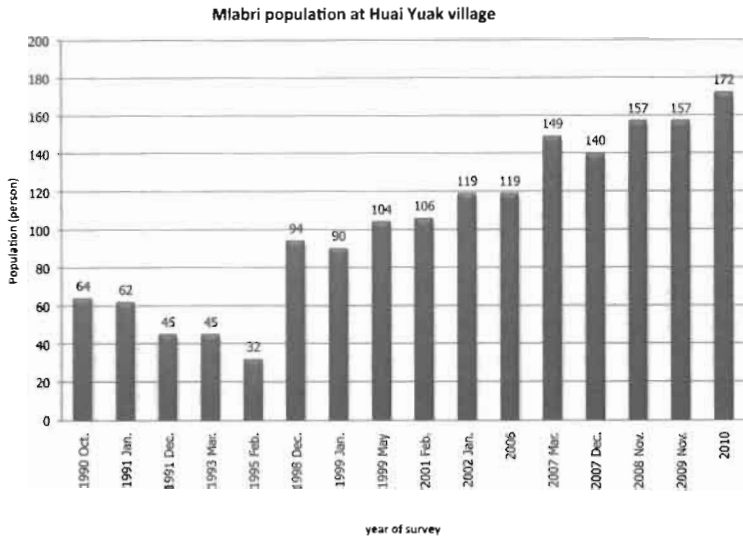
This area was previously inhabited by Tin people. The Phu Fah development center was founded in 1999. The center is used as an office for HRH Princess Sirindhorn in order to demonstrate the eco-friendly agricultural practices and sustainable development designed to improve the livelihood of the highland population. The Mlabri people who started to settle here in 2008 were originally living in Huai Hom.

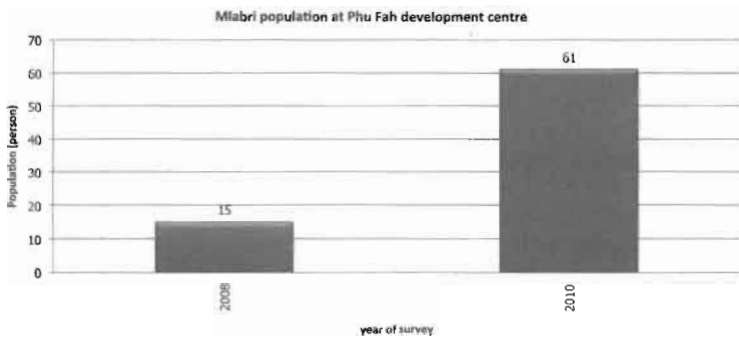
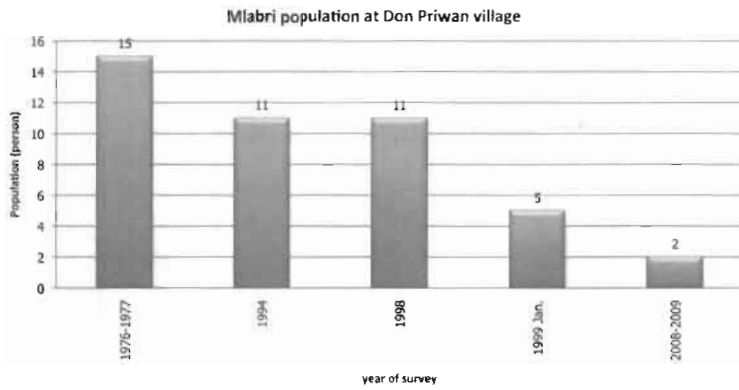
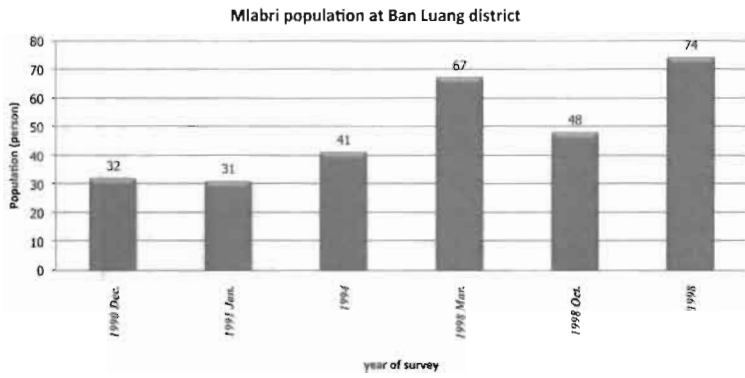
***Huai Hom village, Ban Wiang sub district,  
Rongkwang district, Phrae province***

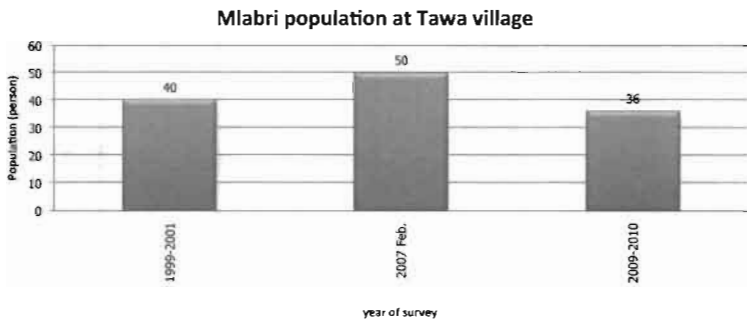
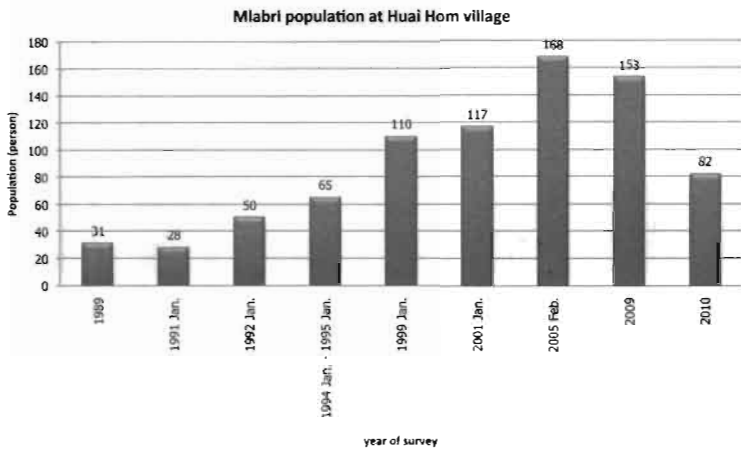
Huai Hom is one of the Hmong villages located in the area of a development project led by a group of missionaries, called the New Tribes Mission. The settlement of the Mlabri community is called "Ban Boonyuen" after the American missionary Mr. Boonyuen Suksanae (บุญยืน สุขเสนห์) or Eugene Robert Long. The development project has operated since 1981 and still exists today. During the period between 2008 - 2009, a large part of the Mlabri population moved to Phu Fah development centre in Bo Kluea district, Nan province.

***Tawa village, Sa Ieab sub district,  
Song district, Phrae province***

Tawa is a Tai Yuan village located on the northern part of Phrae province, near Nan on the side of Ban Luang district. The topography of this area is mountainous and it has only 20% of flat land surface. Led under the initiative of HRH Princess Sirindhorn, the Mlabri development project aimed at settling the community down in one place, an started operating in 2007.







## Periodizing the State-led sedentarization of the Mlabri in Thailand

### *The Other of the Others within (Before 1970s)*

Before the Thai state decided to sedentarize them, the Mlabri had long been seen as the most ‘primitive’ of all ethnic groups in the North of the kingdom according to the essay titled *‘Waduai prophet khon pa ru kha fai nua’* written by Khun Pracha Kadikit in 1886 (quoted in Thongchai Winichakul 2000). This essay reflected the

attitudes of the Siam elites in Bangkok toward those that they called “*khon pa*” and whom they considered completely different from Thai people (*khon thai*). The “*khon pa*” are defined as early men or old humankind “*khon dem*” who are still living in the jungle. Other ethnic groups such as the Lawa, the Yang (Karen), the Khmu, but also the Hmong or the Lahu are also sometimes included in this classification. In the case of the Mlabri, the term *phi pa* (forest spirits) was sometimes used and referred to the lack of permanent settlement. All these people, especially the nomadic Mlabri, were of little interest to the kingdom until the 1970s, in contrast with other lowland subjects who were recruited into the ‘civilization’ for their labor force and to increase tax incomes.

During the Cold War, however, the attitude of the State changed because there was a need to monitor, control and resettle many upland ethnic groups, which were then being classified as ‘Chao Kao’ or hilltribes. The official arguments varied according to the areas concerned and the historical periods (opium eradication, forest protections, and anti-communist fighting) but the important point is that official concerns about highlanders’ “development” did not include the Mlabri, as shown in a short paragraph of a report from the Department of Social Development and Welfare (1966:10) (กรมประชาสงเคราะห์ 2509:10):

*“Finally, we would like to mention about a small hilltribe which makes their living from hunting and collecting food from one place to another. This tribe is Phi Thongluang’ or ‘Yumbri’. There are some reports mentioning that this group was occasionally found in the deep forests where access is difficult. However, following the objective of this report this ethnic group has no significant importance and is not worth to be mentioned.”*

From this government point of view, the Mlabri did not need to be closely watched, controlled and even settled down permanently at that time. However, this did not mean that the Mlabri could move freely in the forest. Warfare and bombings caused death and injuries in many places in the upland areas. Meanwhile, many different groups competed to search quiet areas in the forest (Surin Pookajorn 1992, Trier 2008).

### ***The Beginning of the State-led Sedentarization Project (since 1970s)***

In the earlier period, the government was not interested in converting the Mlabri to a form of settlement and allowed them to continue their nomadic way of life. The change in the government's attitude was partly due to a better understanding of the Mlabri, provided through intensive surveys often carried out in collaboration with academic scholars; such as the survey conducted by the Thai archeologist Surin Pookajorn with the western anthropologist Jesper Trier (see Surin Pookajorn *et al*, 1983: Introduction (สุรินทร์ ภูัจจรและคณะ 2526: คำนำ)). Such academics played a key role in the birth of a development policy toward the Mlabri. Surin Pookajorn, for instance, indicated that “the findings from the study of the minority “Phi Tong Luang” will be used for developing a settlement project for the welfare of “Phi Tong Luang” which will be implemented by the Department of Social Development and Welfare, Ministry of Interior in the near future” (See Surin Pookajorn et al. 1983: 12 (สุรินทร์ ภูัจจรและคณะ 2526:12))

In 1984, not surprisingly, the Nan province Governor released an official announcement, endorsed on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984, titled ‘Defining a protected area for conservation purpose of forest and the minority Phi Tong Luang in an area of Nan province’. According to this announcement, three areas of evergreen forest, 21,563 rai (3,450.08 hectare) in total, would be used for the conservation of forest, Mlabri archeology and culture (see Jarin Naksiri and Direk Yusabai 1984 (จรินทร์ นาคศิริและดิเรก อยู่สบาย 2527)). However, the project was not successful, neither for the conservation of the forest nor for that of the Mlabri culture, as logging concession in the area continued.

Although the establishment of the conservation area was not successful, the cooperation between academic scholars and government officials continued in the effort to shift the Mlabri way of life to a sedentary one. Such cooperation appears in a large research and development project named ‘A development project for the pre-agricultural society of the Mlabri minority’. This project



was scheduled for eight years, from August 1985 to September 1992, after its endorsement by the Nan Hilltribe committee on 4 June 1985. Following the project in Nan province, it was expected to impact 150 Mlabri who were living in the area of Khunstan village, Huai Bohoi village, and Phu Keng village. The final aim was to build self-development capacities according to the model of social evolutionism and its idea of a linear progress from nomadic hunter-gathers to sedentarized farmers (see Suchart Buranamitara 2003; สุชาติ บุรมิตร 2546).

A justification for this eight years project is provided in a document obtained from the Hill Tribe Development Center in Nan province at the time I conducted my survey in 2003. The document highlighted the need to “change” the Mlabri society due to the development of “slave” relationships in which neighbouring ethnic groups or outside entrepreneurs took advantage of them. For the project designers, “the social evolution had gone off course” and they had to correct it. Underlying this statement was the belief that a hunting-gathering society will evolve into an agricultural society and then later on into an urban society. In other words, this project viewed the transition of the Mlabri society as an example of linear evolution. This development project however did not succeed in changing radically the Mlabri way of life and in the following decades, new initiatives were taken both by the State and the private sector. This failure shows the inaccuracy of the conceptual framework which sustained the first State interventions on Mlabri livelihood.

***Sedentarization since the 1980S:  
Missionaries, State officials and Tourism Agencies***

In the 1980s, two movies contributed, among other factors, to shift the image of the Mlabri from a ‘mysterious’ hunter-gather group to an ‘innocent’ population appealing to the tourists (Sakarin Na Nan 2009). One, ‘the God Must Be Crazy’, is about the Kalahari Bushmen, and another is the Thai film about the Mlabri in Nan province, ‘Tha Wan Yim Chaeng (the Smiling Sun)’. In the years following this last movie, a group of local people from Ban Luang

district in the West of Nan province, together with a group of tourism entrepreneurs included a visit to the Mlabri in their guided tours for foreign tourists. Similar initiatives were taken in Phrae and both provinces competed with each other to become a tourist place for the Mlabri tourism (Sakarin Na Nan 2005 (ศักรินทร์ ณ น่าน 2548)).

In Nan province, both public and private actors launched their own projects to involve the Mlabri, especially in 1994 in Ban Luang district. The government started a project aimed at the establishment of a 'Yellow Leaves Development and Preservation Center'. The project occupied an area of degraded forest covering about 50 rai (8 ha). The family of the American missionary, Boonyuen (see below), joined the project with the approval of the Nan governor. Concretely, the project developed temporary shelters for 13 Mlabri families. The total Mlabri population at that time amounted to 67 people, 33 men and 34 women. Land was allocated to each Mlabri family "in order to keep them busy" as was said in the project report. Examples of activities included weeding, vegetable gardening and tree planting. The Mlabri children had to attend Thai language classes (see Sakkarin Na Nan 2005(ศักรินทร์ ณ น่าน 2548)). However, three years after the start of the project, in 1997, a conflict emerged between the government and the neighboring lowland farmers. Several hundred farmers from many villages protested that the Mlabri were responsible for causing environmental degradation by forest clearance, hunting and gathering. Consequently, the project was put to an end in 1999, and the Mlabri of Ban Luang district had to move to live in other places. Some went with the Boonyuen family back to Phrae province; some chose to leave the group and to sell their labor in neighbouring Hmong villages such as Ban Huai Yuak, or in Tai Yuan villages such as Ban Tawa.

In Phrae province, rather than the direct state initiative for a Mlabri settlement, the project was initially developed by an American missionary group and later on, also by the government sector who tried to gather the Mlabri in a single settlement. It was in 1993 that Phrae province tried to provide a dwelling area for the Mlabri, following the provincial surveys that indicated the area where the Mlabri had been living for a long time. These areas included Huai Hom village at Ban Wiang sub-district, Rongkwang district,

and Krok Nanhtha village in Huairong sub-district, Rongkwang district. Based on this information, Phrae province allocated the area of Krok Nanhtha village to the Mlabri and later planned to develop this location as a tourist attraction in the future. The Phrae hilltribe development and welfare centre therefore applied for a budget from the National Security Council and used this funding for the conservation of the “Phi Thong Luang”. To achieve its objective, the project planned to recruit the Mlabri in the hill tribe development and welfare centre (see Bangkok business News 1993 (กรุงเทพฯธุรกิจ 2536)) but the project was not successful and the government decided to rely instead on the help of the missionary group.

This missionary group is called the ‘New Tribes Mission’ and is led by an American named Eugene Robert Long, or Mr. Boonyuen Suksanae (บุญยืน สุขแสนห์). He moved with his family to Thailand at the end of 1978 with the intention of organising a Christian mission for the Mlabri. At that time, the province of Nan still had many problems related to the warfare between the Thai army and Thailand’s communist party, and the family was therefore not allowed to enter the zone. Later, the family heard about the Mlabri in Pak Huai Oy village, Phrae province, and moved to live in the forest with them. The missionary development project for the Mlabri in Phrae started then, in 1981. It continued until 1987, although the mission faced many difficulties because the Mlabri had been moving around continuously and some went out as wage labor in other Hmong villages. It is only after 1988 that the Mlabri seemed to have developed trust in the missionary development project. Yet, they kept their habit to move into the forest frequently for some time before gathering back at the project’s site (see Visut Sriwisan 1995, วิสุทธิ์ ศรีวิศาล 2538).

In the beginning, the missionary family bought an area of about 500 rai from the Hmong village Huai Hom, to install the religious mission and bring development to the Mlabri. Later, this area attracted more Mlabri. A list of highland communities in 1995 reported the existence of a village *Moo 5, Ban Phamung also known as Ban Boonyuen*, though the official name of the village was indeed *Ban Pakbuai*. This Mlabri settlement was located close to Huai Hom

village and the name of *Ban Boonyuen* has been used until today to refer to it, becoming gradually the “official” name of both the settlement and the missionary development project.

Although there are still today some highly mobile Mlabri households at Huai Hom village, their moves have become much more limited than in the past. It is often linked to a family visit or to a period of wage labor in Huai Yuak or Tawa villages. Relocation of houses is uncommon because they are most of the time made out of brick.

### ***The Latest Move of the Mlabri? The royal family and the hunter-gatherers (since 2000s)***

After the end of the Ban Lang District project in 1999, the only development initiative targeting the Mlabri was in the hands of the missionary family in Phrae province. Then, the government had another try at a development project for the Mlabri. Several areas were listed as potential sites, and Huai Yuak village was finally selected. The area was chosen following a survey that reported about many Mlabri families who had moved in it and did wage labor for the Hmong. The government tried to gather them in a small location close to the Hmong settlement; this project is still active today (See Sakarin Na Nan 2005: ศักรินทร์ ณ นาน 2548; Suchart Buramitara 2003: สุชาติ บูรมิตร 2546).

Historically, the Hmong living in Huai Yuak came from Laos and settled down in Doi Phu Kheng in 1957, before moving downhill to Huai Yuak in 1975. The Huai Yuak village was then officially recognized by the Thai state in 1991. When Nan province decided to set up a Mlabri settlement there, some staff were asked to prepare huts for them at about 800 meters from the Hmong village. The 15 rai (2.4 hectare) allocated to the Mlabri were fallow land donated by the Hmong of Huai Yuak. Other adjacent areas of about 150 rai (24 hectare) on the hills were used as forest for the newcomers. Houses were made of bamboo, one-storey with thatched roof and no window. A water system was developed from a small stream nearby; water storage tanks and toilets were built separately in many spots.

Although the number of Mlabri gradually increased over the years, they remained highly mobile. First, as wage laborers for the Hmong, they used to work in fields sometimes located far from the village and therefore did not return every day to their houses. Second, many spent long periods of time either in the forest, while their family stayed in other settlements such as Huai Hom and Tawa or even were employed as wage laborers in these areas. Finally, there were also movement within the settlement, some families breaking down their houses before rebuilding them nearby, as a continuation of their traditional funeral practices.

In 2006, the Nan governor decided to intensify the Mlabri development project and increased the settlement area in order to support the development of basic infrastructure, the extension of crop cultivation, livestock keeping, and other supplementary occupations and to create working space for government officials. In 2007, HRH Princess Sirindhorn made an official visit to Huai Yuak and set up guidelines for the development of the Mlabri community. Many agencies came in and organized major improvements. This was considered as a benchmark in the history of the development of Huai Yuak where the total number of inhabitants kept growing over the years : from 26 households in 2003 it went up to 30 in 2010.

Moreover, two new initiatives took place after the official visits of HRH Princess Sirindhorn in 2007: the implementation of a project at Tawa village in Phrae province and the construction of the Phu Fah development centre in the northern borderland between Nan province and Lao PDR.

At Tawa village in Phrae province, the Mlabri were hunting and gathering in a forest which belonged to a Tai Yuan community, and exchanged with them forest products for household goods. They also progressively engaged in wage labor. Ban Tawa was officially recognized as a Mlabri village by the Thai authorities in 1979 but its inhabitants were not really settled there at that time. Prior to the visit of HRH Princess Sirindhorn to Tawa village, the government officials wanted to stop the constant move of the Mlabri and tried to gather them in a hilly spot behind the school. However,

this project failed because of a diarrhea epidemic that Tai Yuan villagers attributed to the Mlabri, criticizing the officials for letting them live too close. Prior to the beginning of the development project, each Mlabri family in this area was living in the fields of their employers, quite far from the village. After that, the houses behind the school were rebuilt 2 km away in a tamarind orchard belonging to the village's headman. The sub-district administration office also erected a concrete house there. Currently, two Mlabri families live in it while seven other families are living in a one storey wooden house.

The Phu Fa development centre was founded in 1999 in a zone under close surveillance of the army because of its strategic location at the border of Laos. Later, under the initiative of HRH Princess Sirindhorn, it became a sort of "living museum", or "cultural heritage center", and households from various ethnic groups were invited to settle there. The Mlabri population started to come in 2008-2009. Prior to this arrival, a group of about ten Mlabri teenagers participated in a vocational training at the office of skill development in Nan province. They were initially under the care of a German missionary family, Mr. Kham Namprasert (คำ นาม ประเสริฐ, German name: Mr. Friedhard Lipsius) who had started his work for the Mlabri with the American missionary, Booyuen, in Huai Hom. After these teenagers joined the Phu Fah development centre, they were joined by a larger group, mainly their parents and relatives, who came from Huai Hom after the visit of HRH Princess Sirindhorn in that village. The forest officials were able to accommodate the new Mlabri in the centre but after a while, they had to limit the immigration from Huai Hom to the relatives of the first ten teenagers only. The other families from Huai Hom went to live in Huai Yuak village instead.

During the first year, the Mlabri who settled at the Phu Fah development centre lived in bamboo shelters on the hill slope behind the project office. From 2009 onwards, they were relocated to an area in the forest which they still occupy now. The houses are made of bamboo and the roof is covered with imperata grass. Opposite to the settlement, there is a nursery. The settlement is separated from the cultural center by the river Mang; this way,

according to the officials, the Malbri are prevented from visits by tourists. Instead, a building of the cultural center is currently under construction to exhibit Mlabri history and culture.

Though living in a quite remote area, the Mlabri of Phu Fa development centre keep a strong connection with other Mlabri settlements. They contact their relatives by cell phones, travel on their own motorbike and meet the German missionary who is renting three houses in Pang Ka village in Nan province.

All the cases mentioned above concern areas where the Mlabri settlements and development projects were initiated by government agencies or missionaries. The case of the Mlabri of Don Priwan however provide an example of a different and more tragic, context for sedentarization.

### **The Mlabri at Don Priwan Village: extinction and assimilation**

The history of the Mlabri in this village is difficult to assess precisely<sup>1</sup>. It seems that in 1976, 15 Mlabri escaped the war in Laos and stayed in a refugee center in Pua District, Nan province. Later on, they moved out of the center, built shelters in the forest and started to make a living from hunting and wage labor in nearby Hmong villages. It is said that they stayed close to these villages because they became addicted to the opium that the Hmong gave them when they were coming to beg for food. The Mlabri ended up living permanently in the Hmong settlement. However, out of the 15 people recorded in 1975, only five remained alive in 2010. These survivors are relatives from the same group (see Trier, 2008). The survey I conducted in May 2010 and 2011 revealed that only two men were still living at Don Priwan, as wage laborers for the Hmong. Another man had moved out to work in other villages. The two remaining women had married and moved out to live with their husband in a village close to Santisuk district. At present, they have

---

<sup>1</sup>The author did not find the Mlabri during the three field surveys at Don Priwan, and therefore lacks historical information from the Mlabri themselves. The data presented here rely on interviews with the Hmong villagers.

children with their husbands. The chance of the two remaining men of Don Priwan to get married is very small since the other Mlabri of Thailand do not want to have any relation with them<sup>2</sup> (on the origin of the conflictual relations between some Mlabri groups, see Trier, 2008). They also have little chance to marry with women from other ethnic groups like the Hmong of Don Priwan because the Mlabri are disdained, being poor and landless<sup>3</sup>.

The case of Don Priwan illustrate the extinction in one generation of an extended family of Mlabri war refugees from Laos where there are on the verge of a complete extinction<sup>4</sup> and about whom nearly nothing is known yet. This case illustrates also the violent patterns which forced Mlabri populations toward a village life and, simultaneously, the vacuity of any idea of “natural evolution” from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle.

### **Conclusion and Discussion: the incomplete sedentarization and the on-going nomadic image**

If we are now again considering the work of Ikeya and Nakai (2009) to reflect on the five cases presented here, we cannot consider only the symbiotic relationships between hunters-gatherers and farmers to understand the sedentarization process of the former. We also have to acknowledge the role of the State-sponsored development projects as well as, in some cases, of private projects. More importantly, we see that the transition to a sedentary way of life is an unfinished story, or an open-ended process: some projects stopped or failed before the Mlabri were sedentarized; other just started recently, involving new moves from already incompletely settled Mlabri who were taught how to cultivate crops and to keep livestock. In all these projects, the Mlabri still keep some mobility

---

<sup>2</sup> This was because they understood that the Mlabri at Don Priwan belonged to the Mlabri group which is called “*Tha lae*” – the bad and fierce Mlabri (see Trier, 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Information from the village headman of Don Priwan about the possibility of a Mlabri man finding a Hmong marriage partner in the village.

<sup>4</sup> Richel (1995) called this group of Mlabri ‘Minor Mlabri’. He considers that the language and culture of this group will be extinct by the end of the next decade. This situation is also expected with the Mlabri who live currently in Xayaburi province in Laos. As Herda (2007) revealed in 2003, this group had a very small population of just 19 people.



to go in the forest or to work in neighboring Tai or Hmong villages, as they used to do before.

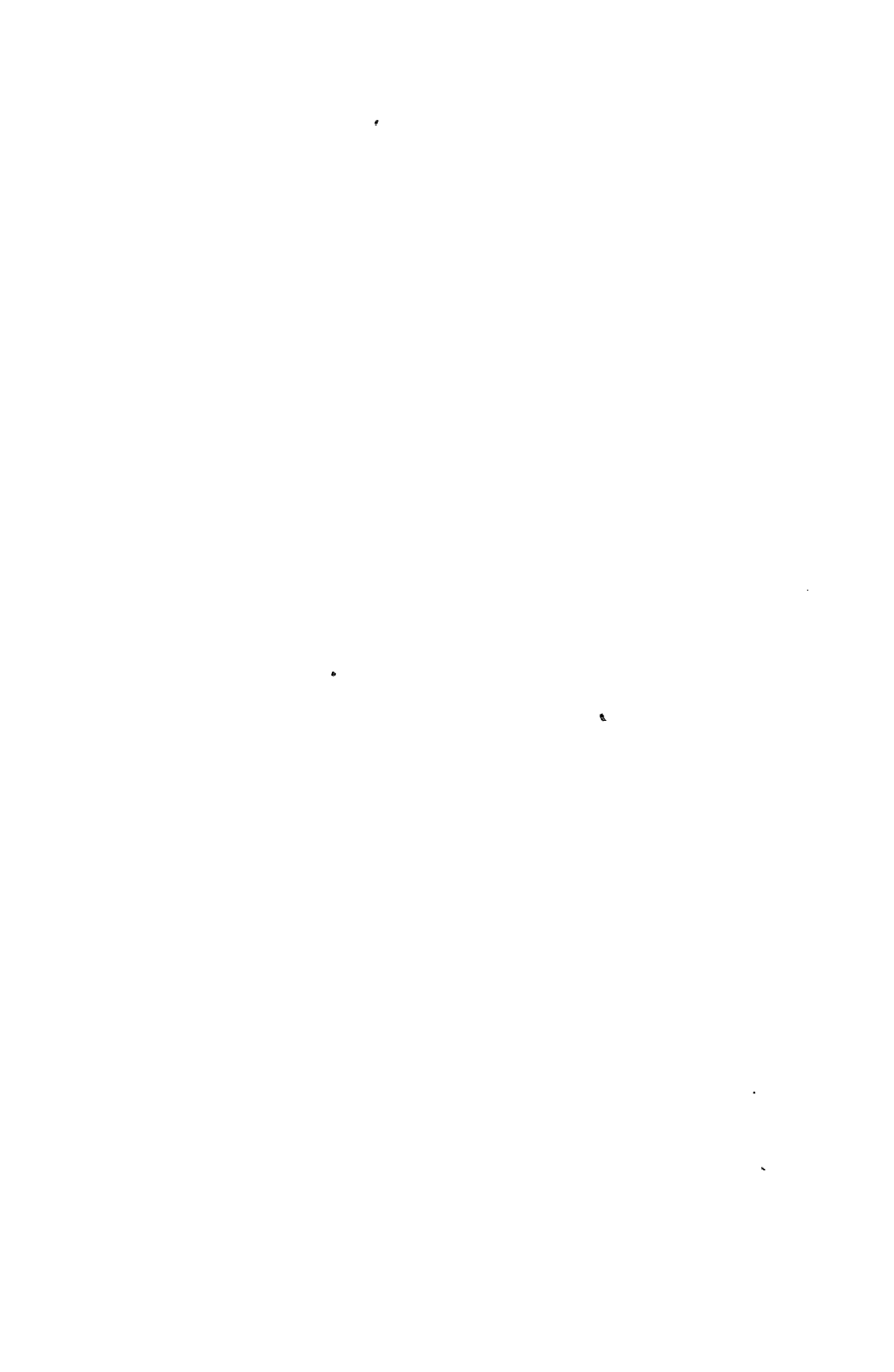
It is true that the sedentarization of the Mlabri became more effective in the 1990s, when the government established long-term development projects, compared to the 1980s when authors such as Surin Pookajornor Jesper Trier were still observing frequent movements between village-like settlements and forest camps. Currently, the Mlabri tend to spend longer periods in village-like settlements and to reduce their nomadic life in the forest, which nonetheless keeps a special importance for them as they can revert to it quite quickly in case of problems. They also keep a margin of autonomy, such as in 2007, when some of them, after moving to the Phu Fa development project, decided to move again and join other Mlabri in Ban Huai Yuak. Besides, there is also an intra-settlement mobility, at household or individual level, which is inaccurately documented but which tends to increase, even if the possible places of destination become fewer.

## References

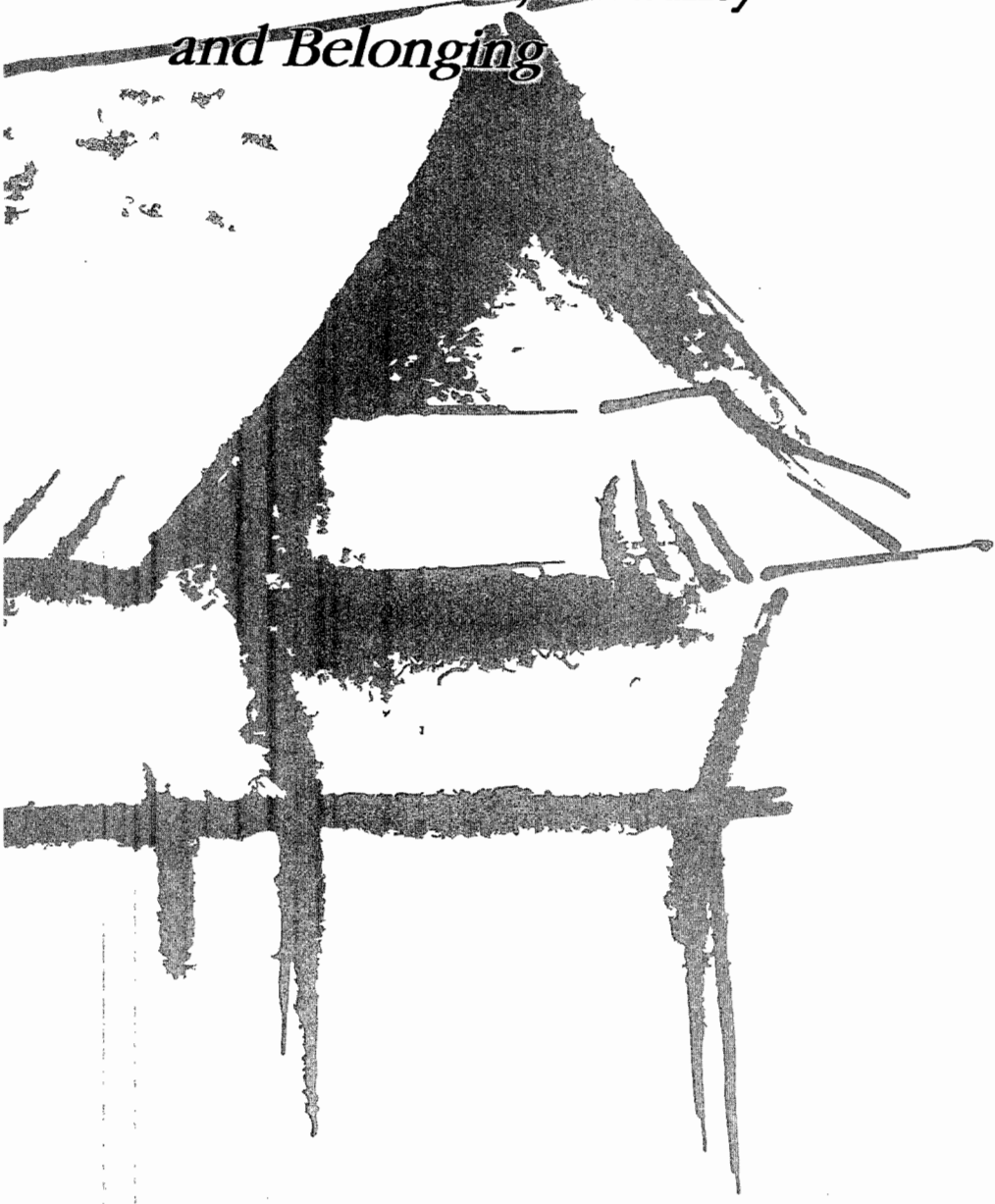
- Bernatzik Hugo Adolf, 1951 — *The Spirits of the Yellow Leaves*. E.W. Dickes, transl. London: Robert Hale Ltd.
- Herda Ellen A., 2002 — Power and Place: A Hermeneutic Orientation in Development and Education Among the Mlabri of Northeast Thailand. *High Plains Applied Anthropology* 22(1):101-109.
- Herda Ellen., 2007 — Mlabri Nation Vanishing: Horizons of Social Imagery in Development. *Language and Nationhood: Discourses Across Cultures and Disciplines*. SoLLs. *Intec.07 International Conference, Malaysia, 2007*, pp. 102-114. *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*.
- Ikeya Kazunobu, Shisuke Nakai, 2009 — Historical and Contemporary Relations between Mlabri and Hmong in the Northern Thailand. In *Senri Ethnological Studies (73) Interactions between Hunter-Gatherers and Farmers: from Prehistory to Present*. K. Ikeya, H. Ogawa, and P. Mitchell, eds. Pp. 247-261. Osaka, Japan: National Museum of Ethnology.
- Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda, 1963 — The Mlabri Language. *the Journal of the Siam Society* 51(2):179-184.

- Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda, Julian Hartland-Swan, 1962 — The Expedition to the “Khon Pa” (or Phi Thong Luang?). *the Journal of the Siam Society* 50(2):165-186.
- Morrison Kathleen D., Junker Laura L., 2002 — *Forager-Traders in South and Southeast Asia, Long Term Histories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 288 p.
- Richel JØrgen, 1995 — *Minor Mlabri: A Hunter-Gatherer Language of Northern Indochina*. University of Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press.
- Sakkarin Na Nan, 2009 — Resource Contestation between Hunter-Gatherer and Farmer Societies: Revisiting the Mlabri and the Hmong Communities in Northern Thailand. *In Interactions between Hunter-Gatherers and Farmers: from Prehistory to Present* K. Ikeya, H. Ogawa, and P. Mitchell, eds. Pp. 229-2446. Osaka, Japan: National Museum of Ethnology.
- Seidenfaden Erick, 1919 — Further Note about Chaubun. *The Journal of the Siam Society* Vol. XIII(3):p. 47-53.
- Surin Pookajorn, 1992 — Introduction. In *The Phi Tong Lueng (Mlabri): A Hunter – Gatherer Group in Thailand*. S. Pookajorn, ed. Pp. 1-28. Faculty of Archaeology, Silapakorn University, Thailand: Odeon Store.
- The Lahu National Development Organization (LNDO). 2005 — No Place left for the Spirit of the Yellow Leaves: intensive logging leaves few options for the Mlabri people. *Undercurrents* 1(1):16-18.
- Thongchai Winichakul, 2000 — The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910. In *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*. A. Turton, ed. Pp. 38 - 62. UK: Curzon.
- Trier Jesper, 1992 — The Mlabri People of Northern Thailand: Social Organization and The supernatural Beliefs. In *The Highland Heritage: Collected Essays on Upland North Thailand*. A.R. Walker, ed. Pp. 225 - 263. Singapore: Double-Six Press (Pte) Ltd.
- Trier Jesper, 2008 — *Invoking the Spirits: Fieldwork on the material and spiritual life of the hunter-gatherers Mlabri in Northern Thailand*. Denmark: Jutland Archaeological Society.
- Winit Wanadorn Pra, 1926 — Some Information Concerning the ‘Phi Tawng Luang’ obtained from a Few Residents of a Village in Nam Wa District, East of Nan. *Journal of the Siam Society* 20(2):171-174.
- Wurm S.-A., Shiro Hattori, 1981 — *Language Atlas of the Pacific Area*. Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities.
- Young Gordon, 1961 — The Yumbri or Phi Tong Luang (Kha Tong Luang, Khon Pa). In *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand (A Socio-Ethnological Report)*. Pp. 87-91. Bangkok: Thai-American Audiovisual Service.

- กรมประชาสงเคราะห์. 2509. รายงานการสำรวจทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคมของชาวเขาในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย. กรุงเทพฯ: กรมประชาสงเคราะห์ กระทรวงมหาดไทย.
- จรินทร์ นาคศิริ, และ ดิเรก อยู่สบาย. 2527. "ผีตองเหลือง ชนกลุ่มน้อยในจังหวัดน่าน". ใน กรมป่าไม้ครบรอบ ๘๘ ปี ๑๘ กันยายน ๒๕๒๗. กรุงเทพฯ: กรมป่าไม้.
- วิสุทธ์ ศรีวิศาล. 2538. ระบบเศรษฐกิจและการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางวัฒนธรรมของชนเผ่าผีตองเหลืองในสังคมไทย วิทยานิพนธ์ศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิตสังคมวิทยาและมานุษยวิทยา, จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย.
- ศักดิ์รินทร์ ณ น่าน. 2548. มลารับรู้กับการช่งชิงทรัพยากรในบริบทของการพัฒนาโดยรัฐ วิทยานิพนธ์ สาขาวิชาการจัดการมนุษย์กับสิ่งแวดล้อม, วิทยานิพนธ์ศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาการจัดการมนุษย์กับสิ่งแวดล้อม, มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่.
- สุชาติ ปุริมิตร. 2546. การตั้งถิ่นฐาน "คนตองเหลือง" (Mlabri) ศึกษาเฉพาะกรณี บ้านห้วยหยวก หมู่ 6 ตำบลแม่ชะนิง ตำบลแม่ชะนิง อำเภอเวียงสา จังหวัดน่าน, ภาคนิพนธ์ สาขาพัฒนาสังคม มหาวิทยาลัยนเรศวร วิทยาเขตสารสนเทศพะเยา.
- สุรินทร์ ภูขจรและคณะ. 2526. รายงานเบื้องต้น กลุ่มสังคมล่าสัตว์: ชนกลุ่มน้อยเผ่า "ผีตองเหลือง" ในประเทศไทย. กรุงเทพฯ: คณะโบราณคดี มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร.
- สุรินทร์ ภูขจรและคณะ. 2531. ผลการวิเคราะห์กลุ่มสังคมล่าสัตว์: ชนกลุ่มน้อยเผ่า "ผีตองเหลือง" ในประเทศไทย. กรุงเทพฯ: กองพิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติ.



*IV - Health, Mobility  
and Belonging*





# 12 *Access to health care among highlanders and ethnic minority migrants in Thailand*<sup>1</sup>



PETER KUNSTADTER

Co-authors:

RASAMEE THAWSIRICHUCHAI (PHPT)

WIRACHON YANGYERNKUN (PHPT)

LAHKELA CHA'TAW (PHPT)

AMPHA KADNOK (PHPT)

SANUPONG CHAILERT (PHPT)

SUCHADA AYUMAN (PHPT)

SUVIMON A'PA (CHIANG DAO HOSPITAL)

PRANEE KLONKACHONKIRI (VILLAGE HEALTH VOLUNTEER)

## **Introduction**

Over 3 million international migrants and more than 2 million members of highland minority groups now constitute as much as 8% of the population living in Thailand. Demographic trends, including relatively high birth rates of migrants and minorities, the very low birth rate of the ethnic Thai majority plus labor shortages, and current and probable future relaxations of regulations concerning labor migration imply that the proportion of migrants and minorities in Thailand will increase in the foreseeable future. It is generally believed that the health status of minorities and migrants is worse than that of the general population because of disparities in determinants of health in their countries of origin and within Thailand, including constraints to access to health services.

---

<sup>1</sup>Research support for this study was received from The Thailand – United States Education Foundation (Fulbright), Oxfam (UK), and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Opinions expressed are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the sponsors of the research.

This paper describes *partial* results<sup>2</sup> of the Access to Care (ATC) research project of the Program for HIV Prevention and Treatment (PHPT). This study, conducted among highlanders, members of ethnic minority and ethnic majority populations in Chiang Dao District, Chiang Mai Province, northwestern Thailand, on or near the border with Burma (Myanmar) allows us to quantify some of the *community level differences* in population characteristics and use of health services between communities of the ethnic majority vs. communities of minorities and migrants.

We collected data in the ATC project from December 2010 through November 2011 in 5 predominantly Lahu communities, 6 parts (pok) of one large predominantly Chinese community, and 2 predominantly Northern Thai communities. We used community censuses to identify for interview women and their current husband or partner. Trained interviewers conducted interviews in the preferred languages of respondents, following informed consent procedures approved by the Faculty of Associated Medical Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

## Hypotheses

The major hypothesis underlying this research is that access to effective care is associated with social, cultural, demographic, economic, geographic and historical factors which in turn are related to ethnicity, and, in the context of Northern Thailand, to the implications for citizenship status of international migrants. Citizenship status, indicated by government issued ID cards in turn determines eligibility for access to the Thai Government's "universal coverage" health insurance.

---

<sup>2</sup> This chapter includes only data entered into computer and available for analysis as of 25 November 2011, plus some hand tabulations. It lacks data from some Lahu, predominantly Chinese, and Northern Thai, and from surveyed Hmong communities. More complete data and tabulations are included in Kunstadter, Peter. 2013. Ethnicity, socioeconomic characteristics and knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about HIV among Yunnanese Chinese, Hmong, Lahu and Northern Thai in a north-western Thailand border district, *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care*, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2013.814807. Published online: 09 Aug 2013. To cite this article: *Culture, Health & Sexuality* (2013): To link to this article: [http:// dx.doi.org /10.1080/13691058.2013.814807](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2013.814807)



Specifically, we hypothesize that:

1. Ethnic minorities and recent international immigrants have less effective access to health care than do members of the predominant ethnic Thai population;
2. There are important differences in effective access to care between ethnic groups;
3. Specific socio-economic-cultural-geographic characteristics of individuals and their communities are important influences on access to care.
4. There are important differences in characteristics and use of health services between Thai citizens and migrants of the same minority ethnic group who live in the same community.

By “effective access” we mean not just existence of services, insurance or eligibility for services, but actual use of services.

### **Historical Background: Distribution of Non-Government and Government Health Services in the Lowlands and for Minorities and Migrants**

Modern medical institutions in Thailand began almost simultaneously in urban centers in the late 1800s sponsored by King Chulalongkorn, with the founding of Siriraj Hospital in 1888<sup>3</sup>, and by Western missionaries (e.g., McCormick Hospital, founded in the 1880s and funded by the McCormick family owners of the *Chicago Tribune*). This led to the development of Government- and missionary-sponsored medical education (started at Siriraj in 1890, Chulalongkorn School of nursing, 1914, and the McCormick School of Nursing in 1923) and the spread of Government public health and health services. Public health services began with immunizations against epidemics (e.g., smallpox) and malaria control and spread to rural and eventually to highland areas. Modern “scientific” medical training and hospitals were established first in Bangkok at Siriraj Hospital, reorganized as Mahidol University in 1943, augmented by Chulalongkorn University’s Faculty of Medicine in 1946, Chiang Mai University Faculty of Medicine in 1959, and later in other

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.si.mahidol.ac.th/eng/siriraj/Hstory2.asp> ;  
<http://english.redcross.or.th/content/page/42>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Payap\\_University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Payap_University).

provinces (Khon Kaen, Songkla ...). Government hospitals and health centers were built first in urban centers in provinces, and then built and expanded in rural districts. Government doctors and nurses were assigned to rural areas to repay their debts to the government for their education.

Traditional treatment by herbalists, spirit doctors etc., was supplemented eventually with patent medicines purchased in market, treatment at government and private clinics. Modern treatment was provided in lowland hospitals and clinics specifically designed for minorities and migrants largely by foreign missionaries until the expansion of government health services in the 1970s and 1980s. Modern services were provided for highland minority communities by government-trained minority group paraprofessionals (*wechakorn*) who were recruited from, and living in the highlands. The program started in Mae Chaem District, Chiang Mai Province beginning in the mid 1970s<sup>4</sup>. Access to health services, especially curative services was greatly increased by rural road network, beginning in early 1970s and continuing to present day.

## **Epidemiology**

Ministry of Public Health policies in general have treated minorities and migrants to lie within their areas and populations of responsibility because of the MoPH's recognition that highland minorities and migrants were never truly "isolated" epidemiologically from lowland populations. Starting in the 1950s, malaria control services aimed to visit, map, spray, provide nets and presumptive treatment for fever cases in every household in Thailand, including the highlands. MoPH officials now generally believe that migrant and minority group rates of communicable diseases, are considerably higher than in the lowland ethnic majority populations including rates of malaria (most of the cases are found along borders with Thailand

---

<sup>4</sup> Choomnoom Promkutkao and Ronald Wilson, 1981. This program, funded initially as a pilot project by USAID in Lampang Province, became a national program and was extended to highland areas, first in Mae Chaem District, Chiang Mai Province, under a USAID-supported counter-insurgency development program.

and Cambodia, 9/10 patients are migrants<sup>5</sup>, most of the rest are highland minority members living near borders), tuberculosis (90% of patients in Chiang Mai Province are migrants)<sup>6</sup> and HIV/AIDS (numbers and rates higher than in the general population).

### **Changing Motives for Migration in and out of the Highlands and Sedentization of Highland Minorities and Migrants (Chart A)**

The highlands and highland populations (i.e., non-irrigable areas of higher elevation and their traditional residents) have never been isolated demographically or economically from the lowlands. Highlands have been crossed by trade routes between major valleys. Highlanders were used as porters or elephant drivers, or were themselves traders, and paid tribute to lowland authorities.

The highlands have been locations of resources for lowland populations (e.g., domestic and commercial-international exploitation of teak, domestic extraction of forest products such as bamboo, traditional medicine, grazing land, and commercial extraction of minerals and more recently even for firewood), and highlanders have worked in the trades associated with these resources (lumbering, elephant driving, especially by Karen and often Khmu' from Laos, and mining). At the same time, the lowlands have served for highlanders as markets for highland products, as temporary or permanent refuges from disasters such as fires or epidemics, and as escapes from over-population of swidden land<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> The MoPH Malaria Division maintains malaria clinics in many highland minority areas along the Thai-Burma border. An unpublished study by a malaria division official in Chiang Dao District in the early 2000s showed a clear relationship between the number of malaria cases among international migrants larger than among local non-migrant residents, the number among migrants increasing when the local border with Burma was open, and declining when the border was closed; the smaller number of cases among local non-migrant residents increasing and decreasing after a lag (Trairat Bangaongakson, personal communication). Our research in a rural community malaria clinic south of Mae Sot showed that 90% of the patients were migrants from Burma (Kunstader P. Et al. 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication. Surasing Visrutratna, Chiang Mai Provincial Health Office. 2011.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Leach, 1954, which describes the pre-World War 2, pattern in which highland swiddening, animist Kachin became lowland, irrigated rice farming Buddhists. This seems

A. Changing Motives for Migration Into, Through and Out of Highland Areas	
"Traditional" motives for travel outside of location of rural communities of village territory	"New" and increased motives for travel, temporary or permanent migration outside of rural communities
<i>Individuals (usually temporary)</i> Trade (farm and forest products for a few manufactured goods) Ceremonies, courtship, marriage Visiting relatives Seasonal, temporary labor for cash "Emergency" – fire, crop failure, epidemic ... Expulsion from village because of taboo violation Government requirements (e.g., for headmen), tribute, taxes, other government obligations Health care (traditional and modern) – rare (more common for traditional provider to come to patient) Inability to make a living where located <i>Communities (usually permanent)</i> Taking, rental and purchase of fields outside traditional village boundaries Expansion of village territory associated with population growth Relocation of village or hiving off of households associated with loss of soil fertility Inability to make a living where located	<i>Individuals</i> Many of the same motives as "traditional" plus: Education Increased employment opportunities for unskilled labor Permanent jobs Bright lights of the city Aspirations for better life for children "Revolution of rising expectations" (desire for and perception of benefits of material goods) Health care (much more common, and usually requires patient to travel to provider) <i>Communities</i> Government (forced) relocation Government controls on land use → decrease in land/capita  <i>Decreased individual motives or needs for travel</i> Telecommunications (letters, telephones, cell phones) <i>Decreased community motives or needs for travel</i> Infrastructure development <i>in situ</i> Satisfaction of permanent needs by temporary travel

As the lowland ethnic Thai population expanded and government control of highland increased some lowlanders settled in the highlands, sometimes replacing long-settled highlanders (as in one of our Northern Thai study communities). This trend was accelerated with the location of various government and international organization development projects and privately owned highland resorts, sometimes acquired in Royal Forest land. Additional highland areas, in large quantities, has been taken as National Parks, often with little or no regard to long term occupancy by highland minority populations.

Motives for migration and for settlement have changed markedly along with changes in infrastructure (especially roads), government policies, government ability to exert control, and major economic changes in highland and border areas. Long term Central Thai Government policy has been to "settle migrant hill tribes" and

---

is the same pattern followed by Lua' in Mae Sariang and Mae La Noi districts of Mae Hong-son Province for many decades through the late 1960s. Leach does not relate the pattern to demographic-economic variables, nor does he note that the movement was always from highland to lowland.

to assimilate them administratively, politically, linguistically and to some extent culturally with little recognition of differences in traditional highland settlement patterns, customary law or traditional relationships between highland and lowland political organizations (e.g., recognition by Northern Thai princes of the rights to property and self-government of Lua' villages)<sup>8</sup>.

### **Some Specific Government Interventions in the Highlands**

A very large number of development and other projects have been initiated in the highlands, by the Thai Government, and international and local agencies. Christian missionaries were often the first Westerners to contact highland minorities especially after World War 2, and were generally the first to learn and develop scripts for many of the minority languages. Some of the missionaries moved to Thailand to work with the same ethno linguistic groups they had worked with for many decades before being expelled from China after the Communists took over in 1948, and thrown out of Burma after 1962 when the Burmese government expelled almost all foreigners, including Western missionaries. Missionaries range from those offering nothing other than fundamentalist religion, prayers, laying on of hands and expulsion of evil spirits to treat illnesses (e.g., New Tribes) to those offering a full range of activities including highland agricultural assistance and hostels in the lowlands for children attending lowland schools, modern health services (e.g., Baptist hospitals, primarily established for Karen in Mae Sariang and Kanchanaburi) and health service training. Representatives of the Malaria Division of the Ministry of Public Health seem often to have been the first representatives of the central government to provide services to the highland populations.

The Border Police Patrol (BPP), founded in the 1950s with technical and financial assistance from the US Central Intelligence Agency, and under Royal patronage<sup>9</sup> was the lead agency in contacting and

---

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Kraisi Nimmenahaeminda, 1965.

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Border\\_Patrol\\_Police](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Border_Patrol_Police) ; US assistance, through government agencies as well as private NGOs and church-related organizations, has supported many

starting development projects, including schools, in many of the more remote highland and border areas beginning in the 1950s at a time when post-World War 2 treaty regulations prevented the stationing of Thai military forces near borders with Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Malaya (Chart B).

The Government, under the Welfare Department established *nikhom*, resettling small numbers of highland minorities in highland locations beginning around 1960 (e.g., at Doi Musser in Tak and Mae Chan in Chiang Rai) to make it easier to deliver services and to control the populations. The Welfare Department also admitted highland children to Welfare schools in the lowlands starting in the 1960s.

<p><b>B. Government agencies involved in programs specifically for highland minorities in approximate chronological order</b></p> <p>Ministry of Public Health Malaria Division                  The Border Police Patrol (BPP),                  The Welfare Department,                  The Royal Project,                  The Ministry of Public Health,                  The Royal Forestry Department,                  Education (non-conventional → normal)                  Local Administration                  Tourist Organization of Thailand,                  Police,                  Army                  ...</p>
---

Although in general there was no conflict between the government and foreign missionaries or the teaching of Christian religions (the King was heard to say that he was King of all the people of Thailand regardless of religions)<sup>10</sup>, the government in the mid 1960s made some partially successful attempt to insure that all minority languages were transcribed into Thai script, rather than in Roman script.

Buddhist missions in the highlands were carried out starting in the mid-1960s, with the eventual recruitment of highland minority

---

of the Thai governmental and non-governmental activities related to highland minorities in Thailand for various counter-insurgency, anti-narcotics, church-related and humanitarian reasons which are not always clearly distinguished from one another.

<sup>10</sup> PK Field notes. The King is also the nominal head of Buddhist activities in Thailand.

boys for initiation, and building of Buddhist temples in highland communities (often in parallel with the construction of Christian churches).

The lead agency in controlling land and forest in the highlands is the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) which gradually assumed ownership and control over traditionally-owned and unclaimed land in the highlands, but lacked ability to control land use (including swidden agriculture) until roads were built in the 1980s and 1990s. The RFD has frequently been in conflict with highland and minority populations, as well as with other Thai Government agencies which have different priorities.

Suppression of opium cultivation became a government policy under the Field Marshall Sarit government, starting at the end of the 1950s, in response to international pressures. Related development projects in the highlands started with crop-substitution (highland crops, often developed with the assistance of the Royal Project, which started in the late 1960s) and treatment of addicts as well as law enforcement, with eradication of opium cultivation by about 1990 (after roads allowed access for the military). Intelligence and law enforcement and development activities have been aided by the US Drug Enforcement Agency as well as UN agencies.

Counter-insurgency against perceived internal and external threats from China, Laos and Vietnam, especially in the highlands in Nan, Petchabun, and Tak Provinces became a government policy supported especially by the US and SEATO in the 1960s through 1975. Counter-insurgency continued in Thailand after wars in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975. Counter-insurgency programs included large scale resettlement projects, as well as military operations, plus economic and infrastructure development (including some health programs) "to win hearts and minds".

Government interests in highland minorities as an asset for tourism began in the 1980s. Renewed interest in narcotics suppression (largely heroin and amphetamines from Burma) was the public rationale for widespread arrests and extra-judicial killings of highlanders during the Thaksin administration in the early 2000s.

Lowlanders “invaded” the highlands and exploited highland resources, and sometimes displaced traditional highlander settlements under a variety of government, Royal, and internationally-supported development projects and commercial enterprises, beginning with teak extraction at least 130 years ago<sup>11</sup>. Some of the highlanders displaced by these activities (e.g., Lahu from the Mae Fa Luang development in Chiang Rai) resettled spontaneously and then received assistance of the Royal Project in the ATC study area in the 1970s and 1980s. Several of the first highlanders to move into this area were jailed by the RFD.

### **Materials and Methods of the Access to Care Research (ATC) Project**

Survey topics considered in this paper include socioeconomic characteristics of the populations (ethnicity, education, Thai language ability), use of antenatal care, counseling and testing for HIV, and responses to questions about factors delaying or preventing access to health services (Chart C).

<b>C. Access To Care (ATC) Interview Topics</b>	
1	Basic socioeconomic and demographic data
2	Use of antenatal care, HIV counseling and testing
3	Reproductive health, family planning, marriage and reproductive history
4	Health and use of health services
5	Constraints to use of health services and potential solutions to constraints
6	Knowledge of, and attitudes toward HIV/AIDS
7	Sources of information on health and health services
8	Beliefs concerning treatment and local epidemiology
9	Demography of surveyed populations

### **Rationale and Sample Selection**

This project was initiated on the basis of identification by Chiang Dao Hospital personnel of part of their area of responsibility which is occupied largely by minorities and recent international migrants in which use of HIV services appeared to be lower than in Northern

<sup>11</sup> E.g., such highland activities as tea cultivation (Raming Tea started in about 1963 in the Mae Taeng and Chiang Dao highlands; tourist development in the Mae Sa Valley began in the 1970s.



Thai communities. We selected for research five predominantly ethnic Lahu community, and one very large predominantly Chinese community with six sections. We identified two Northern Thai communities in the same general area, located at approximately the same distance from sources of health services as the migrant and minority communities to provide statistical “controls” to compare access to care among populations with different ethnicity and different citizenship status.

All of the ethnic minority communities surveyed in the ATC project were settled relatively recently (30 – 40 years ago) in the foothills or highlands, mostly on non-irrigated or sprinkler-irrigated land, where the population is primarily farmers of internationally-marketed cash crops (especially maize) plus some crops for local markets (vegetables) and subsistence crops (vegetables and rice). They are 40 – 60 km from the Chiang Dao Hospital. Four are located on recently paved roads, one on an unpaved road. The Northern Thai communities are located on recently paved roads at distances and travel times to the district hospital comparable to those of the minority-migrant communities. One was settled by lowlanders 50+ years ago who moved from several Northern provinces in what had been an old minority highlander village. The primary product in this community is miang for the local market. The other Northern Thai community is an irrigated rice and maize farming area.

### **HIV Services which Are Theoretically Accessible to All**

Chiang Dao Hospital personnel and health station personnel in Chiang Dao District interpret current Ministry of Public Health policies to mean that all pregnant women, regardless of citizenship and ethnicity, are eligible for free antenatal care (ANC) from government health facilities. The MoPH protocol for ANC prescribes health education, HIV test counseling and HIV testing for every pregnant women and her husband partner. Because ANC is a primary access point for HIV-related health services, we selected for survey women who had *at least one* child born within the five years prior to interview, and thus who should have had the opportunity to have ANC, counseling and HIV testing.

We conducted a community census of each household in the selected villages in order to identify persons eligible for interview and to select a sample where necessary (Chart D). In small communities we selected every eligible woman and their current husband/partner (if any); in large communities we selected a 50% sample with replacement of women and their partners if the eligible woman declined or could not be located or declined to be interviewed.

Chart D. Topics included in ATC Community Censuses
Community location (Province, District, Tambon, Village)
Number in household
Sex
Birth date, age in completed years
Marital status
Relation to household head
ID card type, citizenship
Current actual ( <i>de facto</i> ) place of residence
Religion
Ethnic group
Children born within 5 years of ATC survey

### Notes on Demography, *de Jure* and *de Facto* Residence and Definitions of Urban and Rural

From the point of view of social science, including policy science and administration, it is important to know who is living where. It is customary to distinguish between *de jure* (legal, often registered) place of residence and *de facto* (actual) place of residence. The censuses of Thailand are based on *de jure* residence: voting place, eligibility for special quotas in admission to university and other government services are determined by *de jure* (registered) place of residence. Until recently eligibility for free or low cost treatment at a local government health facility was also defined by *de jure* residence – individuals were assigned to specific local sources of care and were required to receive an official referral to access care from some other facility at a higher level or in another locality. In recognition of the high volume of internal migration and the high cost to patients of this regulation, the MoPH relaxed the eligibility requirements for treatment (announced under the previous Democrat-led regime but not universally followed) to allow any person with a normal

Thai ID card (not certain classes of immigrants or those without identification cards) to use any government facility.

“Place of residence” and conventional definitions of “urban” vs. “rural” no longer have the same meaning as they did when these two kinds of living conditions were conceptually and physically separate and could be easily distinguished. Recent developments in transportation and other infrastructural developments (roads, schools, piped water, electricity, phone service...) mean that life conditions may be similar in rural locations and urban centers. Moreover, daily or weekly, not just seasonal commuting from rural to urban areas is feasible for many tens of thousands of people. At the same time, information is exchanged and family ties and economic relationships can be maintained from distant locations as a result of modern communication systems. Rural farm work still requires presence in rural areas, but many kinds of urban work can be carried out anywhere; increasing numbers of people who are registered in urban areas also have second homes in rural areas or homes in other cities.

Systematic national data collection and analysis has lagged behind these changing conditions (“Nomadic Hill Tribes” were not counted in early Thailand censuses and Thailand continues to adhere to de-jure not de facto census collection). We have only fragmentary ideas of the numbers and characteristics of formerly rural people, including tens of thousands of members of “highland” minority groups and international migrants who now are urban residents in all but their household registration (Prasit Leepreecha *et al.*, 2006). Our census surveys suggest that the proportion of individuals in our study area who are registered in rural communities but are actually living somewhere other than where they are registered is 15% or more (see Appendix 2, table 1). Most of these residents who are *de jure* but not *de facto* residents are young adults. The result is that the de facto age and sex distribution of these populations is distorted in our study area, with fewer people in the young adult ages, and in some communities fewer men as compared with the national average distributions.

## Ethnicity and Sex of the ATC Interviewed Sample

The following tables show the distribution of self-identified ethnicities of respondents to the survey interviews by sex and ethnicity (Table 1)<sup>12</sup>.

Predominant Community Ethnicity	Women		Husband/partner		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Lahu	258	56.0	203	44.0	461
Chinese	246	66.5	124	33.5	370
Northern Thai	31	60.8	20	39.2	51
Total	535	-	347	-	882

**Comment:** More women than husband/partner were interviewed because of marital instability (divorce) and greater temporary mobility for men than for women (see Appendix 2).

## Ethnic diversity in the study Communities (Table 2)

Ethnic diversity of the survey interview sample is indicated in the following table.

**Comment:** Note that there is considerable ethnic mixing and that the total proportions of the predominant groups vary between the types of communities: About 95.4% percent of the members of predominantly Lahu communities identify themselves as one or another variety of Lahu vs. 86.8% of the residents of predominantly Chinese communities who identify themselves as Chinese<sup>13</sup>, and 80.4% of residents of the Northern Thai communities who identify themselves as Northern Thai or “Phoen Lap” (= lowlanders) or Thai, or Northeastern Thai.

Proportions of men vs. women of other than the predominant group also vary between the different types of communities: (Percent non-Lahu men in Lahu communities = 4.4%, non-Lahu

<sup>12</sup> All tables in this draft are based on partial data entered into computer as of 25 November 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Some residents of these communities now identify themselves as ethnic Chinese, even though both of their parents were Tai Yai.

**Table 2. Ethnic and Sex Composition of Survey Sample [partial data]**

Ethnic composition of individuals in study communities	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lahu Daeng (Ni)	87	42.9	139	53.9	226	49.0
Lahu Dam (Na')	70	34.5	102	39.5	172	37.3
Lahu unspecified	24	11.8	7	2.7	31	6.7
Lahu Shele	7	3.4	4	1.6	11	2.4
Thai	6	3.0	1	0.4	7	1.5
Tai Yai (Shan)	4	2.0	3	1.2	7	1.5
Akha	2	1.0	0	0.0	2	0.4
Chinese	1	0.5	1	0.4	2	0.4
Hmong	0	0.0	1	0.4	1	0.2
Karen	1	0.5	0	0.0	1	0.2
Lisu	1	0.5	0	0.0	1	0.2
<b>Lahu communities total</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>461</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Chinese</i>	<i>113</i>	<i>91.1</i>	<i>208</i>	<i>84.6</i>	<i>321</i>	<i>86.8</i>
Tai Yai	9	7.3	22	8.9	31	8.4
Thai	2	1.6	4	1.6	6	1.6
Lahu	0	0.0	5	2.0	5	1.4
Lisu	0	0.0	4	1.6	4	1.1
Akha	0	0.0	2	0.8	2	0.5
Wa Daeng	0	0.0	1	0.4	1	0.3
<b>Chinese communities total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>N. Thai (Phoen rap)</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>75.0</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>61.3</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>66.7</i>
Thai	3	15.0	3	9.7	6	11.8
NE Thai (Issan)	0	0.0	1	3.2	1	2.0
Tai Yai	2	10.0	4	12.9	6	11.8
Karen	0	0.0	1	3.2	1	2.0
Lisu	0	0.0	2	6.5	2	3.9
??	0	0.0	1	3.2	1	2.0
<b>Northern Thai communities total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100.0</b>

women = 1.9%; Percent non-Chinese men in Chinese communities = 8.9%, non-Chinese women = 15.4%; percent non-Thai men in Thai communities = 10.0%, women = 25.8%), as do Relatively low proportions of non-Lahu women in the Lahu communities reflects the matrilineal post-marital residence pattern of Lahu; relatively high proportions of non-Chinese women in the Chinese community reflect the patrilineal post-marital pattern of the Chinese

### Citizenship Status and Predominant Community Ethnicity (Table 3)

Citizenship status determines eligibility for access to free government health services. There were major differences in citizenship between the different ethnic community types.

**Comment:** All respondents from the Northern Thai communities had "Proper" ID cards, as did 96.5% of the Lahu community respondents, vs. 38.6% of the Chinese community residents.

This is consistent with the very significantly higher proportion of Chinese community residents (compared with Northern Thai and Lahu community residents who reported ineligibility as a problem causing them to delay or not use health care when they needed it (see below).

**Table 3. Access to Care Survey: Type of ID card and Predominant Community Ethnicity**

Predominant Community Ethnicity	No ID		ID: Entered without permission		"Proper" ID*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lahu	16	3.5	0	0.0	445	96.5
Chinese	54	14.6	173	46.8	143	38.6
Northern Thai	0	0.0	0	0.0	50	100.0

\*There are many different types of "proper" ID cards issued by the Thai government  
Chi square = 375.63, p < .0001

### Self-Reported Health Status (Table 4)

Health of the populations can be expected to be related in some way to the use of health services, but to a large extent population health depends on public health services (e.g., water supply, immunizations, and to some extent vector control) that require relatively little behavior on the part of the population. To the extent that the bulk of the population is in fair to excellent health reflects the results of many years of widespread and effective preventive public health measures by the MoPH, and to a lesser extent on the use of health treatments.

**Table 4. Self Reported Health States "Very poor" or "Poor" and Predominant Community Ethnicity**

Predominant Community Ethnicity	Total number in Group			Men		Women		Total	
	Men	Women	Total	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lahu	203	257	460	14	6.9	20	7.8	34	7.4
Chinese	124	246	370	3	2.4	3	1.2	6	1.6
N. Thal	20	31	51	0	0.0	1	3.2	1	2.0

Chi square = 16.21, df = 2, p = 0.0003

**Comment:** Most people in all communities reported they were in fair, good or very good health, but three times higher proportion of residents of the Lahu communities (7.4%) reported they were in very poor or poor health, as compared with members of the Chinese community (1.6%) and Northern Thai communities (2.0%), a small proportion but a highly significant difference (chi square = 16.21, p = 0.0003). This suggests that there are significantly more people

in the Lahu communities who are ill, but hypotheses linking self-reported health status and access to care could go either way (in good health, don't need or use care; or in poor health because don't use or have access to care).

### Education and Thai Language Ability by Sex and Predominant Community Ethnicity (Table 5)

The following tables show the distribution of educational attainment (at least graduated primary school) and *inability* to understand or to speak Thai by sex and predominant community ethnicity.

Ethnicity	Lahu		Chinese		N. Thai		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No education	170	36.9	265	71.6	5	9.8	440	49.9
Any education	291	63.1	105	8.4	46	90.2	442	50.1
Total	461	100.0	370	100.0	51	100.0	882	100.0
Chi square = 1,339, p < .0001								
Numbers and percentages of survey respondents who can or cannot speak Thai								
Ethnicity	Lahu		Chinese		N. Thai		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Cannot speak	66	14.3	160	44.0	0	0.0	226	25.8
Can speak	395	85.7	51	100.0	51	100.0	650	74.2
Total	461	100.0	370	100.0	51	100.0	882	100.0
Chi square = 1,122, p < .0001								

**Comment:** As expected, there was strong and highly significant variation between communities of proportions on those who were unable to speak Thai, and those who had no education: There were strong and highly significant variations between communities of proportions of those who were unable to speak Thai, and also those who had no education:

All respondents in the predominantly Northern Thai community could speak Thai,

Every one of the 9.8% of Northern Thai community respondents with no education in the Northern Thai communities were ethnic Tai Yai (Shan)

Lahu community respondents (with a larger proportion of native-born citizens or long-term residents than in the Chinese communities) were intermediate between Chinese and Northern Thai:

14% of the Lahu community respondents cannot speak Thai, and 37% have had no education.

44% of the Chinese community respondents cannot speak Thai, and 77% have had no education.

### **Annual Income and Predominant Community Ethnicity (Table 6)**

Even under a universal health insurance program, disposable income is an important determinant or constraint on use of care, given direct and indirect costs of access. Although income figures may be unreliable, especially for rural people, some of whom are primarily subsistence farmers, we asked both women and their husbands for their annual income. Annual income ranged from 300 Bht to 940,000 Bht. Answers of both members of the same couple were not always consistent, but the general patterns for women, husband/partners and the total surveyed population were similar. We show here the results for the total population indicating higher income for respondents from predominantly Chinese and Northern Thai communities compared with Lahu.

**Table 6. Predominant Community Ethnicity and Annual Income of Survey Respondents\***

Ethnicity	Lahu		Chinese		N. Thai		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
300 – 20,000	85	30.4	53	16.2	4	7.8	142	21.5
21,000 – 50,000	117	41.8	70	21.3	18	35.3	205	31.1
51,000 – 78,000	34	12.1	39	11.9	7	13.7	80	12.1
79,000 – 940,000	44	15.7	166	50.6	22	43.1	232	35.2
Total	280	100.0	328	100.0	51	100.0	659	100.0

Chi square = 82.126, df = 6, p = .000  
 \*Includes responses from both women and their husband partners.

**Comment:** We grouped incomes by quartiles for this analysis and found that income distribution is strongly bimodal (large proportions in the lowest 2 quartiles, from 300 bht – 20,000 bht/year plus 21,000 – 50,000 bht/year, low proportions in the third quartile 51,000 – 78,000 bht/yr, and high proportions in the highest quartile (79,000 – 940,000 bht/yr). Statistically significantly higher proportions of respondents in Northern Thai and Chinese communities had higher incomes than respondents from Lahu communities.



### Motor Vehicle in Household and Predominant Community Ethnicity (Table 7)

Motor vehicles in the household indicate both relative wealth and ability to travel to source of health services without depending on public transportation or on relatives or neighbors.

Type of vehicle in HH	Lahu		Chinese		N. Thai		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No motorcycle	82	17.9	84	22.7	2	3.9	168	19.1
Have motorcycle	377	82.1	286	77.3	49	96.1	712	80.9
Total	459	100.0	370	100.0	51	100.0	880	100.0
No car or pickup	371	81.0	313	84.8	29	58.0	713	81.3
Have car or pickup	87	19.0	56	15.2	21	42.0	164	18.7
Total	458	100.0	369	100.0	50	100.0	877	100.0
Motorcycle in household: chi square = 11.169, df = 2, p = .004								
Car or pickup in household : chi square =20.895, df = 2, p = .000								

**Comment:** Households of survey respondents in predominantly Northern Thai communities are most likely to have a motorcycle and/or a pickup. Surprisingly, given income data, Chinese community households are least likely to have a motorcycle or a pickup. This might be related to the relatively low proportion of survey respondents in the predominantly Chinese communities who have “proper” Thai ID cards, or to the fact that Chinese community residents invest heavily in their houses in comparison with houses in Lahu and Northern Thai communities.

### Use of Health Services in Communities Classified by Predominant Ethnicity (Table 8)

We hypothesized that minorities would have less access to health services. Results show strong associations between ethnicity and receipt of services, with a higher proportion of respondents from Northern Thai communities consistently receiving these services, and also showing differences between respondents from Lahu and Chinese communities in receipt of services.

**Comment:** Proportions of individuals who were counseled for HIV testing were extremely varied (Table 8A), with 88.2% of

Northern Thai community respondents vs. 31.6% of the residents of Chinese communities. The disparity was even greater among women: 90.3% of Northern Thai community women counseled vs. only 20.7% of the women in the Chinese community, data not shown.

**Table 8A. Numbers and percentages of survey respondents who were ever counseled about HIV tests by predominant community ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Lahu		Chinese		N. Thai		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Counseled	261	56.9	117	31.6	45	88.2	423	48.1
Never counseled	184	40.1	240	64.9	5	9.9	429	48.8
Don't know	14	3.1	13	3.5	1	2.0	28	3.2
Total	459	100.0	370	100.0	51	100.0	880	100.0

Chi square = 83.360, p = .000

**Table 8B. Numbers and percentages of survey respondents who were ever tested or never tested for HIV**

Ethnicity	Lahu		Chinese		N. Thai		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Tested	352	76.9	271	73.4	46	92.0	669	76.3
Never tested	92	20.1	90	24.4	1	2.0	183	20.9
Don't know	14	3.1	8	2.2	3	6.0	25	2.9
Total	458	100.0	369	100.0	50	100.0	877	100.0

Chi square = 15.299, p = .004

Proportions who were tested are relatively high in the different community types, but there are major differences between Northern Thai (92.0% tested) vs. Chinese 73.4% and Lahu (76.9%). The fact that there were higher proportions tested than were counseled (Table 8A vs. Table 8B) suggests that contrary to the established protocol, substantial numbers of men and women were tested who had not been counseled. This is probably because of the relatively high proportion of Chinese women who do not speak or understand Thai and the lack of counseling in non-Thai languages

### **Use of Health Services by citizenship (ID cards) among women in Lahu communities (Table 9)**

We hypothesized that migrants would make less use of services than Thai citizens of the same ethnic group. The following tables compare members of predominantly ethnic Lahu communities who are citizens vs. residents of the same Lahu communities who are not citizens. The lower use of services is probably associated with different characteristics of these sub-populations (e.g., lower proportions who understand Thai language among migrants).

Thai language ability	Thai Citizens		Not Citizens		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Can speak Thai	167	86.5	44	62.0	211	79.9
Can't speak or understand Thai	26	13.5	27	38.0	53	20.1
Total	193	100.0	71	100.0	264	100.0

A much higher proportion of Lahu community respondents who are Thai citizens than Lahu who are not Thai citizens can speak Thai:  
Thai citizen Lahu vs. Lahu non-citizens: chi square 19.507, p = 0.00001

Did the mother get antenatal information for this pregnancy*	Thai Citizens		Not Citizens		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 Yes ANC	222	98.7	65	80.2	287	93.8
2 No ANC	3	1.3	16	19.8	19	6.2
Total	225	100.0	81	100.0	306	100.0

\*Notes: Incomplete data. Some of the interviewed women had more than one pregnancy in the 5 years prior to interview.

Did the parents get antenatal HIV counseling for this pregnancy?	Thai Citizens		Non-Citizens		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
0 Neither parent was counseled	105	47.7	47	62.7	152	51.5
1 Only mother was counseled	25	11.4	5	6.7	30	10.2
2 Mother and husband/partner were counseled	90	40.9	23	30.7	113	38.3
Total	220	100.0	75	100.0	295	100.0

Lahu Thai Citizen mothers counseled vs. Lahu Non-Citizen mothers: chi square = 4.998, p = .0254; Lahu Thai husbands/partners of Thai citizens vs. husband/partners of Non-Citizens: chi square = 3.723, p = 0.0537

Did the parents get antenatal HIV test during this pregnancy?	Thai Citizens		Non-Citizens		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
0 Neither parent was tested	2	0.9	14	20.3	16	5.6
1 Only mother was tested	48	22.1	11	15.9	59	20.6
2 Mother and husband/partner were tested	167	77.0	44	63.8	211	73.8
Total	217	100.0	69	100.0	286	100.0

Lahu Thai citizen mother and husband partner vs. Non-Citizen mother and husband/partner, chi square 37.308, p = 0; in only 0.9% of Lahu Thai Citizen couples was neither parent tested, compared with 20.3% among Non-Citizen Lahu parents in which neither parent.

**Comment:** Even though both citizens and non-citizens are theoretically eligible for free ANC services and associated HIV counseling and testing services, there is a clear relationship favoring citizens over non-citizens in use of these services.

## Constraints Survey Respondents Report Caused Delay or Non-use of Needed Health Services

Constraints can be grouped roughly into problems with costs of services to the patients including opportunity costs and conflicting obligations; cultural, linguistic and social barriers; lack of knowledge and information; and the nature of the services themselves (Table 10).

**Comment:** The importance of the constraints (indicated by the proportion of respondents who said the constraint caused delay or non-use) varied statistically significantly between groups, but can be ranked overall roughly as follows:

- 1) The long wait time for services at the facility was considered to be the greatest constraint among Lahu and Thai communities (79.1% and 64% of respondents from these groups respectively), as compared with only 20.6% of respondents from the Chinese community.
- 2) Direct costs (lack of money for transportation, lack of money for services or medicine) and opportunity costs (could not leave job or could not leave house or children) were major constraints in all types of communities; ineligibility for free government health services was a problem mentioned by a much higher proportion of Chinese community respondents (34.4%) than respondents from the Lahu communities (11.9%) or Thai communities (4.0%), reflecting differences in the proportions of non-eligible recent immigrants in these communities.

Reason for delay or not using health care when needed	Percent Delay/Not use		
	Lahu	Chinese	N Thai
Statistical significance of difference between community types[1]			
<b>The nature of the services</b>			
Wait time at facility too long (.000)	79.1	20.6	64.0
<b>Costs of services to the patients including opportunity costs and conflicting obligations</b>			
Lack money for transportation or treatment (.000)	64.6	42.6	43.1
Lack of transportation (.000)	47.9	34.2	35.3
Lacked money for services or medicine (.000)	24.5	40.7	24.0
Ineligible for government health services (.000)	11.9	34.3	4.0
Could not leave house or children to seek health care (.000)	19.1	6.1	24.0
Could not leave job to seek health care (.002)	9.4	3.3	8.2
<b>Cultural, linguistic and social conditions</b>			
Lack of Thai language ability (.000)	27.0	43.5	2.0
Lack of someone to accompany (.002)	67.2	32.3	8.2
Did not know how to talk with doctor (.000)	28.7	17.4	4.1
Tried medicine from market or drugstore first (.000)	40.3	12.0	44.7
Tried traditional method first (.000)	25.0	5.6	26.1
Feared or experienced harassment from govt. officials (.023)	14.0	16.3	2.0
Feared or experienced health care providers scolding (.000)	20.6	5.3	9.8
Feared prejudice or discrimination from health care providers because of ethnicity (.000)	14.0	3.3	4.1
Lacked permission from household member (.001)	8.3	2.5	2.0
Feared stigma in your own society because of illness (.328)	5.8	4.1	2.0
<b>Lack of knowledge and information; and the nature of the services themselves</b>			
Seriously ill, but thought illness was not serious (.000)	17.3	4.0	31.2
Did not know enough about illness (.000)	14.7	2.8	25.0
Did not know where to go (.049)	14.1	8.6	10.0
Did not think illness could be successfully treated (.001)	8.5	2.5	10.2
<b>Total N in survey sample*</b>	<b>461</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>51</b>

\*Note: not every survey respondent answered every question so total sample size is not always total for comparisons.

3) Linguistic and other social-cultural constraints (lack of Thai language ability, lack of someone to accompany to source of care) were much more important in Lahu and Chinese communities than in Thai communities; use of medicine from market and use of traditional medicine were important for respondents from Lahu and Thai communities but were less important for respondents from Chinese communities.

4) Unexpectedly, lack of knowledge about illness was reported more commonly as a constraint by respondents from Thai communities than respondents from Lahu and Chinese communities.

### Potential Use of Solutions to Constraints to Access to Care (mobile teams and translators)

Because Thai language ability and transportation costs and availability and associated opportunity costs are so important as constraints to use of care, we asked respondents if they would actually use potential solutions to these problems (mobile teams and translators in hospital) (Table 11).

**Comment:** The vast majority of the respondents in every type of community said they would use the services of a mobile team if it were available, the Chinese less so than the other groups, possibly because there is an anamai located within their community.

The vast majority of the respondents also said they would use a translator to help translate language (ล่ามช่วยแปลภาษา) if one were available in the anamai or hospital, including 63.45% of the respondents from predominantly Northern Thai communities,

Service	Lahu		Chinese		N. Thai		Total	
Would use, or probably use mobile team	439	96.5	307	84.3	51	100.0	797	91.6
Would not use	16	3.5	57	15.7	0	0.0	73	8.4
Total	455	100.0	364	100.0	51	100.0	870	100.0
Would use, or probably use translator in anamai or hospital	446	97.8	343	98.6	26	63.4	815	81.5
Would not use	10	2.2	5	1.4	15	1.4	30	3.0
Total	456	100.0	348	100.0	41	100.0	845	100.0
Mobile team: chi square = 43.753, df = 2, p = .000								
Translator in anamai or hospital : chi square = 137.7, df = 2, p = .000								

which includes only a small number of ethnic non-Thai, all of whom claim to be able to speak and understand Thai. This implies that communication with health care providers, remains a problem, even for many native Northern Thai-speakers.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Data collected in the Access to Care Project show clear, consistent statistically and substantively significant differences between respondents from majority ethnic Thai communities and communities comprised of ethnic minorities and recent international migrants in use of health, and in knowledge of health and health services. Major determinants of these differences include relative poverty, limited Thai language ability and a variety of social and cultural factors. Finer grained analysis (rather than using data aggregated from several villages as we have shown here) also shows major differences between villages of the same ethnic group

So what? These results are not surprising or unexpected, but they do suggest potential interventions that are perhaps more feasible than major improvements in the economic or citizenship situation of migrants and minorities.

Respondents' answers with respect to mobile teams (to reduce patients' direct and opportunity costs of transportation to source of services), some willingness to contribute to the cost of mobile team services, and translators (to increase ability of patients to talk with and learn from health service personnel) suggest that these interventions would be acceptable and might be economically feasible ways of reducing health and health service disparities in the migrant and minority populations.

## References

- Choomnoom Promkutkao, Ronald Wilson (eds), 1981 — Community health parapsychician (wechakorn) training in medical care. Ministry of Public Health.
- Kunstadter P, Kunstadter SL, Thawsirichuchai R, Yangyernkun W, Juntakanbandit C., 2009 — Post-treatment blood tests among patients on the Thai-Burma (Myanmar) border: Implications for malaria elimination. Poster, Society for Medical Anthropology Annual Meeting, Yale University, New Haven CT, 26 Sep 2009. Abstract published.
- Leach, E.R., 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma*.
- Kraisri Nimmenahaeminda, 1965 — An inscribed silver plate grant to the Lawa of Boh Luang. Felicitation Volumes in Southeast Asia Studies Presented to His Highness Prince Dhanivat Kromamum Bidyalabh Bridyakorn, vol. 2, pp 233-238. Bangkok, The Siam Society.
- Prasit Leepreecha, Kwanchewan Buadaeng, Panida Boonyasar'n, 2006 — Withichiwitchathipannaimuan (The Way of life of ethnic minorities in the city). Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University: 46-7-389, 2546.

## Appendices

### 1. Background:

Quick history of migration into Central vs. Northern Thailand: Northern Thailand has been a “net receiver” of populations, most of whom are ethnic minorities in the countries from which they came (e.g., Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu, Kachin, Palong, Akha, Wa, Shan, southwestern Chinese and others), and mostly (except for Karen) coming out of southern-southwestern China – northern Burma area into what is now Thailand for hundreds (maybe thousands?) of years.

Migration into Central Thailand in historic times saw very extensive, government-encouraged migration from southeastern China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, bringing many thousands of Chinese as workers to construct canal systems as the foundation of the Thai rice-export economy. By contrast, except for the misnamed “Haw” Chinese remnants of the Kuomintang army the Mainland Chinese Communist take-over in the late 1940s, World War 2, most

migrants to Northern Thailand have come without the benefit of the Thai government's blessing. Historically there has also been some exchange of populations associated with wars with Burma (e.g., Burmese-origin craftsmen in Wua Lai, Chiang Mai).

The modern borders of Thailand were drawn during the colonial period, when Thailand continued to maintain its independence between the British in Burma and the French in Laos and Cambodia. The newly recognized borders, poorly demarcated as they were, separated Thai Issan from Laos, and Tai Yai, Mon and many other highland and lowland minorities (e.g., Karen), from the larger populations of their kin in Burma. After the borders were established, movements between places of residence of relatives, including exchanges of marriage partners and in some places between villages and their fields, became international population movements. Visiting and recruitment of spouses across borders persists to the present time in addition to the large scale migration out of Burma.

Thailand's borders remain subject to dispute with cross-border warfare as recently as mid-2011.

The migration in the past two or three decades of millions of refugees, displaced persons and labor migrants, including members of many ethnic minorities from Burma seeking to escape from the severe economic and political situation and decades of inter-ethnic and narcotic-related warfare is well recognized. Less well-recognized is the substantial migration of thousands of people from China in recent years, especially young adults, with at least the acquiescence if not the public acknowledgement and blessing of the Thai government<sup>14</sup>. The ATC study includes respondents who are migrants from China and Burma as well as members of recognized Thai citizen minorities.

---

<sup>14</sup> Recent Chinese migrants in our study population use their current residence on the border of Thailand for agriculture, as a staging ground for migration elsewhere in Thailand and overseas (e.g., to Taiwan) and as an opportunity for reproduction far exceeding the Mainland Chinese one child policy and the extensive decline in fertility in Taiwan and among overseas Chinese in Singapore, and at a considerably higher rate compared with members of the Lahu minority and the majority ethnic Thai in our study populations.



## **Quick History of Population, Development, Public Health and Health Care in Thailand**

### ***Pre-demographic transition:***

Part of the impetus for population movement, especially of highland minority populations, comes from natural increase (surplus of births over deaths) within the populations themselves. Traditionally populations in Thailand had relatively high birth rates, fluctuating mortality (mostly child deaths) leading to overall slow population growth.

There has been gradual migration of lowland Thai farmers into unoccupied zones and great expansion of the multi-cropped (i.e. year round irrigated farming) irrigated area in Central Thailand associated with drainage, canal-building and widespread river-based irrigation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, building of multi-purpose dams (dry-season irrigation, electricity generation and flood control) for the Central plains beginning in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. This led to ability to support increased populations and to expanded export of rice.

These infrastructure developments had little effect on the economy and population of the North prior to the late 1960s, but there was gradual movement of highlanders into unoccupied land, especially at higher, steeper elevations, as the highland populations expanded both from natural increase and from immigration. Multiple cropping, conversion from primarily subsistence to cash cropping, use of agricultural chemicals and labor-saving machinery began to come to the North as multipurpose dams were built on smaller rivers along with extensive irrigation systems beginning in the 1960s. Cash cropping could only become profitable when national and international markets became accessible with the development of an extensive urban-to-urban, and eventually farm-to-market road network beginning in the 1960s. Widespread road networks, use of chemicals and machinery and extensive cash cropping did

not reach directly into the highlands until the late 1970s or early 1980s<sup>15</sup>.

Although the efforts of the Royal Project to introduce cash crops in the highlands began in about 1970, major cash cropping by highlanders actually began with “relocated” highlanders who had highway access for example, south of Mae Sot, or in Petchabun<sup>16</sup>, and spread in the wake of the highland road network<sup>17</sup>.

### ***Demographic transition:***

Rapid demographic changes began in the late 1950s and early 1960s (that is, they began before substantial systemic changes in the economy of the North. Control of infectious diseases was associated with immunizations and malaria control and led rapid decline in child deaths and thus to rapid increase in population growth rate and size<sup>18</sup>. Declining death rates were followed by rapid spread of family planning starting in the early 1960s in lowland urban and rural populations in both Central Thailand and the North. Widespread use of family planning led to a rapid decline in fertility rate, but the population continued to grow rapidly due to

---

<sup>15</sup> The earliest extensive cash cropping I know of in the northern highlands was cultivation of cabbages along the Hot – Mae Sariang highway, begun by lowlanders displaced out of the Hot – Doi Tao area by the flooding of the Bhumiphol Dam reservoir in the early – mid-1960s, and later copied by highland minority farmers.

<sup>16</sup> Relocates were either “non-Communists, rallying to the Thai Government”, or “ex-communists” who had opposed the Government after their “hearts and minds had been won”.

<sup>17</sup> Earliest building of roads in and across the highlands was in aid of extraction of forest and mineral resources; the modern highland road network was built primarily for security against potential international invasions, suppression of insurgency, and suppression of narcotics production, and only incidentally as an aid to development of the economy of highlanders.

<sup>18</sup> Among highlanders report that they feared going to the lowlands because they always became ill (presumably with malaria, which was not a problem at higher elevations). Malaria control thus allowed increased contacts between highlanders and lowlanders.

high numbers of surviving children entering the reproductive years. Overall, the population of Thailand grew from 27 million in 1960 to 66+ million 2010.

The introduction of agricultural chemicals and machinery led increase in productivity and decline in demand for rural agricultural labor force, compensated in part by multi-cropping (thus year-round employment of farmers) and expansion of the amount of land under cultivation, but for the most part population growth was absorbed by growth of wage labor opportunities. This required migration of "surplus" rural population to urban centers, and by the late 1960s and early 1970s with the beginning of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled wage labor migration to other countries. Highlanders were involved in these temporary and permanent wage labor migrations from early days.

### ***Post demographic transition:***

By the 1990s, although some members of the post-infectious disease control – pre-birth control era baby boom generation were continuing to reproduce, Thailand had very slow or negative inherent population growth because the total fertility rate (average total number of children born to women of reproductive age) was less than 2 (below "replacement"). This was the beginning of shortages of local labor, along with political problems in Burma and Cambodia (and Lao PDR?) and led to great increase in immigration of unskilled labor in farming, agriculture, service and other industries.

Highland populations lagged behind lowland populations in decline of mortality associated with public health by about one generation, and also lagged behind lowlands in adoption of family planning, so there was rapid growth of highland population size due to natural increase 1960s-1980s or 1990s, as well as growth by immigration associated with political and economic problems in neighboring countries.

## Appendix 2.

### Where were de jure residents of survey communities living at time of survey?

Examples from surveyed communities suggest the extent to which de jure residents could not be interviewed because they were not living in the communities in which they were registered.

<b>Appendix 2 Table 1.</b>			
Results of Census vs. Results of Interviews (November 2011): NR Village (Northern Thai) Amphur Chiang Dao, Changwat Chiang Mai [Women with $\geq 1$ Child born in previous 5 years and their partner/husband]			
Where, interviewed	Female	Male	Total
Interviewed in village*	21	12	33
<b>Where now, why not interviewed</b>			
Drive tractor for hire		1	1
Electrician		1	1
Arunothai, T. Muang Na'	1	1	2
Chiang Mai	3	1	4
Chiang Rai	1		1
Lamphun	3	4	7
Lampang	1	1	2
Phitsanulok		1	1
Chachoengsao	1		1
Bangkok		1	1
Pattani		1	1
Southern Thailand	1	1	1
"Busy", not in village		3	3
Registered in household, but moved	4	8	12
Total out of village, not interviewed N	15/36	24/36	39/72
Total out of village, not interviewed %	41.7	66.7	54.2

\*Includes 1 woman who lives in Petchabun, but was in village for interview

<b>Appendix 2, Table 2.</b>			
Community: PMO, Tambon (Northern Thai): <i>De Jure vs. de facto</i> residence at time of census			
Population age-sex distribution			
Age	Male %	Female %	Total %
$\geq 80$	.9	2.9	1.8
70-79	3.5	2.9	3.2
60-69	13.0	5.8	9.5
50-59	20.0	26.2	22.7
40-49	11.3	9.7	10.4
30-39	13.0	14.6	13.6
20-29	19.1	8.8	14.1
10-19	9.6	17.5	13.2
0- 9	9.6	11.7	10.5
Unknown	-	-	-
Total	115	103	218

**Appendix 2, Table 3.**  
Registered in PMO village (N. Thai), living elsewhere at time of survey

Age	Male		Female		Total
	Live where	N	Live where	N	
> 80		0		0	0
70-79		0		0	0
60-69	Chiang Rai	1		0	1
50-59	San Sai	1	Chiang Mai	2	7
			Mae Taeng	2	
			San Sai	1	
			Chiang Rai	1	
40-49	Phrao	1		1	4
	Mu 6	1			
	Chiang Mai	1			
30-39	Chiang Mai	2	Chiang Mai	1	7
	Mae Taeng	1	Phrao	1	
	Bangkok	1	TAIWAN	1	
20-29	Chiang Mai	3	Chiang Mai	2	8
	San Sai	1			
	Chiang Rai	1			
	Nan	1			
10-19	Chiang Mai	1	Chiang Mai	2	7
	Mu 6	1	Mu 6	1	
			Mae Na'	1	
			Chiang Dao	1	
0- 9		0		0	0
Total N		17		17	34
Total %		14.7		16.3	15.4%

**Appendix 2, Table 4.**  
Community: KPP (Lahu) age-sex composition

Age	Male %	Female %	Total %
> 80	0.0	0.0	0.0
70-79	0.0	1.1	0.6
60-69	3.5	5.2	4.4
50-59	4.9	6.9	6.0
40-49	8.3	9.2	8.8
30-39	13.2	12.6	12.9
20-29	20.8	19.0	19.8
10-19	16.0	20.7	18.5
0- 9	21.5	17.2	19.2
??	11.8	8.0	9.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	144	174	318

<b>Appendix 2, Table 5.</b>				
<b>Registered in KPP (Lahu), living elsewhere at time of survey</b>				
<b>Age</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Live where</b>
60-69	0	0	0	--
50-59	1	0	1	Malaysia
40-49	1	0	1	Bangkok
	1	1	2	TAIWAN
	1		1	Chiang Mai
30-39	2	2	4	Chiang Mai
	1		1	Phadaeng
	1	2	3	Bangkok
	1		1	Tak
20-29	1		1	Chiang Dao
	1		1	Prison, Mae Rim
	1	2	3	Prison, Chiang Mai
		1	1	Phrao
		1	1	Wieng Haeng
	6	5	11	Chiang Mai
		1	1	Bangkok study
	1	1	2	TAIWAN
	1		1	Chiang Mai studying
	1		1	Chiang Rai studying
	1	1	2	Mae Pan, A. Chiang Dao
	1	1	2	Mae Rim
10-19	1	2	3	Chiang Mai, studying
	1		1	Kae Noi
		2	2	Fang study
		2	2	Bangkok study
	1	3	4	Chiang Mai
0-9	1		1	Phrao with mother
	3	2	5	Chiang Mai
	2		2	Mae Pan, A. Chiang Dao
	1		1	Chiang Mai, Welfare school
Age unk.		1	1	A. Fang unspecified
		1	1	Chiang Dao
		1	1	Wieng Haeng
	3	6	9	Chiang Mai
	1		1	Mae Rim
	1		1	Mae Sot
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>76/318 = 23.9%</b>



Lahu New Year 2011 in a Christian Lahu Community  
Continuing to Follow Some Non- Christian Traditions



Lahu Non-Christian Community  
"Chinatown" (Predominantly Chinese Community)





# 13 *The commoditisation of therapeutic knowledge among diasporas' populations*

*The case of the Hmong in Lao PDR<sup>1</sup>*

---



AUDREY BOCHATON

In today's globally interconnected world, the opening up of borders, faster information flows and increased mobility have a renewed impact on the issues of identities, memories and relation to places. On the one hand, much has been written on movements (of people, capital or signs) and how new forms of mobility are shaping the contemporary world. Several authors focus on the processes of deterritorialisation/ reterritorialisation as well as on the weakening of State control. But on the other hand, peoples' attachment to places is increasingly emphasized through the discourse of local stakeholders and the practices of populations. Even if more and more people are migrating for job opportunities, education and other reasons, they still have connections with people who continue to live in their area of origin or birth. Therefore, we need to understand more precisely the transformation of the relations between mobility and attachment to places, between territory and networks. I consider this relation through the perspective of health, asking the following question: how are therapeutic practices and health seeking behaviors part of the local as well as the global world?

---

<sup>1</sup>This post-doctoral research project has been funded by an ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche) grant held by the French Institute of Research for Development (IRD)

Globalization entailed several new dynamics in the field of health: the rapid spread of pathogens across the planet is one of these aspects. There are also increased movements of medical staff and patients around the world. My previous work in the Lao PDR and Thailand focused mainly on patients' mobility and health seeking behaviors (Bochaton 2011). I used to work on cross-border movements of Laotian patients to Thai hospitals along the border. Part of this work also focused on "medical tourism" (Glinos, Baeten, Maarse 2010). This phenomenon is widespread and involves patients from developed countries using hospital facilities in emerging countries such as Thailand (Bochaton, Lefebvre 2008). Through this study of cross-border and transnational care seeking, I wished to explain how globalisation contributes to reshape the hospital activity and more generally how it builds a global "health space".

Globalisation also creates a homogenisation of medical practices around the world and allows the circulation of drugs (Sakoyan, Musso, Mulot 2011). My contribution for this conference focuses on this last topic and takes as starting point the traditional remedies used among the Hmong community in the Lao PDR and abroad. Herbal medicine has been used for centuries by Hmong people and it still appears very dynamic today. More generally, herbal medicine is widespread in all the different ethnic groups living in Laos and has played a crucial role to maintain populations in good health in the past (Pottier 2004; Ngaosyvathn 1983; Westermeyer 1988; Sydara 2005; Soejarto 2006).

Traditional medicine is an interesting issue as it lies at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, between local and global. Herbal medicine is indeed a good indicator of traditional knowledge and belief, of the transmission of this knowledge as well as of the attachment to place of origin. Specialized plant knowledge reveals how well a community knows the biodiversity present in its surroundings. Conversely, traditional herbal medicine is meeting with renewed interest in the West as pharmaceutical companies research new efficient plant-based medicines. There is also a general interest in 'natural medicine' among the wider public, especially among the Hmong Diaspora in Europe or in the USA who consider it as part of their traditional culture. Considering

all these aspects, this paper deals with this following question: to what extent is herbal medicine an interesting issue to study new forms of attachment to places and more generally new modes of territoriality?

Our study is based on Hmong herbal medicinal products which are gathered in the Lao PDR and sold abroad (USA, France) through Diasporas networks. The Hmong population of Lao PDR is an ethnic group originating from the mountainous regions of southern China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. During the civil war of 1953-1973, the Hmong were trained and supported by the US Government and, after the end of hostilities in 1973, many Hmong faced an unclear future and entered refugee camps across the border in Thailand. After a more or less long stay in the camps (from a few months to a few years), a large part of them flew to the USA (220,000 inhabitants) while some others went to France (15,000) (Hassoun 1997), Australia (2,200), French Guiana (1,500), and Canada (600).

The Hmong Diaspora is therefore largely spread around the world. Today, some of the Hmong people based abroad come back regularly to the Lao PDR, especially for cultural events such as the Hmong New Year.

Concerning the health seeking behaviors of US citizens of Hmong origin, we refer to an article published in 2003 and entitled "*Hmong gardens: botanical diversity in an urban setting*" (Corlett, Dean, Grivetti, 2003). In this article, it appears that in Sacramento in California, "*the Hmong continue their agrarian traditions by creating urban gardens where they grow traditional plants either for food or medicinal use*". We also learn that "*use of traditional herbal medicine has remained part of the world of Hmong women in the USA, where gifted elders have continued to teach female relatives and trusted friends*". Moreover, Hmong shamans living in the United States still use their botanical knowledge even if the available flora are totally different from that in the Lao PDR. This "*lack of familiar plants has led to the importation of traditional Hmong herbs to California whether through covert commercial exchange or through covert personal transportation*". This last point – the shipment of medicinal plants from Laos to the US - is central to our study.

Considering all these factors, we wonder whether and how the commoditization of therapeutic products influences the transmission of knowledge as well as the dynamism of local territories (Bode 2006).

The study was carried out in the Lao PDR, together with an ethno botanist, Jean-Marc Dubost (see his contribution in this volume). We first investigated herbal medicine markets in the capital of the Lao PDR, Vientiane (fig.1). This led us to the Hmong village called “*kilometer 52*”, north of Vientiane on the national road 13. Following this fieldwork, we then continued our data collection in Phonsavan in Xieng kuang province and finally in Nong Hed district, a mountainous area along the border with Vietnam. The choice of these study sites has been made step by step in accordance with the exchange links established between the different places; it shows well how the Hmong herbal medicine is part of a large network taking place across the entire Laotian territory.

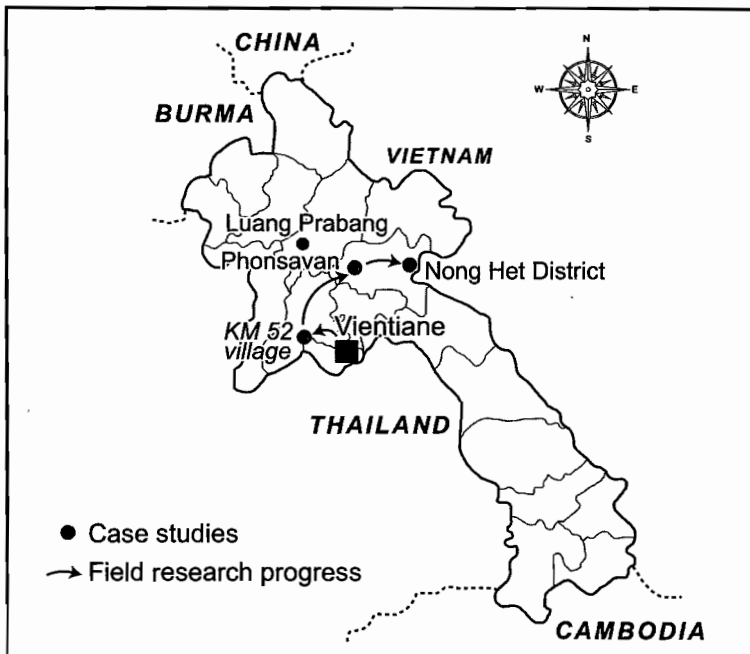


Figure 1: Study Areas in the Lao PDR

The methodology used during this fieldtrip was twofold. First, interviews were conducted with several officials at the Ministry of Health, with traditional healers, and with plants sellers in the different study areas. Secondly, records from the Lao Post Office were collected as they contain information concerning the content and value of packages sent abroad. The postal registers from Vientiane, “*kilometer 52*” village, and Phonsavan have been obtained. This twofold methodology allows a balance between quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The main finding of this research is the dynamism of Hmong herbal medicine, highlighted by the scale of Hmong networks diffusing herbal medicines from the collection area to the markets where they are sold. These networks interact at different spatial scales, from local communities to global.

In Nong Hed district (Xieng khuang province), the village of Tham Say (the district capital) has a Saturday morning market where the villagers from the uplands come to sell forest and farming products. In one corner of the market, several women sell medicinal plants (picture 1).



Picture 1: Medicinal Plants sellers at Tham Say market

As the fieldwork was conducted during the rainy season (July 2011), only about ten women were present at the market since the monsoon is not the best time to gather plants, and it is also a period of intense work in the fields. During the dry season, it seems that more sellers come from the surrounding upland villages and there can be up to 50 people selling herbal medicine in this weekly market. This market is therefore the place where villagers meet middlemen (picture 2) who will sell their products to Phonsavan, the provincial capital of Xiengkhouang, and even further afield.



Picture 2 – A middleman takes orders over the phone from KM 52 village



Picture 3 – Herbal medicine markets at KM 52 village and in Vientiane

While some herbal medicine is sold directly to consumers at Phonsavan market, most of the products are dispatched to Lak 52 (thereafter KM 52 village) village and to Vientiane.

The medicinal plant business at KM 52 started less than 10 years ago (Ly 2011). Most of the sellers established there are from Nong Hed district in Xiengkhouang, and decided to sell herbal medicine to increase their living conditions. In recent years, KM 52 and the surrounding villages experienced a strong population increase, with Hmong people coming from Xiengkhouang and Saysomboun provinces. This area is an open flat country in contrast to the mountainous area where the Hmong used to live traditionally. Consequently, the plants available there are not the same as the plants for traditional remedies available in upland areas. This is why the demand of the plants coming from Nong Hed district has increased and a medicinal plant market has emerged recently.

Another interesting observation relates to some villages located around KM 52. In these villages, many Hmong families plant herbal medicine in large gardens for sale in southern Laos, in cities such as Takhek, Savannakhet, Pakse, as well as in markets along the Lao-Thai border. This southern area, mainly composed of Lao ethnic groups, does not have a very rich diversity of plants and constitutes therefore a promising market. The Hmong herbal medicine sellers have built up a dense and wide network throughout the country and also at a cross-border scale through exchanges made with Thai people.

Finally, some herbal medicines are also sent to Hmong living overseas. The US appears to be the main destination for exports of herbal medicine gathered in Laos, and especially from Nong Hed district. According to the Post Office data, more than 400 packages were sent from Phonsavan to the US between January 2010 and July 2011 (monthly average: 22 packages); 260 packages were sent from KM 52 to the US between January 2010 and August 2011 (monthly average: 14.5 packages). France comes second concerning the exports (with a monthly average of 1 package from Phonsavan) and finally Australia comes last. These striking differences can be explained by the distribution of Hmong people between these three countries; the quantity of exports of herbal medicine reflects closely the different concentrations of the Hmong diaspora across the world. The differences raise also some questions about customs regulations and health care systems in the host countries, either



that their customs laws constitute in some cases a barrier to herbal medicine trade, or that Hmong people do not have similar access to health facilities in each host country.

Concerning the distribution of the packages between the different states in the US, we observe that Minnesota (and especially the city of Saint Paul) is in first place, followed by California where Fresno and Sacramento get most of the packages. This observation also fits well with the distribution of Hmong community within the American territory: nearly 30,000 Hmong people live in Saint Paul, 25,000 in Fresno, and almost 17,000 in Sacramento.

The growing demand of herbal medicine from Vientiane, KM 52 and even from the US has several impacts on the local territory and especially in Nong Hed district where villagers gathered herbal medicine. The economy of this area has been boosted and the plant demand has changed the activities of women there. Several women we met in a village around Tham Say explained that they started gathering medicinal plants just a few years ago in order to increase their incomes; the first women who started this activity (about 8 years ago) now act as middlemen and sellers. This redeployment is not only due to the emergence of a new market abroad; it is also the result of the ban on opium poppy cultivation by the Laotian government in 1998.

This growing demand for medicinal plants, especially from the diaspora, also reasserts the value of traditional remedies within the Hmong community in the Lao PDR: the fact that American Hmong still use herbal medicine from their place of origin when they live in the most developed country in the world contributes to change the perception about these products. With the economic development, improved communications and the liberalization of trade, Lao PDR is experiencing a growing availability of modern drugs and an increasing use of it among the Laotian population. As a consequence, we observe that traditional knowledge about herbal medicine generally decreases among the young Lao, Lue, and Khmu community in some areas where we conducted other fieldwork: in Vientiane, in Luang Prabang, in rural areas along the Nam U River in the northern part of the country.



Picture 4 – A villager looking for medicinal plants in the forest (Nong Hed district)

In this perspective, the commoditization of herbal medicine contributes to the preservation of traditional knowledge as it affects directly the intergenerational transmission of knowledge: in fact, during plant collection, women can share their knowledge between them and can also teach their children (mainly girls) who often come to help. These trips in the forest are therefore ideal times for knowledge transfer from adults to the young generation. On the contrary, in the areas where traditional medicine is neglected, there is less and less plants gathering and therefore a decrease of transmission. Of course, commoditization also has its drawbacks, especially in terms of environmental degradation since a increased demand for medicinal plants leads to intensive and unsustainable gathering. However, as shown by Jean-Marc Dubost (next contribution), this situation is partly counterbalanced by the development of private medicinal gardens where the plants are grown before to be sold.

To conclude, this case study demonstrates how the circulation of herbal medicine through transnational networks perpetuates an extraterritorial identity among the Hmong diapora. However, this study has some limits that we will try to overcome during our next fieldworks. The study is in fact based on the Laotian side and focuses only on the transformations of local territory through global flows. In the future, it would be interesting to explore also the US side in order to better understand the reasons of the use of herbal medicine by Hmong Americans (Fadiman 1998): in which case herbal medicine is being used? What are the links between biomedicine and herbal products? And what about the relations between shops and customers?

## References

- Bochaton A., 2011 — La construction de l'espace transfrontalier lao-thaïlandais : une analyse à travers le recours aux soins, *Espace Populations Sociétés*, 2011-2 : 337-351.
- Bochaton A., Lefebvre B., 2008 — The rebirth of the hospital: heterotopia and medical tourism in Asia, in *Asia on Tour: Exploring the rise of Asian tourism*, Tim Winter, Peggy Teo, T.C. Chang, London, Routledge : 97-108.

- Bode M., 2006 — Taking Traditional knowledge to the market: the commoditization of Indian medicine, in *Anthropology and Medicine*, 13(3).
- Corlett J.L., Dean E.A., Grivetti L.E., 2003 — *Hmong Gardens: botanical diversity in an urban setting*, *Economic Botany* 57(3): 365-379.
- Fadiman A., 1998 — *The spirit catches you and you fall down, a Hmong child, her Americans doctors, and the collision of two cultures*, Noonday Press, 341p.
- Glinos I.A., Baeten R., Maarse H., 2010 — Purchasing health services abroad: practices of cross-border contracting and patient mobility in six European countries, *Health Policy*, pp. 103-112.
- Hassoun J.P., 1997 — *Hmong du Laos en France, changement social, initiatives et adaptations*, PUF, Paris, 215p.
- Ly S., 2011 — *La diaspora Hmong et transferts de fond : une etude de cas d'un village dans la province de Vientiane (Laos) : le km 52*, mémoire de géographie de M1, Université Paris-Diderot, 113p.
- Mulot S., Musso S., Sakoyan J. (eds.), 2011 — “Numéro spécial : Médecines, mobilités et globalisation”, *Anthropologie et Santé*, 3(2011).
- Ngaosyvathn P., 1983 — Propos sur la médecine traditionnelle laotienne, *Cahiers de l'Asie du Sud-Est*, 13-14, 113-126.
- Ovesen J., 1995 — *A minority enters the nation state, a case study of a Hmong community in Vientiane Province, Laos*, Uppsala Research Reports in Cultural Anthropology, n°14, 94p.
- Pordié Laurent, 2011 — Savoirs thérapeutiques asiatiques et globalisation, *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances*, Vol.5, n°1 : 3-12.
- Pottier R., 2004 — *Santé et Société au Laos (1973-1978). Le système de santé lao et ses possibilités de développement : le cas de la zone de santé de Tha Dūa*, texte remanié de thèse de doctorat en ethnologie, Paris, Comité de coopération avec le Laos (CCL), 505 p.
- Sakoyan J., Musso S., Mulot S., 2011 — “Quand la santé et les médecines circulent”, *Anthropologie et Santé*, 3(2011), <http://anthropologiesante.revues.org/819>
- Soejarto D.D., 2006 — Medicinal Plants: An important asset to health care in a region of Central Laos, *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 106 (3), 303-311.
- Sydara K., 2005 — Use of traditional medicine in Lao PDR, *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 13, 199-205.
- Westermeyer J.J., 1988 — Folk medicine in Laos: a comparison between two ethnic groups, *Social Science & Medicine*, 27 (8), 769-778.

# 14 *Transmission and vitality of traditional medicinal knowledge among several ethnic groups of Northern Laos*



---

JEAN-MARC DUBOST

This study is the result of two campaigns of medicinal plant collecting and recording of their uses with traditional healers in two areas of northern Lao: the first one was conducted in 2010, in the Nam Kan National Park (NKNP), in Bokeo province, with three ethnic groups, Hmong, Lue and Lamet, and the second one during summer 2011 in Nong Het district, Xieng Khuang province, with Hmong people.

In this communication I will address the questions of traditional medicinal knowledge (TMK) transmission and dynamics in the two areas. This will also allow to compare the destiny of TMK in two Hmong communities living in quite different social environments regarding their integration in the global Lao economy and emergent ways of life.

I will first consider inter-ethnic TMK transfers between the three groups studied in the NKNP, and the dynamic of these knowledge in this area. Then I will compare medicinal plant knowledge of Hmong people in different locations: in a Hmong village, Ban Tup, located in the NKNP, in Nong Het district, and between the 2 areas. I will then address the question of the dynamic of traditional knowledge transmission in Nong Het district which appears to

have a very different pattern than the one prevailing in NKNP, and of the potential impact on environment that this dynamic may have in Nong Het district.

### **Inter-ethnic transfers of traditional medicinal knowledge in Nam Kan National Park**

In 2010, on the request of Animo, the company which manages the NKNP, I started an inventory of medicinal plants used by the population living on the park to edit a guide presenting these plants and their uses (Dubost 2013).

The NKNP spreads over the province of Bokeo to the west and over the province of Luang Namtha to the east. It is mostly populated on its southern border (see fig. 1). The population living in the park belongs to five ethnic groups: Lamet and Khmu (Mon-Khmer language group), Lue (Tai-Kadai language group), Hmong (Miao-Yao language group) and Lahu (Tibeto-Burmese language group).

The survey consisted in collecting medicinal plants and recording their uses through interviews with healers and people from three villages located in the Southern part of the park (fig. 2):

- Ban Tup, a Hmong village around which 106 specimens were collected: 50 with a healer and 56 with four other villagers.
- Don Kham, a Lamet village around which 25 specimens were collected with a healer.
- Ban Tafa, a Lue village around which 80 specimens were collected with a healer.

The healers of the 3 villages were chosen among the most renowned ones in their community.

Samples of the collected plants were identified by J.F. Maxwell, curator of the Chiang Mai University Herbarium, and given to the CMU Herbarium in Chiang Mai, the National Museum of Natural History's Herbarium in Paris and the National Herbarium of Lao PDR in Vientiane.



Regarding the corpus of plant collected, the Lue and Lamet healers told me that they had shown me all the plants they knew, which is not the case of the Hmong healer who said he knew many more plants than he was able to show me. In any case, the knowledge of a single healer, even renowned in his community, doesn't cover the whole TMK knowledge used by the local group (cf. 2nd part of this study).

Since it is difficult to list all the species known and used by all the members of these communities, I will focus only on the species shown in two or three of the communities, and compare their uses to address the question of knowledge transfers from one community to another.

180 species of medicinal plants have been documented in this area, among which 23 species were shown to me by two or three of the ethnic groups approached. Among these 23 species "shared" by several groups, 15 are used by both Hmong and Lue, 6 by Hmong and Lamet, 5 by Lamet and Lue, 2 by Lamet, Hmong and Lue. Keeping in mind that we don't know all the plants used by Hmong informants, we can note in first stance that these shared species represent a rather small proportion of all the plants shown, which gives a first quantitative indication of the relative place TMK transfers might take between these communities.

If we look now at the medical uses of the 23 "shared" species, 20 of them are prescribed for different ailments<sup>1</sup>; They constitute:

- 14 out of the 15 plants used both by Hmong and Lü,
- 4 out of the 6 plants used both by Hmong and Lamet,
- 4 out of the 5 plants used both by Lamet and Lu.

In addition, out of these 20 species prescribed for different ailments, the way they are used by the the different communities is often not the same: for 12 of them it is a different part of the plant which is used, and for 14 of them, the way they are prepared and taken is different. These divergences indicate that the knowledge associated

---

<sup>1</sup> All data about these plants and their use are presented in my Master thesis (Dubost 2010).



to these plants most probably doesn't come from a transfer of knowledge between the communities.

Among these 23 shared species, 4 are used for similar ailments<sup>2</sup>, moreover the same part of the plant is used, prepared and given in a similar way (even though another part can be also used in a different manner). These similarities on several parameters suggest more a transfer of knowledge than a confluence, but this does not necessarily mean that the transfer took place between the different groups. In some cases for example, part of the knowledge may have come along with the introduction of exogenous species. It is probably the case for *Psidium guajava* which was introduced from Tropical America and whose leaves are recorded to be used in Mexico and Central America to treat diarrhoea (Gutiérrez *et al.* 2008, 2-5).

Botanical name	Ethnic group	Ailment	Part used	Indications
<i>Derris acuminata</i> Grah.	Lamet	Stomach ache with blood in faeces	wood, bark	Stem is lightly burned, bark peeled off, and a decoction is prepared with the wood to make a beverage
<i>Derris acuminata</i> Grah.	Hmong	Stomach ache (ulcer), broken bone	wood, bark	Chopped wood decoction drunk daily for stomach pain. Bark is wrapped around broken bone area.
<i>Psidium guajava</i> L.	Lamet	Diarrhoea	leaves	The leaves which taste bitter are chewed 2 times a day.
<i>Psidium guajava</i> L.	Hmong	Diarrhoea	leaves, root	Young leaves are eaten or a decoction prepared with the root is drunk.
<i>Rubus blepharoneurus</i> Card.	Lu	Pain in chest	Root	Root decoction beverage.
<i>Rubus blepharoneurus</i> Card.	Lamet	Edible fruit. Low back pains	Fruit, root	Root decoction beverage
<i>Vernonia andersonii</i> Cl.	Lu	Skin outbreak all over the body with itchiness	Leaves, stem	Leaves and stem decoction is used to lotion the affected area.
<i>Vernonia andersonii</i> Cl.	Hmong	Sore legs, itchy eyes	Whole plant	Legs bath with all plant decoction. For itchy eyes, face is washed with the decoction

Table 1: Plants given for similar ailments in 2 of the 3 ethnic groups under study.

<sup>2</sup> In order not to emphasize differences of use which are far more numerous, I have been quite flexible on what to consider as being similar features.

In conclusion, regarding knowledge transfers, if TMK transfers between the three communities may occur (which is possible for the use of four of the shared species with the restriction of possible common exogenous origin), they seem to be rather exceptional (20 out of 23 shared species are given for different ailments and used in different ways)<sup>3</sup>.

Yet, these groups are geographically very close, for instance Ban Tup, the Hmong village, lies half an hour away by motorbike from Don Kram which itself is about six km away by road from Ban Tafa. They maintain neighbourly relations characterized notably by trade (rice, land etc.), schooling –Lamet children from Don Kham go to school at Ban Tafa – and interethnic marriage between Hmong and Lamet. In addition, every week, an open market frequented by people of the three villages is also held near Don Kham. We could therefore question why, despite this proximity and the relationships, medicinal inter-ethnic knowledge transfers seems to be so scarce.

If exogenous knowledge might be discarded for reasons linked to cultural identity, there are anyway some structural obstacles to interethnic communication regarding TMC: the Lue traditional medicine for example is a scholarly medicine consisting in preparations combining many ingredients. The recipes are recorded in lue manuscripts preserved in monasteries, often written in pali (Lafont 1962, 395-396). The indications consist in very concise formulas and need to be supplemented by oral transmission to be understood (Pottier 2007, 262-263). Thus the Lue healer of Ban Tafa has learned from his father-in-law who had been a monk in a Lue pagoda; while on the field, he was often consulting his father-in-law's notebooks to find all the plants for specific preparations.

Another obstacle relates to specific rules of transmission: while knowledge is passed down from ascendants to descendants in most of the cases, it can also be obtained from other healers. Such cases involve a special ceremony and a form of payment. According to Hmong healers, transmitting part of TMK without the agreement

---

<sup>3</sup> 4 sp. are used the same way and 20 differently but it amounts to 23 shared sp. as one of them, *Rubus blepharoneurus* is similarly used by Lu and Lamet while used for different ailment by Hmong people.

of the medicinal spirits (which is obtained through such rituals) may result in health misfortunes.

At last, but not least, while each of the three communities has its own vernacular names for each plant, my informants were not able to give the equivalent Lao names<sup>4</sup>. Given that Lao is the vehicular language used to communicate between these different ethnic groups, this certainly represents another hindrance to talk about medicinal plants.

### **The future of TMK in these communities**

Since the opening of the road linking Huay Xay at the Thai border to Luang Namtha 20 years ago, and the recent access to modern drugs supplies it allows, the recourse to traditional medicines is very quickly decreasing in the area. In Ban Tafa (Lue), the best local expert acknowledges that since then, his services are barely required, and that he is not transmitting his knowledge to anyone anymore. To his own account, it was also a big effort for him to recall all the plants he knew about, because he was scarcely using them. In Ban Tup (Hmong), I made a survey about the use of the different medicines available; results showed that 83 % of the families reported using mostly (and solely for 18% of them) modern drugs bought in Huay Xay, the nearest big town, the use of which only dates back a few decades, since villagers have access to the road. We have also seen that in Don Kham (Lamet) the best specialist of medicinal plants could only recall a mere 25 herbal species, which can seem quite surprising as the Lamet people are said to be one of the first ethnic group to have populated the country.

While their use is becoming scarce, the transmission of TMK is also affected as most of it takes place when children go with their grandparents or parents in the forest to collect food, or on the way to gardens, or such opportunities which allow collecting medicinal plants when needed. In fact, if people don't collect medicinal plants, children don't see them and are not taught about them. Also, the fact that herbal medicine is less and less used in favour of western medicine, which enjoys a strong image of modernity and

---

<sup>4</sup> except for edible plants commonly found in markets

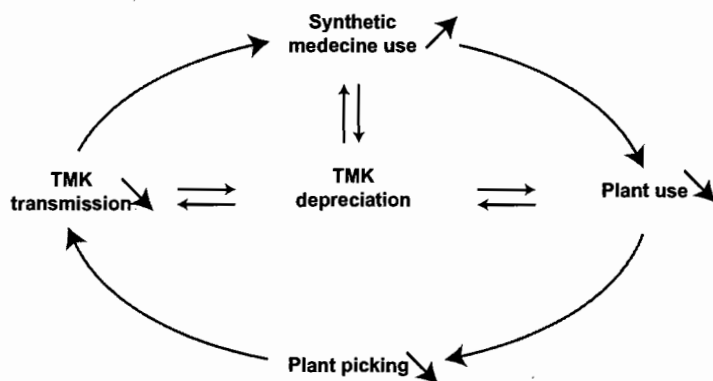


Diagram 1: Dynamic of TMK in the Namkan National Park

efficiency, leads to a quick depreciation of the TMK, which affects also the transmission of this knowledge. All these factors are of course mutually enhancing their effects and form what one could call a vicious circle of TMK depreciation. In the course of such a process, a big part of TMK, particularly in an oral culture context (Hmong, Lamet), risks to sink quickly into oblivion.

### **Comparison of TMK among Hmong people in Bokeo and Xiang Kuang provinces**

Another fieldwork to collect plants and to record the knowledge associated to them has been carried out with Hmong people in Nong Het district, Xieng Khuang province during the summer 2011. This fieldwork was part of a survey about commercial networks of medicinal plants, carried out in Northern Lao together with Audrey Bochaton.

As in Ban Tup, Nong Het district population is dominated by White *Hmong -hmong dawb-* (Oparaocha 1998). But while Ban Tup shows some of the features of a traditional hmong village, lying two hours away by car from the first urbanized centre, the Hmong healers we worked with in Nong Het district were living in a much more urbanized environment. They are settled around Ban Nong Het,

a small town located near the Vietnamese border along the road linking Phonsavan to this border.

Fieldwork has consisted in collecting medicinal plant and recording their uses with local healers who also sell and supply a wide medicinal plant market<sup>5</sup>. It was not possible to assess precisely of all the plants known by each of my informants, mainly because the study was conducted during the wet season, when access to sloppy areas was difficult and people were quite busy on rice fields. Another difficulty to compare Hmong TMK between the two studied areas is that Nong Het people are living in very different environments and ecosystems than the ones of Ban Tup villagers: in Ban Tup, medicinal plants are mainly collected in old dense forest and secondary forest at an altitude ranging from 400 to 800 m, while in Nong Het district, people are mainly collecting plants in grazing areas with scattered bushes, and in young secondary forests at a much higher altitude (1300-1650m). Thus the flora and species distribution in their respective environment is evidently quite different.

For these reasons, I will focus again on the species used by two or more informants to compare Hmong plant knowledge in Ban Tup village (Bokeo), with the one in Nong Het district (Xieng Khuang), and finally compare the two areas. 118 species used as medicinal plants were collected in Nong Het area with three healers who also sell plants and supply medicinal plants markets, which makes a corpus comparable in size to the 101 species collected with Hmong people from Ban Tup (half of them with a renown healer, the other half with other villagers). Among these species, 11 were shown by different people within Ban Tup area, 5 were shown by different people in Nong Het area and 9 species were shown in the two locations

I will compare TMK in these two locations by using the two most significant<sup>6</sup> parameters, the Hmong names and the ailments for which shared species are used, as presented in table n°2.

---

<sup>5</sup> see also Audrey Bochaton contribution in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Parts of plants used and the mode of administration are not as significant for a quantitative analysis since they display little possibilities.

From table 2, we can see that the names and prescriptions of these plants differ in a large proportion from one place to another (3<sup>rd</sup> line), but also within the same area (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> lines). The fact that the same plant in the same area can have different names and can be administrated for very different ailments accounts more for rather independent knowledge chains, resulting from vertical transmission, than for horizontal knowledge diffusion within a community<sup>7</sup>. This view matches what most of the healers say, that their knowledge was passed down to them by their ascendants (and sometimes by parents-in-law) and in some cases supplemented by a renowned healer – in which case the transmission involved a ritualized form.

	Species number	Local Vernacular Name	Ailment
Within Ban Tup area	9	6d / 3s	5d / 4s
Within Nong Het area	5	5d	5d
Ban Tup / Nong Het	11	10d / 1s	7d / 3s

Table 2: Cumulated differences (d) and similarities (s) regarding vernacular names of plants and ailments they are used for, for plants shown by two people, within Ban Tup area, within Nong Het area and between the two places; 2<sup>nd</sup> column gives the number of species shared.

This diversity of TMK is also in accordance with the social organization of Hmong villages. Their population is constituted of a core of families or lineage that do not stick together along the succession of generations (Lemoine 1972, 33 and 45), but which moves and changes according to the necessities of shifting

<sup>7</sup> This tendency needs to be supplemented by further collections in order to get most of the plants known by each specialist. If these results are even more evident in Ban Tup than in Nong Het, this may be due to geographic factors: people from Ban Tup live in a much more compact and isolated village than our informants from Nong Het district who are scattered a few km away from each other along the main road. However, even in Ban Tup the differences over TMK between the diverse informants are more important than the similarities.

cultivation and commercial opportunities<sup>8</sup>. Olivier Évrard and Gilles Maurer made a similar observation about the history of Ban Tup: “rather than a community rooted in a precisely defined territory, Ban Tup appears as a temporary convergence of common strategies and interests.” (Évrard and Maurer 1997, 18, my translation).

However, beyond the great variability of the Hmong pharmacopeia, the nosology (i.e the classification of diseases, which I approach through the description of ailments for which plants shown are given) shows a great deal of homogeneity. It seems that we can distinguish two levels in Hmong medicinal culture: on the one hand, nosology shows representations of health disorders that are quite common to Hmong people from different places and lineage, and on the other hand, the pharmacopeia exhibits a great diversity from one healer to another and reflects vertical chains of transmission rather than horizontal ones.

### **The dynamic of Hmong TMK in Nong Het district:**

Many Hmong people from Nong Het area have recently settled in KM 52 (a small town named after its location, 52 km north of Vientiane) and surrounding hamlets. These migrations are linked to the land allocation programs sponsored by the government and to the banning of poppy growing, but also to the desire to get closer to urbanized centres in order to access public services and commercial opportunities. Some of the Hmong started to sell medicinal plants about 10 years ago. The proximity of Vientiane has brought Lao plants buyers but also foreigners from neighbouring countries. In addition, members of the Hmong diasporas (USA, France) who come for the Hmong new year celebration have also started to buy traditional medicine, and a growing demand for medicinal plants ensued. Consequently, the Hmong settlement at KM 52 has now become one of a major medicinal plant “hub” market in Laos. It is supplied mainly by Hmong relatives from Nong Het district who collect plants on order, but also, to some extent, by

---

<sup>8</sup> These traditional processes are quickly changing with the government land allocation program which notably intends to limit slash and burn agriculture and control population movements, but the situation we consider about TMK is the result of these former processes.

a local production that has appeared in dedicated gardens and by collections in the surroundings.

In such context, the picking of medicinal plant is increasing in these areas, and as most of knowledge transmission occurs while collecting and preparing plants (cf. supra, p.281), TMK transmission is also broadening. Contrary to what we have observed in the Nam Kan National Park, a virtuous circle of TMK reassertion is occurring in the areas supplying this market:

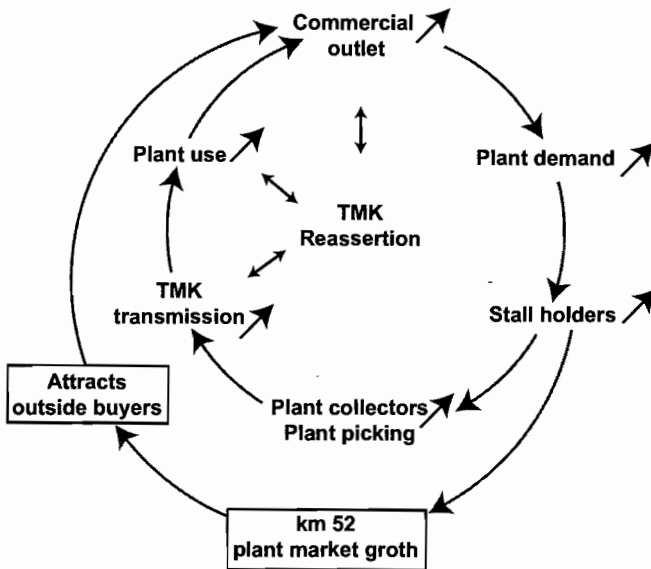


Diagram 2: Dynamic of TMK all along KM 52 commercial plant network.

The commercial outlet of KM 52 creates a demand for plants, which are collected mainly in Nong Het district. As plants collecting increases, knowledge is again passed down from parents to their children who help them. When they cannot meet the demand, people collecting and selling plants recruit their relatives as labor but also their neighbours. Therefore, it is not only traditional vertical transmission (from ascendants to descendants) that is maintained



and enhanced, but this new commercial demand also leads to the emergence of different forms of horizontal transmission (within the same generation).

According to Herve Morin (2011, chapter 4), the increase of transmission events and the diversification of transmission chains are two key factors for the perpetuation of a tradition. Moreover, the fact that the collecting and selling of plants appears to be a potential source of income probably plays a significant role in restoring TMK image. Finally, the increasing demand for medicinal plants from the Hmong diaspora settled in USA (Corlett et al. 2003), apart from its immediate economic impact, tends to give to traditional medicine a more positive image. For those still living in Laos, Hmong who are settled in America represent successful individuals who live according to 'modern lifestyle'. Therefore, their demand for traditional medicine is likely to counter, or at least balance, the strong image of modernity and efficiency enjoyed by western medicine, which is an important cause of TMK depreciation.

Supplying this new plant market leads however to a significant increase of plant collecting pressure in the surroundings of Nong Het district, and to a smaller extent of KM 52. Some plant collectors say that some species now become scarcer and are more difficult to find, not only due to the increase of collecting pressure, but also to the increase of cattle grazing in Nong Het district. Conversely however, healers or sellers grow some plants they can acclimatise in their domestic gardens, to have them at hand for their own use (as it is customary among rural communities) but also -for the ones settled in KM 52- to supply the medicinal plant market in some of the species which don't grow where they live or are difficult to get. Some sellers even have special gardens, away from their houses, dedicated to the cultivation of specific medicinal plants. This, purposely or not, constitutes a kind of *ex-situ* preservation of some endangered species by creating informal conservatories spots, and could contribute to lessen collecting pressure<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> These practices however cannot contribute to insure the preservation of genetic diversity as most of these plants are often propagated by exchange of cuttings.

Another interesting point is that many medicinal or condimental plants move along with the population from garden to garden in Laos -and even to the USA (Corlett et al. 2003). This potentially opens a way for species dissemination since plants, once acclimatised in their new spots, may propagate outside the gardens. In Nong Het for example, one of the healers interviewed had planted in her garden eight plants she had brought from Bokeo province where she had spent her childhood.

### **Conclusion on TMK dynamic in both areas**

We have seen that in the Nam Kan National Park in Bokeo province, TMK are in a process of quick depreciation. The datas of my study in this area has been recently published as a guide book of medicinal plants used by local people, notably to be distributed in the surrounding villages schools. It is to be hoped that this contribution will contribute to safeguard local TMK but also to reassert them among the young generations who will see for the first time the knowledge of their parents and grandparents printed in a book in Lao language. However in Nong Het area, the integration of the medicinal knowledge in new economic processes is already a very efficient way of maintaining, diffusing and reasserting them. It is interesting in this case to note that, regarding the two Hmong communities considered, it is paradoxically the most “integrated” (economically and culturally) population who is able, through economic processes of larger scale, to preserve and broaden the use and transmission of some of their own traditional knowledge.

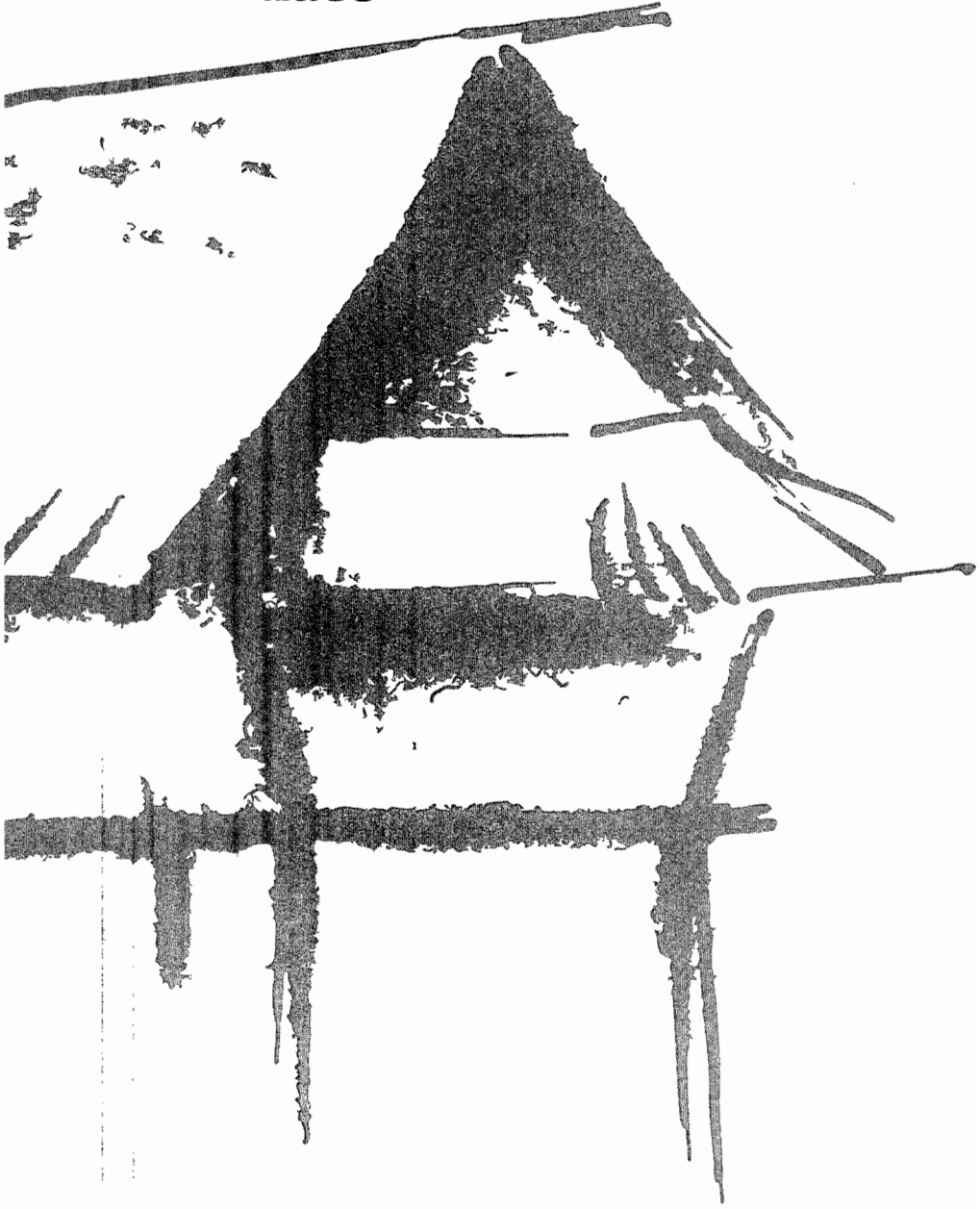
### **References**

- Corlett J.-L., Dean, E.-A., Grivetti L.-E., 2003 — “Hmong garden: botanical diversity in an urban setting”, *Economic Botany*, 57, pp. 365-379
- Dubost Jean-Marc, 2013 — *Medicinal plants used in Nam kam National Park*, Vientiane, Animo.
- Dubost Jean-Marc, 2010 — *Une enquête ethnobotanique dans le Parc National de Nam Kan, Province de Bokeo – Laos*, Master « Évolution, Patrimoine Naturel et Sociétés », Paris, Museum National of Natural History

- Évrard Olivier, Maurer Gilles, 1997 — *Etude socio économique préliminaire - Réserve Nam Kan, Bokéo*, report for Forespace project (personal communication).
- Gutiérrez R.-M., Mitchell S., Solis R.-V., 2008 — “*Psidium guajava*: a review of its traditional uses, phytochemistry and pharmacology”, *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, Vol 117, issue 1, 17, Pages 1–27.
- Lafont Pierre-Bernard, 1962 — “Les écritures du pali au Laos”, *Bulletin de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient*, Issue 50-2, pp. 395-405.
- Lemoine Jacques, 1972 — *Un village Hmong vert du Haut Laos*, Éd. du Centre national de la recherche scientifique.
- Morin Olivier, 2011, *Comment les traditions naissent et meurent - La transmission culturelle*, Paris, Odile Jacob.
- Oparocha S., 1998 — “Hmong women, opium cultivation and livestock production in Lao PDR”, *Gender, technology and development*, vol. 2 no. 3, pp. 373-95.
- Pottier Richard — 2007, *Yú dī mī hêng « être bien, avoir de la force », essai sur les pratiques thérapeutiques lao*. Paris, Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient.



*Postface*





# Postface



---

CHARLES F. KEYES

The papers in this volume address what might on the surface seem like very disparate topics: prehistory, ethnography, demography, and public health. There are, nonetheless, some strong common threads. I cannot adequately show how these threads together make up an interesting cloth, but I will try to follow a few of them

If I had to chose a title for these conclusions, I would entitle it "Peoples move, places remain; people in places create social spaces." All places have physical characteristics that include land, natural resources, and water. There is cultivatable land and land with natural foliage with plants and wildlife. In the past these were essential for some people to maintain an adequate diet and to benefit from medicinal herbs; today, there are environmentalist concerns that the diversity of flora and fauna of many places may disappear. Land also contains minerals that humans for centuries have found valuable for their livelihoods. In the premodern past iron ore was mined for tools (see paper by Pryce); today, there are mining companies extracting tin, tungsten and other ores in the hills for many industrial uses. Lands also contain forests and trees that have been a resource for humans since the beginning of humanity. Today many places have been denuded of trees because of excessive human demand. Lands also contain water – streams, lakes, and oceans – the use of which has become more contentious in modern times.

Although we are aware of the intense competition today over rights to these natural resources, a paper in this volume also demonstrates

that such competition also existed in premodern times. Today, as in the past, people who seek to use natural resources must answer the question as to whether the right to these resources is vested primarily in the people who live in a place, or with the political authority that exercises domain or seeks to do so over a place? In short, the relationship between people and place is not simply a consequence of who actually inhabits a particular locale.

A second common theme I noticed in the papers presented is that people have been moving since prehistoric times. Why do they move? They move to find food; they move to find places to produce food; but they also move to create social spaces, to create places on which they put their social imprint on physical locales. They also move to flee conflict or elude the authority of a state<sup>1</sup>. They move for religious purposes, they move for adventure, and today they move for tourism.

Often when peoples move to new places, they create new 'social spaces' that are, as Condominas (1990) and Lefebvre (1991) have shown, constituted as much by social relations as by the physical properties of a locality. Social spaces include spirits and ancestors as well as physically invisible boundaries between living people. Social spaces, thus, are not the same as geographical places.

Some people who have had a long history of moving from one location to another still remain very much in the same social space. The Hmong, for example, have since ancient times been changing places, yet still retain the same social space. Hmong social space is based on kinship, or, more precisely, on shared descent. No matter where they live if they share a common ancestor they are from within a common social space. They share, in other words, social memory of a common past<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> I think it is somewhat interesting that James Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2009) was hardly referred to in the papers herein. In his book Scott argues that upland peoples took up swidden agriculture – what he calls 'escape agriculture' – in order to put themselves outside the authority of the state. As I have argued elsewhere (Keyes 2010), I find this thesis provocative, but unpersuasive because it reduces upland social structure to being an adaptation to states.

<sup>2</sup> See in this connection, Tapp (2000) and on social memory, see Tanabe and Keyes (2002).



It is social memory that Tanabe maintains underlies spirit cults. Spirit cults are significant because they link people who share a past and they relate people to each other in an emotional as well as in a physical way. Social memory is expressed not only by words or ideas but also by feelings. Many significant spirits are connected to places – they inhabit particular hills, particular streams, particular trees and forests. The cults of such spirits are what Paul Mus (1975 [1933]) termed ‘cadastral cults’, that is, cults that connect people to particular places.

Memories of places can, also, become de-territorialized and memories of the suffering of ancestors can relate people to places very different from where they now live. A classic example is that of Jews when celebrating the Jewish *seder*, the ritual meal at the Jewish holiday of Passover. At the *seder* families ritually remember the exodus of Jews from Egypt and end by speaking of return to Jerusalem. For many centuries almost no Jews had ever been to Jerusalem, but the memory contributed to the idea of a Jewish homeland being kept alive, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem once again became a real, rather than just a remembered, place for Jews. In Southeast Asia, many peoples – for example, Karen and Mien – in a similar ritualized way keep alive a memory of an ancient homeland that none have actually lived in.

Until modern times, memory of a shared past was communicated orally, often through myth (see paper by Évrard), but today most people use other means that include not only printed literature but also the memory houses that we term ‘museums’. Increasingly memories are communicated digitally, as Amporn Jirattikorn discusses in her paper. She examines how digital recordings of music connected to a homeland – in this case, the Shan state in Burma – become embodiments of social space for those who now live in very different places, such as northern Thailand. In a similar way, Prasit Leepreecha (2008) has shown that videos made by Hmong living outside of Asia have contributed to shaping the social memory of a Hmong homeland in Asia.

Several papers speak of ‘territorialization’, that is the imposition by a political authority – usually a state – of its authority over places. As a

number of scholars who work in Southeast Asia such as Thongchai Winichakul (1994) and Vandergeest and Peluso (1995) have shown territorialization entails the drawing of borders, especially between different nation-states, but also within states in the defining of land rights. Today those living within the boundaries of a state are differentiated by whether they are 'citizens', who are officially deemed to have the right to live in the place under the authority of the state, and 'migrants'. The latter are further subdivided between those who have been accorded the right to live in a place legally for some specified period of time and 'illegal migrants'. Many of the Shan discussed by Amporn, as well as the Burmans and Karen from Burma living in western and northern Thailand discussed by Chayan, and Hmong from Laos living in Thailand discussed by Prasit face the problem of being defined as peoples living outside their legitimate places.

In fixing the borders that separate one state from another, governments have also sought to ensure that all who legitimately live within their borders share not only citizenship but also nationality, that is, that they embrace a shared memory of national identity. Since some who live legitimately within the boundaries of a state have very distinct identities that through shared memory links them to pasts that are sometime quite separate from the official past of a nation, states have also embarked on 'civilizing missions' as Mukdawan writes to transform such distinctive peoples as those living in the uplands of Southeast Asian states into national subjects. The primary technology of power – to use Foucault's term – used to ensure such transformation, as Panada, speaking about the upland peoples of Thailand points out, is state-sponsored education<sup>3</sup>. Thailand, which has had a longer history of state-mandated compulsory education than Laos, has thus been more successful than Laos in this process nation-building.

Internationally recognized boundaries between states are very recent and mainly associated with 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism and 20<sup>th</sup> century post-colonialism. Prior to this, peoples were divided by vaguely defined and often shifting 'frontiers'. Peoples living in

---

<sup>3</sup> See, in this connection, my paper, "The Proposed World of the School..." (Keyes 1991)

some frontier areas occupied distinctive ‘middle places’ – to use a term first proposed by White (1991) and then used with reference to South China by Giersch (2001). A classic case of a middle space in premodern mainland Southeast Asia is the area, as discussed by Grant Evens, in what is today northeastern Laos and northwestern Vietnam where various Tai-speaking peoples live. The Tai-Dam, Tai-Khao, Tai-Daeng lived in what were autonomous müang (political domains) in a middle space between the Theravada Buddhist and Sinitic worlds. Even today some of the characteristics of the formerly autonomous middle space remain characteristic of this region<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the efforts of all modern states to eliminate middle places, some still remain. Many peoples who live in northern Laos, as Évrard and Guémas show in their papers, remain peoples of middle spaces. In northern Thailand, according to Sakarin na Nan, the Mrabri still appear to remain a people of a middle place rather than fully assimilated citizens of Thailand. Perhaps more significantly, as Kwanchewan shows, the Karen of Burma and Thailand who are adherents to the Talakhon movement have created a very distinctive middle space. As Paul Cohen (2001) has shown, Buddhist movements have also shaped spaces in which people from northern Thailand, Laos, and the Shan state of Burma share a common culture that is not the national cultures of the states under whose authority they live<sup>5</sup>. Another Karen case, that discussed by Malee based on research in a district in Chiang Mai province whose population is nearly 100% Karen, has been accorded the designation of a distinct district but is not allowed to be self-governing and, thus, does not constitute a true middle space. Kallayaniwattana District in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the district Malee discusses, is very similar to the so-called autonomous political units of China.

Middle spaces also exist because of the flow of diseases that are not inhibited by political borders. Such flows, as Bochaton and

---

<sup>4</sup> See, in this connection, the dissertation by Hoang Cam (2009), a ‘White Tai’ from Son-la in northern Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup> Wasan Panyagaew and Phra Sapawuth Apisit in forthcoming study of the followers of *Khraba* Maha Khuen Kham show that Cohen’s findings are not limited only to the monk who is the focus of his study.

Kunstadter show, create a new type of middle space that is defined with reference to health care or disease control. These spaces are also ones in which new tensions and even conflicts between peoples develop as they compete for or are denied access to health care.

Because people continue to move, 'new frontiers' are created as diverse peoples come to live – at last temporarily – in the same places and interact with each other. As Prasit in his paper on the Hmong from Laos living in Thailand documents well, governments sometimes use a policy of dictated resettlement in seeking to mitigate the problems, often defined as 'security' concerns, associated with the development of a new frontier. Even though refugee camps are seen both by those who live in them and by the governments of the states in which they are located as 'liminal' – that is, not as permanent social spaces, during the period when a resettlement camp exists, as is well documented from studies of Khmer, Lao, and Burmese refugees living in camps in Thailand, a unique social space is created. Those who have lived such camps often continue to carry with them the social memory of their experiences when they resettle elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. Sometimes, as with many Palestinians in Lebanon and Jordan, refugee camps can themselves become semi-permanent social spaces.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century refugee camps have been way stations for peoples who eventually often resettle in places very different to those places from which they have originally come. Both voluntary and refugee migration has resulted in the dispersal of people away from their homeland to new places. As many such people retain strong emotional and often today real links with their homelands, they may become a 'diaspora', that is, a dispersed people who continue to think of their homeland as a place from which they or their ancestors came rather than the place they now live in<sup>7</sup>. Amporn in her paper discusses how Shan living in Thailand today constitute a diaspora. These Shan, like others whose parents or ancestors moved from their original homeland, may not, however,

---

<sup>6</sup> See Long (1993) detailed ethnography of one such camp for refugees from Laos that was located in Thailand.

<sup>7</sup> A 1991 essay by William Safran is widely cited as providing the most influential definition of diaspora.

remain a diaspora. They may well assimilate to Thai society, whose culture is similar to their own, or they may, like many migrants to the United States, Australia, Canada, and elsewhere become new ethnic minorities whose heritage is a fusion between an original homeland and a new one.

I have at the University of Washington observed a marked change in students of Vietnamese, Lao or Khmer descent. The first students were themselves migrants who spoke at home and with their friends the language they had first learned as children and who shared with their parents the stories of a lost homeland. Three decades after the end of the wars in Indochina, many of the students of Vietnamese, Lao or Khmer descent were born in America and no longer speak – fluently, at least – the language of their homelands. They have gone to American schools and many have American friends, including friends who are potential spouses. Most now identify as Vietnamese-American, Lao-American, or Khmer-American rather than in an unhyphenated way with the places their parents came from. One can expect that in the next generation, as was the case with the descendants of Irish, Jewish, and Italian migrants, that they will identify primarily as Americans with different heritages. They will not belong to a diaspora. They will only reconnect with their ancestral homelands as hyphenated Americans.

The so-called ‘overseas’ Chinese include several different types of migrant identity. Some, especially those who retain memories of an ancestral home in a place in China, are members of a Chinese diaspora. Others, however, have become ethnic minorities in the countries in which they or their ancestors have settled. Yet others, while being citizens of a country other than China, continue to maintain kinship links with overseas Chinese in other countries as well as Chinese in China proper. They have become what I would term a ‘transnational’ people, that is people who maintain strong links to places in two or more countries. Many Hmong who have dispersed not only in Asia but also in a number of other countries also belong to a transnational people.

Another modern form of movement is represented by tourism. Although tourists themselves – like pilgrims in the past (and even

in some cases today) – may create new social spaces with those with whom they share the journey (see MacCannell 1976), such spaces are transitory. On the other hand those who live in what Pratt (1992) termed ‘contact zones’ where many tourists go may well develop new social characteristics that are different from those of their natal communities, but at the same time are not those of the tourists they encounter. A good example are the Hmong girls in Sa Pa, a popular tourist destination in northern Vietnam, who have developed a very distinctive social world of their own (see Hanh 2006).

When tourists share, or believe themselves to share, a heritage with those they encounter, such encounters can contribute to the shaping of or reinforcement of a transnational identity. In 2002 I observed such an encounter in Sa Pa which I visited with my student, Duong Bich Hanh. We were accompanied by a student from the University of California at Berkeley who was of Hmong descent. In Sa Pa, she met local Hmong who at first could not believe given her American clothing and body language that she was Hmong. When she spoke to them in Hmong, however, they immediately crowded around to learn about Hmong in America. For her, her sense of being Hmong was certainly reshaped, at least to some degree, by her encounter.

Today there are many more such ethnic tourists – Sino-Thai visiting China, Vietnamese-Americans visiting and even working in Vietnam, Franco-Khmer who have ‘returned’ permanently to Cambodia, but who still have kinsmen in France, to give only a few examples. The ‘churning’ of the world – to use a Hindu-Buddhist metaphor – that has come about because of the ease and low costs of transnational travel and communication has led to very different relationships between peoples and places than existed in the past. At the same time, because there is so much movement of people today, there is also a strong desire on the part of many to claim a shared descent and shared place with others who may or may not live in the same place. This has resulted in what I term ‘resurgent tribalism’. As Kotkin (1993) and I have more recently argued elsewhere (Keyes in press), people everywhere have been rediscovering or reaffirming the descent from common forbears that they share with people who may live in very distant places

as a response to the unsettling sense that is associated with the modern world. The relationships between people of Karen descent living in the United States and Thailand and Karen in Burma have contributed to a strong affirmation of being Karen in contrast to identifying as Burmese. So, too, Khmu in Laos are doing the same for being Khmu because of the promotion of Khmu identity and culture by people of Khmu descent in France, Sweden, and the United States. Taken together the papers in this volume contribute to shaping a new research agenda that I would hope also will include inquiries into resurgent tribalism, that is assertions of sharing descent and social space with others, in a world where increasing numbers of people far from sedentary.

## References

- Cohen Paul, 2001 — “Buddhism Unshackled: The Yuan ‘Holy Man’ Tradition and the Nation-State in the Tai World,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32.2: 227-47.
- Condominas Georges, 1980 — *L’Espace social à propos de l’Asie du Sud-est*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Duong Bich Hanh, 2006 — “The Hmong Girls of Sa Pa: Local Places, Global Trajectories, Hybrid Identities,” Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Washington.
- Giersch Charles Patterson, 2001 — “‘A Motley Throng’: Social Change on Southwest China’s Early Modern Frontier, 1700-1880.” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 60.1: 67-94.
- Hoang Cam, 2009 — “Forest Thieves? The Politics of Forest Resources in a Northwestern Frontier Valley of Vietnam.” Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Washington.
- Keyes Charles F., 1991 — “The Proposed World of the School: Thai Villagers Entry into a Bureaucratic State System,” In *Reshaping Local Worlds: Rural Education and Cultural Change in Southeast Asia*. Charles F. Keyes, ed. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies. Pp. 87-138.
- Keyes Charles F., 2010 — Review of *The Art of Not Being Governed* by James C. Scott, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37.1: 237-54.
- Keyes Charles F., In Press — “The Study of Ethnicity in the Greater Mekong Subregion,” in volume on ethnicity in the Mekong, ed. by Kanokwan Manorom, Ubon, Thailand: Ubon University.

- Kotkin Joel, 1993 — *Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy*. New York: Random House.
- Lefebvre Henri, 1991 — *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Long Lynellyn D., 1993 — *Ban Vinai: The Refugee Camp*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- MacCannell Dean, 1976 — *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Mus Paul, 1975 [1933] — *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*. I. W. Mabbett, trans. Monash: Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, No. 3.
- Prasit Leepreecha, 2008 — "The Role of Media Technology in Reproducing Hmong Ethnic Identity," in *Living in a Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion*, ed. by Don McCaskill, Prasit Leepreecha, and He Shaoying. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press. Pp. 89-113.
- Pratt Mary Louise, 1992 — *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Safran William, 1991 — "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1.1: 83-99.
- Scott James C., 2009 — *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Tanabe Shigeharu, Charles F. Keyes, (eds) 2002 — *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Routledge Curzon.
- Tapp Nicholas, 2000 — "Ritual Relations and Identity: Hmong and Others," in *Civility and Savagery*, Andrew Turton, ed. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2000. Pp. 84-103.
- Thongchai Winichakul, 1994 — *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Vandergest Peter, Nancy Lee Peluso, 1995 — "Territorialization and State Power in Thailand," *Theory and Society*, 24: 385-426.
- White Richard, 1991 — *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



*Proceedings of the conference « Sedentism in the Mekong Region. Mobility and Heritage on a long-term perspective », Chiang Mai 1st -2nd December 2011 ; Center for Ethnic Studies and Development/Chiang Mai University, Thailand & The Institute of Research for Development, France.*

Sedentism traditionally designates the processes that, in prehistory, led human societies to give up nomadism and to settle down. In a broader sense, it also refers to the various ways a society "roots down" and creates a sense of place: it evokes the permanence of the settlement, the transformation or the regulation of the mobility practises, the setting up of territories and networks; the development of specific techniques and the transformation of living conditions; and finally the affective and symbolic investment in the land through memories, rituals and discourses. Based on case studies in Thailand and Laos, the papers presented in these proceedings pay attention to these various implications of sedentism and to their change under the pressure of State policies and globalization.

Olivier Évrard is an anthropologist at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD).

Dominique Guillaud is a geographer at IRD, and the Director of research unit "Patrimoines Locaux" (Local Heritage - Paloc), IRD-MNHN, France.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti is an anthropologist, and the Director of the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

*The project "Sedentism in the Mekong region" has been supported by the French National Agency for Research (ANR-Les Suds).*



ISSN 576-374-672-922-5

