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in the Tropics and Subtropics**

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Reiner BUERGIN

**'Hill Tribes' and Forests:  
Minority Policies and Resource Conflicts  
in Thailand**

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Working Group Socio-Economics of Forest Use in the Tropics and Subtropics

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Reiner Buergin  
Working Group Socio-Economics of Forest Use in the Tropics and Subtropics  
Tennenbacher Str. 4 (Herderbau)  
Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg  
D-79085 Freiburg

[reiner.buergin@uni-freiburg.de](mailto:reiner.buergin@uni-freiburg.de)

<http://www.sefut.uni-freiburg.de/>

**CONTENTS:**

**Introduction ..... 3**

**Ethnic minorities, nation-building, and cultural hegemony ..... 3**

**'Hill tribes': diversity and stereotype ..... 5**

**Fighting opium cultivation and communism ..... 6**

**Forest policies, deforestation and protected areas ..... 9**

**Forest conservation and environmental discourse: the community forest debate..... 11**

**Resource conflicts and ethnicism ..... 12**

**References ..... 16**



## Introduction

Compared with other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand appears to be one of the most homogenous states of the region. About 95 % of the more than 62 Mio. inhabitants are Buddhists, more than 90 % of them speak Thai, and more than 80 % are ethnic Tai.

This is, to a considerable degree, the result of a process of nation-building linking 'national identity', since the establishment of the territorial state at the end of the 19th century, to Thai language, Buddhism, and Monarchy.

This process of nation-building had to overcome considerable resistance of various ethnic and cultural minority groups. Policies towards these minorities have been, and still are, policies of assimilation, quite frequently resorting to oppression.

Until the 1980s, Thai policies towards the ethnic minority groups categorized as 'hill tribes', predominantly living in the uplands of northern and western Thailand, was dominated by concerns about opium cultivation and communist insurgency. By the 1980s, deforestation and control of resources in the uplands became important national issues and the main concerns of 'hill tribe' policies.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, strategies of territorial, social, and political exclusion towards these ethnic minority groups, increasingly referring to national sentiments and ideologies, are dominating conservation policies and resource conflicts in the uplands of Thailand. State agencies, like the Royal Forest Department and the Military, thereby try to secure and regain positions and power challenged in the controversies on settlement and use rights in national forest reserves during the 1980s and 90s.

This paper will sketch these changes of concerns and strategies of ethnic minority policies in Thailand, concentrating on the shifts during the 1980s and 90s in the context of the controversies on deforestation and resource conflicts in the uplands.

## Ethnic minorities, nation-building, and cultural hegemony

In reaction to the colonization of Southeast Asia by the British and French, the Siamese Chakri Dynasty, during the reign of King Rama V. (Chulalongkorn) in the second half of the 19th century, started to create a modern territorial nation state. Primary objectives of these successful efforts have been the maintenance of sovereignty with regard to the colonial powers, in which Thailand was the only country in Southeast Asia to succeed, as well as the extension of the power domain and resource control by the Siamese Royal House.

In this process, the Siamese not only had to deal with the interests and objectives of the colonial powers, but also had to overcome considerable resistance of 'regional' powers and people, such as the various principalities of the Yuan (northern Tai), Lao, and Malay, as well as peasant movements in the north and northeast of present day Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

After the territorial demarcation of the state and the establishment of a centralized bureaucracy by the beginning of the 20th century, these resistances mostly had been overcome, and the nation state was successfully established. By then, a 'multicultural region' of different centers of power and various ethnic groups had become a territorial nation state, ethnically dominated by the Siamese (central Thai).

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the process of nationalization and territorialization see for example the excellent analysis of Thongchai 1994, regarding problems of resistance and integration see also Grabowsky 1995a, Tanabe 1984, Chatthip 1984. For a more detailed political history see Pasuk/Baker 1997.

**Tab. 1: Ethnic groups in Thailand** (without refugees)

	1960 Kunstadter 1967	1980	1986	1996 (Kraas/Rivet 1997)
Tai <sup>1</sup>	14.171.600	23.577.000 <sup>3</sup>	27.696.000 <sup>3</sup>	33.296.000 <sup>3</sup>
Lao-Tai	9.000.000	12.058.000 <sup>3</sup>	14.164.000 <sup>3</sup>	17.028.000 <sup>3</sup>
Thai-Malay	1.025.000	1.660.000 <sup>3</sup>	1.950.000 <sup>3</sup>	2.340.000 <sup>3</sup>
Chinese	2.600.000	5.380.000 <sup>3</sup>	6.320.000 <sup>3</sup>	7.600.000 <sup>3</sup>
Mon	60.000	-	ca. 100.000 <sup>4</sup>	-
Khmer	-	1.210.000 <sup>3</sup>	1.420.000 <sup>3</sup>	1.900.000
'Hill tribes' <sup>5</sup>	ca. 222.000	ca. 385.000	ca. 460.000	ca. 793.000
Total Population	26.258.000	44.824.000 <sup>2</sup>	52.654.000 <sup>2</sup>	63.300.000

Sources: Kunstadter 1967; Husa/Wohlschlägl 1985:22-26; Santhat 1989:75; Kampe 1997:22f; <sup>1</sup>=including various northern, central and southern Tai groups; <sup>2</sup>=Donner 1989:47f; <sup>3</sup>=calculated from Kraas/Rivet 1997; <sup>4</sup>=estimates by Keyes 1987a; <sup>5</sup>=sources see Tab. 2

While conflicts between the different Tai ethnic groups lost most of their importance after the establishment of the nation state, ethnic conflicts between the dominating Tai on the one hand, and Chinese and Malay minority groups on the other hand, rose during the first half of the 20th century.

Conflicts between the Siamese and Chinese people living in Siam already had occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries, but, at that time, the Siamese rulers did not try to assimilate them and Chinese inhabitants to some extent even were privileged, insofar as they were not obliged to corvee. Efforts to exert cultural hegemony over the strong Chinese ethnic minority group in Thailand only became dominant during the period of offensive Thai nationalism from the end of the 30s until the end of the 50s in the 20th century. At the core of these controversies there lay conflicts over power and resources. The Chinese minority group which dominated extensive parts of the Thai economy, at least had to be excluded from political power. Today the Chinese make up about 12 % of the total population and still dominate the Thai economy to some degree, but with their far reaching assimilation into Thai society and increasing access to political power, tensions between Tai and Chinese ethnic groups mostly have disappeared.

In the case of the Malay ethnic minority group, resistance against cultural hegemony was even more fierce. Accounting for about 3,8 % of the population, the Malay, living predominantly in southern Thailand, besides the 'hill tribes', are the ethnic minority group most distinct from the Tai by their religion (Islam), language (Malay), and history. The period of Thai nationalism in the first half of the 20th century, for them too was a time of heavy oppression, which in the 1960s and 70s resulted in a strong secessionist movement requesting cultural autonomy and even separation from the Thai state. It was only during the 1980s, a period of rapid economic growth, that the movement lost much of its force and importance.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Uhlig 1995b; Platz 1996.

## 'Hill tribes': diversity and stereotype

Ethnic minority groups like the Chinese, Malay, Khmer or Mon by now are rather integrated into Thai society. Not so another very heterogeneous group of ethnic minorities, predominantly living in the uplands of northern and western Thailand, categorized as 'hill tribes' or '*chao khao*' in Thai. At the end of the 1990s, they comprise about 840.000 people or 1,3 % of the total population and belong to various, culturally most diverse ethnic groups.

Some of them, like the Lawa, H'tin and most probably the Karen, have been living in areas now part of the Thai nation state before the Thai speaking ethnic groups immigrated at the beginning of the second millennium. Others, like the Hmong, Yao, and Lahu immigrated since the middle of the 19th century into present day Thailand or in the beginning of the 20th century like the Lisu and Akha.<sup>3</sup>

Linguistically Lawa, H'tin, and Khamu are grouped as Mon-Khmer languages, while Hmong and Yao belong to the Austro-Thai language group. Akha, Lisu, Lahu, and Karen are classified as Tibeto-Burman languages, with some dispute on the status of the Karen language within the Tibeto-Burman language group.

**Tab. 2: 'Hill tribe' groups in Thailand (without refugees)**

	1960 (Young 1961; Kunstadter 1967)	1974/77 (TRC) (Husa/Wohl. 1985)	1985 (TRC) (Donner 1989)	1996 (Kampe 1997a)
H'tin	18.900	19.400	24.276	32.755
Lawa	11.000	11.300	13.282	15.711
Khamu	7.600	6.300	5.355	10.153
Mlabri	140		139 <sup>1</sup>	173
Karen	71.400	184.648	235.622	402.095
Hmong	45.800	37.301	63.418	126.147
Yao	10.200	22.652	32.706	47.305
Akha	25.000	13.566	23.430	48.468
Lahu	15.050	22.584	38.558	78.842
Lisu	17.300	12.542	20.449	31.536
Total	222.390	331.305	457.096	793.185

Sources: Young 1961; Kunstadter 1967; Husa/Wohlschlägl 1985:22-26; Santhat 1989:75; Kampe 1997a:22f; Donner 1989:47f; <sup>1</sup>=TDN 1993 23:18; TRC = Tribal Research Centre.

Since the 1950s, these groups have been differentiated by Anthropologists and Geographers, on the one hand, into those predominantly living in the uplands at altitudes from about 400 up to 1000 m above sea-level, like the Karen (comprising about 51 % of the total 'hill tribe' population in Thailand), the Lawa (~2 %), H'tin (~4 %), and Khamu (~1,3 %), on the other hand, those living in the 'highlands' at altitudes above 1000 m like the Hmong (about 16 % of the 'hill tribe' population), the Yao (~6 %), Lahu (~10 %), Lisu (~4 %), and Akha (~6 %).

Regarding their dominant economic organization, the groups living at the lower altitudes traditionally mostly cultivated rice in sedentary forms of rotational swidden systems in combi-

<sup>3</sup> For overviews on the various ethnic minority groups of the uplands see for example McKinnon/Vienne 1989a; McKinnon/Wanat 1983; Kunstadter 1967, 1983; Young 1961.

nation with paddy fields where possible, while the groups living at the higher altitudes, in Thailand, 'traditionally' practiced forms of shifting cultivation with long cultivation and very long fallow periods, often including some opium cultivation.<sup>4</sup>

This 'traditional' model, based on ethnic layers related to specific forms of economic organization, since the 1970s, for various reasons became increasingly obsolete. On the one hand, the economic system and settlement patterns of the groups living in the 'highlands' have undergone several changes and differentiations due to state control as well as national and international development policies. Swidden systems with long cultivation and very long fallow periods are not practicable any more, opium cultivation in Thailand has become fairly insignificant, and highland groups increasingly have moved down to lower altitudes too. On the other hand, groups of the lower uplands, like the Karen, Lawa, and H'tin, since long have been living in the valleys too, and ethnic Thai, 'traditionally' plains and valley populations, are moving into the uplands. By now, ethnic Tai constitute the majority of the population of the uplands, formerly almost exclusively inhabited by ethnic minority groups.<sup>5</sup>

The term 'hill tribes' came into use in the 1950s as a generic name for the various non-Tai groups living in the uplands of northern and western Thailand. Very soon, the term 'hill tribes' was identified with the negative stereotype of forest destroying, opium cultivating, dangerous alien troublemakers. This image originally was derived from the Hmong ethnic group, as their shifting cultivation system, in Thailand, frequently included opium cultivation and some of them have been involved in the communist insurgencies of the 1960s. It soon was branded on all the different groups categorized as 'hill tribes'. Until today, it is a widespread and influential image in Thailand, revived and instrumentalized in the community forest debate and resource conflicts of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

## **Fighting opium cultivation and communism**

Before the establishment of the nation state, the ethnic groups of the uplands maintained diverse relations with the neighboring Tai populations and power centers. They reached from total autonomy, more or less intensive trade and neighborhood relationships, to tribute and subject relations. Members of these groups sometimes held high positions in the peripheral administration system of the power centers, some of them even were conferred ranks of Siamese nobility. They were also of economic importance for the Tai rulers. The Karen, for example, with their tributes, mostly forest products, contributed considerably to the wealth and regional importance of the Siamese rulers, and in the second half of the 19th century they were involved in defending and demarcating the new boundaries of the emerging nation state.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For descriptions of the different land use systems see for example Schmidt-Vogt 1995, 1997; Grandstaff 1980; Mischung 1980; Uhlig 1979; Kunstadter/Chapman/Sanga 1978; Geddes 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding accounts of these changes in the uplands see for example Elawat 1997; Chupinit 1994; Sornuk/Sombat 1993; Kunstadter/Kunstadter 1992; Vienne 1989; Chantaboon 1989; Renard et al. 1988; Kunstadter 1980, 1990; Uhlig 1979, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Krisadawan 1999; Mischung 1995; Cohen 1992; Buergin/Kessler 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the different relations between ethnic groups in northern and western Thailand as well as the importance of the ethnic minority groups of the uplands for the power centers see for example Jørgensen 1995; Thongchai 1994; Renard 1979, 1980, 1986, 1987; Keyes 1979a,b; Kunstadter 1969; Manddorf 1966.



After the territorialization of the state around the turn of the century, and the changes of the orientation and organization of the state economy that already started in the middle of the 19th century in response to the intrusion of the colonial powers, the ethnic groups of the uplands, mostly living in remote areas, lost their importance for the central state. Most of their settlements, during the first half of the 20th century, were not integrated into the Thai administration system. It was not before the 1950s, that they became of concern for the state authorities again, not least because of international developments and interests.

In 1951 the Ministry of Interior established a 'Committee for the Welfare of People in Remote Areas' with the objective to integrate the ethnic minorities of the uplands into the administration system and the Thai nation state.

Since 1955, this became one of the main tasks of the Border Patrol Police (BPP). The BPP had been established in 1953, supported by the United States, in reaction to the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. Until today, besides guarding the borders of Thailand, the BPP is responsible for controlling the minority groups in remote areas. Efforts to integrate them and prevent them from communist influences include the maintenance of basic schools and health stations as well as agricultural consultancy.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the 19th century, the British had discovered opium as a profitable commodity and, until the middle of the century, they had succeeded in opening up most of the markets of Southeast Asia. Business with opium flourished and in Thailand, during the first half of the 20th century, income from the state monopoly on opium made up a considerable part of the state budget, at times accounting for more than a quarter of it.

The opium partly was produced in Thailand, quite often in 'joint ventures' of Hmong, cultivating the opium, and Thai, financing the cultivation and selling it to the government. During the 1930s, opium cultivation in Thailand even was promoted by the state to counter opium smuggling from Burma, from which the state could not profit.

Since the 1920s, most of the 'western' countries had illegalized opium consumption and in 1946, at the first UN conference on international drug problems, Thailand was attacked for its opium monopoly and cultivation. Pressure from the dominant northern countries forced the military government in Thailand, which controlled the trade in opium, to prohibit opium cultivation, trade, and consumption. As the drug problem in the industrialized northern countries, by now, had been defined as a problem of supply, the opium growing ethnic minority groups in Thailand became a problem that had to be solved.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, in 1959, the 'Central Hill Tribe Committee' (CHTC) was established in Thailand and, for the first time, a national policy towards the 'hill tribes' was formulated. Responsible authority became the 'Hill tribe Welfare Division' within the Ministry of Interior. Objectives of the policy were 'national security', reflecting fears that communist influences may spread among the ethnic minority groups of the uplands, control and substitution of opium cultivation, as well as the abolition of shifting cultivation, which in the international development community had come to be perceived as destructive, a threat to forest resources, and a hindrance to development. These objectives, in spite of shifts of emphasis and strategies, mainly have remained the same until today.

Resettlement and concentration of the 'hill tribe' groups in a few, easily accessible so-called 'Self Help Settlement Projects' was the first strategy pursued, but soon proved to be unrealizable. To study 'the problem', in 1961/62 a first extensive study on the various ethnic minority

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<sup>8</sup> See Pasuk/Baker 1997; Kunstadter 1967

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the history of the 'opium problem' in Thailand and Southeast Asia see for example Renard 1996, 1997; Pasuk/Baker 1997; Chupinit 1989; McCoy 1972.

groups of the uplands was carried out, supported by the UN Narcotic Drugs Division. The results of the study in 1963 led to the establishment of mobile units called 'Hill tribe Development and Welfare Centers' to look after the 'hill tribe' groups, as well as the setting up of the 'Tribal Research Centre' in Chiang Mai in 1964.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the wars in neighboring countries and the fight against the Communist Party of Thailand, which had many of its bases in ethnic minority areas, 'hill tribe' policies, from the middle of the 1960s to the middle of the 1970s, were under the primacy of 'national security' concerns, and in the 'battle zones' the military became responsible for the ethnic minority groups. The policy towards 'hill tribes' was reformulated in 1968, now aiming at the concentration of scattered settlements, resettlement into the lowlands, as well as the creation of confidence and the assimilation into Thai society to secure loyalty towards the state. By way of improving economic conditions, the susceptibility to communist influences was supposed to be diminished. In this context, in 1969, the first 'Royal Projects', 'Highland Development Projects' initiated by the King, were established.

In the beginning 1970s, the drug problem had received growing concern on the international level, not least because of the Vietnam War. International and national organizations and governments, for the first time, provided extensive funds to fight drugs, resulting in numerous opium substitution programs and 'Highland Development Projects' in Thailand during the 1970s and 80s.<sup>11</sup>

In 1976, the 'Office of the Narcotics Control Board' (ONCB) was set up to coordinate the various efforts of the Government and bureaucracy to fight opium cultivation in Thailand, which was the issue that by now dominated 'hill tribe' politics.

A revision of the policy towards 'hill tribes' was formulated insofar as they now explicitly were to be supported to become Thai nationals, and the reduction of population growth among the ethnic minority groups of the uplands was included as a new objective.

Until 1982, the activities of the various institutions concerned with 'hill tribes' were rather uncoordinated. To change this situation, in 1982, the 'Committee for the Solution of National Security Problems involving Hill tribes and the Cultivation of Narcotic Crops' was established to coordinate and realize the 'hill tribe' policy designed by the committee.

In principle, the objectives formulated by the committee are official 'hill tribe' policy until today. They comprise the integration of the 'hill tribes' into Thai society, requiring the reorganization of their way of life accordingly (meaning particularly 'anticommunism', giving up shifting cultivation and resettlement into the lowlands), elimination of opium cultivation and consumption, reduction of population growth, and improvement of living standards.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Regarding objectives and results of this first 'hill tribe' survey see Manndorf 1967; Geddes 1967; Huff 1967; Wanat 1989a.

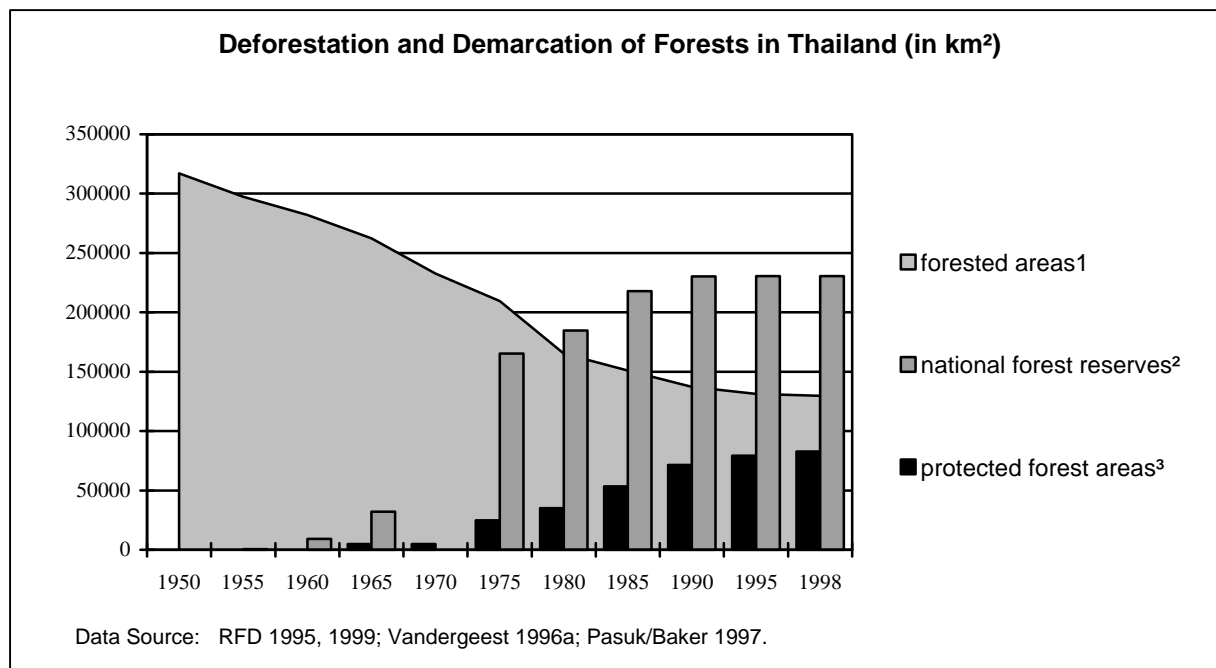
<sup>11</sup> See Dirksen 1997; Elawat 1997; Wanat 1989a.

<sup>12</sup> For overviews regarding 'hill tribe' policies see Wanat 1987, 1989a; Kachadpai/Porntipa 1988; Chupinit 1993; TDN 1993a,b; Platz 1996.

### Forest policies, deforestation and protected areas

Before the emergence of Siam as a territorial nation state, the power of the different rulers in the region mainly depended on the amount of subjects they controlled. Control of resources, particularly of the teak forests in northern Thailand, began to play an important role during the early phase of the extension of the Siamese sphere of power, nation-building and modernization. Primarily to secure control over one of the most valuable natural resources, the teak forests, the 'Royal Forest Department' (RFD) was established in 1896, and made responsible for all areas neither cultivated nor claimed by any other person or state authority. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about 75 % of the total land area fell into this category, by the middle of the century it was still about 60 %.<sup>13</sup>

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main concern of the RFD was to allocate and control concessions for Teak extraction, predominantly executed by British companies. Besides, taxes on commercially used forest products were levied. Territorial control of the vast areas under the administration of the RFD was neither interesting nor feasible. Contrary to British forest management in India and Burma, forest use of local people was widely unrestricted by forest legislation in Thailand until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> Only in the 1960s a shift in forest policies occurred towards territorial control by way of the demarcation and rapid extension of national forest reserves and protected areas.



<sup>1</sup> = Official figures of the RFD for 1998 claim about 25 % of the total land area (TLA) to be forested. More realistic estimates of forest cover range between 10 to 20 % of the total land area which is 513115 km<sup>2</sup>.

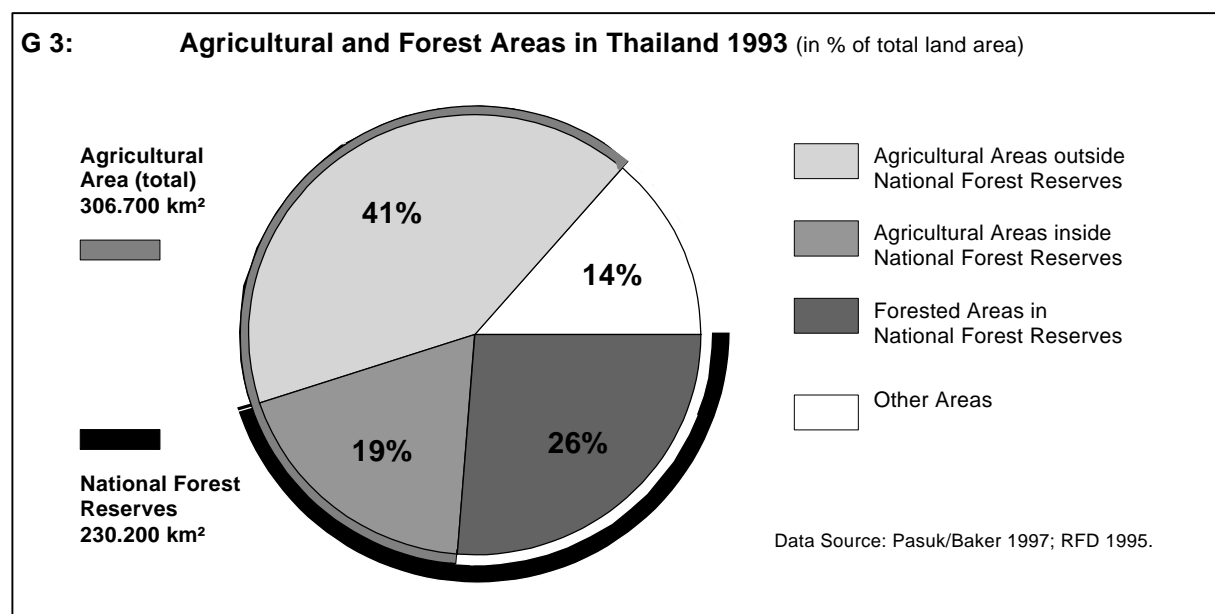
<sup>2</sup> = In 1998, 230.370 km<sup>2</sup> or about 45 % of TLA had been demarcated as forest reserves. It is estimated that more than 40 % of these forest reserves already are used as agricultural areas.

<sup>3</sup> = Protected Areas, in 1998, comprised 80.824 km<sup>2</sup> or about 16 % of TLA. Forest policies aim at extending the Protected Area System to about 28 % of TLA.

<sup>13</sup> Vandergeest 1996a:161f.

<sup>14</sup> For the history of the RFD and forest policies see Kamon/Thomas 1990; Sathi 1993; Vandergeest 1996a.

The demarcation of these state forests, implying restrictions on the use of the forests, frequently didn't consider existing settlements or local forms of forest use. Quite often, areas declared forest reserves actually already were agricultural or settlement areas. Moreover, this strategy to control forest resources and fight deforestation proved to be rather ineffective. It could not stop rapid deforestation caused by legal and illegal logging, the development of infrastructure projects like roads and dams, and the extension of agricultural areas in the context of a national development policy based on extensive cash cropping for export markets.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the RFD claims control over almost half of the country's territory, being demarcated as forest reserves and protected areas. But of this area actually only about one third still is forested. The rest mainly is agricultural area, used by about 12 Mio. people who generally do not have secure settlement and use rights for this land.



When, in the beginning 1980s, the failure of the demarcation policy of the Forest Department became obvious, the RFD reacted with a new zoning policy. The areas claimed as forest reserves now were zoned according to different functions related to different objectives and restrictions. In this context the concept of a Protected Area System (PAS) was designed, supposed to comprise more than a quarter of the total land area, in which human settlement and forest use is to be prohibited and resettlement enforced as far as possible.<sup>16</sup>

By the mid 1980s, most of the remaining forest areas in Thailand were to be found in the uplands of the north and west, in the settlement areas of the 'hill tribes'. The most important issues of 'hill tribe politics throughout the 1960s and 70s, opium cultivation and 'national security', had lost most of their urgency. Now 'forest conservation' became the dominant concern. At the same time, the military assumed a central role for 'hill tribe' policies. In 1986 the 'Center for the Coordination of Hill Tribe Affairs and Eradication of Narcotic Crops' (COHAN) was established. It was presided by the Commander of the Third Army and responsible for the implementation of 'hill tribe' policies, now predominantly a resettlement policy.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Regarding deforestation in the context of economic development see Vandergeest 1996a,b; Vandergeest/Peluso 1995; Rigg 1993; Lohmann 1993; PER 1992; Hirsch 1987, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> See Brenner et al. 1999; Vandergeest 1996b; Watershed 1996; Lohmann 1993.

<sup>17</sup> McKinnon/Vienne 1989b; Elawat 1997; Pinkaew/Rajesh 1996.

## **Forest conservation and environmental discourse: the community forest debate**

Since the beginning 1980s, 'environmental problems' had received increasing attention internationally and in Thailand, and provided an interesting field of activity for the growing NGO movement in Thailand. Numerous NGOs, networks, and movements emerged in opposition to the development and environmental policy of the state, specifically in the conflicts on resettlement projects, logging scandals, eucalyptus plantations, and dam projects. As part of a growing civil society they were demanding more political influence, decentralization, and democratization.

In a broad alliance of environmental activists, students, academics, concerned urban middle classes, local people and government agencies, a heterogeneous 'movement' in 1988 succeeded in preventing the building of the Nam Choan Dam, which would have flooded extensive parts of the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in western Thailand. This victory of the 'environmental movement' was an important step in the process of democratization in Thailand and, in 1989, public pressure even forced the Government to declare a nation-wide logging ban.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of the resistance against resettlement out of forest reserves and reforestation projects with eucalyptus plantations, NGOs, academics, and peasant organizations, at the end of the 1980s, began to develop a community forest concept as an alternative to the forest conservation strategy of the RFD, arguing to give control over local resources mainly to the local communities.<sup>19</sup> In 1990 the process of drafting a Community Forest Bill was started and remains a hot issue of public debate and political conflict until today.

In this ongoing controversy not only conflicting interests of RFD and farmers living in forest reserves clash, but also conflicting conservation ideologies (man and forest can or can not co-exist) and different value priorities (environmental conservation versus social justice), dividing the NGO movement as well as society. In this conflict, RFD and 'dark green', conservation orientated NGOs and academics oppose farmers organizations, 'light green' or people orientated NGOs and socially concerned academics. The extent to which the two sides will succeed in realizing their interests in the Community Forest Bill, or whether the bill will be passed at all, remains to be seen.<sup>20</sup>

More obvious, by now, is that the RFD, after it has largely failed to protect the forests and far reaching concessions regarding the people living in forest reserve areas are inevitable, is trying to secure its interests by pushing ahead with its strategy of exclusion towards the ethnic minority groups of the uplands. The resettlement of about 12 Mio. people living in forest reserves, predominantly ethnic Thai, is politically and practically not feasible. Instead of, the RFD is concentrating on the extension of the Protected Area System and enforced resettlement of people living in protected areas, mainly people of ethnic minority groups. To support this strategy, high government officials as well as dark green NGOs increasingly refer to national and even racist sentiments.<sup>21</sup>

With the Military the RFD found a receptive partner for their strategy. After the decrease of communism in Thailand and neighboring countries, a failed bloody military coup in 1991/92,

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the role of the Nam Choan Controversy for the process of democratization in Thailand see Buergin/Kessler 1999.

<sup>19</sup> On the reasoning of this approach see for example Anan 1992; Yos 1992, 1993; TDN 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding the controversy about the Community Forest Bill see Brenner et al. 1999; Buergin/Kessler 1999; Watershed 1996, 1998; TDN 1994.

<sup>21</sup> See Buergin/Kessler 1999; Pinkaew 1999a; Watershed 1998, 1997a,b; Pinkaew/Rajesh 1996.

and dwindling political influence in the course of democratization, the Military is looking for new grounds of legitimacy and, thereby, has discovered environmental conservation as a new task.<sup>22</sup>

## Resource conflicts and ethnicism

With the intrusion of the Tai farmers into the uplands of the north and the extension of cash cropping among some 'hill tribe' groups, induced and supported by the opium substitution programs, conflicts between ethnic Tai and 'hill tribe' groups during the 1980s increased, specifically over land, forest and water resources.

At the beginning of the 1990s, these resource conflicts, often termed environmental conflicts, in the context of the debate over the Community Forest Bill emerged as a national issue. NGOs established in local conflicts to support the interests of Tai farmers against 'hill tribe' groups and 'dark-green', conservation oriented NGOs now tried to push through their interests on a national level and found their 'natural' ally in the RFD with its protected area strategy. The new General Director of the RFD, at the beginning of his period of office, already had made clear, that for him a co-existence of people and forests was unthinkable.

These groups, since 1997, tried to pressure the government to support their claims with diverse public actions, including petitions to politicians and government, the fencing of cultivation areas of 'hill tribes' with barbed wire, demonstrations, road blockades and the burning of effigies of Professors of Chiang Mai University who had publicly supported the rights of ethnic minority groups. They demanded the resettlement of all 'hill tribe' groups out of the so-called 'watershed forests' as well as the revocation of three Cabinet Resolutions of April 1997, in which settlements in forests and protected areas, under certain conditions, had been legalized.<sup>23</sup>

In June 1998, the April 97 resolutions, due to the public pressure, were revoked, and most of the settlements in protected areas illegalized again and threatened by forced resettlement. Moreover, with the introduction of the diffuse category of 'ecological sensitive areas', the RFD created an instrument to facilitate the resettlement of 'legal' settlements established before the declaration of forest reserves or protected areas. The situation of the ethnic minority groups of the uplands, thereby, is getting more precarious once again, as it is them mostly living in protected areas.

At the same time the conflicts assume more and more ethnicist traits, aiming at the territorial, social, and political exclusion of the 'hill tribes' in the context of a more or less outspoken, culturally defined Thai nationalism, even among some high government officials. In contrary to the integration policy announced by the Government, the bureaucracy responsible for the naturalization of ethnic minority people is rather reserved and restrictive regarding these groups. Moreover, in the process of granting citizenship discretionary powers of the officials, quite often, seem to be used for personal profit and corruption.

At the moment, only about 240.000 of the more than 840.000 'hill tribe' people actually do have the status of Thai nationals. Therefore, most of them even cannot refer to the existing legal provisions regarding their settlement and land use rights. Most of them, at best, do have

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<sup>22</sup> See Perapong 1992.

<sup>23</sup> For an account of the increasing tensions between Tai and 'hill tribe' groups in the context of environmental and resource conflicts see for example Buergin/Kessler 1999.

the 'blue ID card' and '*thor ror 13*' residence permits, entitling them to stay in Thailand legally for 5 years and freedom of movement within the district of registration.<sup>24</sup>

The new 'hill tribe' policy, in the context of resource and environmental conflicts since the late 1980s and beginning 90s, increasingly led to resettlements of 'hill tribe' villages as well as restrictions on their traditional land use systems. Since 1998 pressure on the ethnic minority groups in the uplands is growing once more, resulting in arbitrary arrests, forced resettlement, terror and violence.<sup>25</sup>

In May 1998, the new Director General of the RFD, Plodprasop Suraswadi, an outspoken 'forests without people' advocate, signed an agreement with Gen. Chettha Thannajaro, Supreme Commander of the Army, specifying the cooperation of RFD and Army to protect the remaining forests. In this agreement the army is given far reaching authorities as well as financial support for operations in forest areas where 'illegal immigration' and illegal large scale logging prevail, while the RFD is responsible for forest areas encroached by small scale farmers. According to this division of responsibilities, the RFD mainly will have to deal with the ethnic Tai farmers predominantly living in the highly degraded forest reserves, while the military is supposed to deal with the 'non-Thai' ethnic minority groups, often living in protected areas.<sup>26</sup>

The fruits of this agreement and the new policy could be observed in a 'pilot project' of this alliance in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary. Thung Yai, the same place where two decades ago a broad alliance of resistance succeeded in preventing the building of the Nam Choan Dam (see above), had been declared a World Heritage Site in 1991. Thereby, the sanctuary became a matter of prestige and, being the core area of the so-called 'Western Forest Complex', it is the most important forest area in the Protected Area System of the RFD.

People of the Karen ethnic minority group have been living in the area for at least 200 years. All the villages have been established in their present location before its designation as a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1974. Until today, the Karen in Thung Yai predominantly grow rice for subsistence needs in swidden fields supplemented by rice grown on paddy fields. Their traditional rotational swidden system under a commons regime relies on short cultivation periods (generally 1 year) and long fallow periods from 7-15 years and more.

Since the establishment of the sanctuary, the resettlement of the villages has been discussed and, specifically with the declaration as a World Heritage Site, became a political issue. Within the present discourse on people and forests in Thailand, the Karen in Thung Yai are cited as example that human forest use and conservation of forests may well go together.

Public attention in the wake of the Nam Choan Controversy, the positive image of the Karen and their traditional land use system in the context of the people and forests debate, as well as unclear and changing legal statuses of the villages in the sanctuary made it difficult for the RFD to resettle the Karen in Thung Yai as they did in adjoining areas.

Therefore, from the beginning 1990s on, the RFD began to pressure the Karen by prohibiting the use of fallow areas older than three years, which inevitably makes their traditional land use system unsustainable and subsistence production impossible. To enforce these restrictions, in Thung Yai the RFD and the Military already had formally cooperated since 1991. In 1999, the pressure on the Karen in Thung Yai was intensified once again and they became the

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<sup>24</sup> See for example BP 5.26.2000; BP 5.4.2000; Nation 7.23.1999; Nation 7.12.1999; Nation 7.14.1999; BP 5.20.1999; Deuleu-/Naess 1997; McKinnon 1989.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Pinkaew 1999a; Watershed 1998; Watershed 1997a; Eudey 1989; Chupinit 1988; McKinnon 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Nation 5.9.98; BP 7.2.98.

first test case for the new alliance of RFD and Army on a national level, agreed upon in May 1998.

On April 13 in 1999, the Director General of the RFD himself flew into the Wildlife Sanctuary and landed with his helicopter at the place where the Karen just had started to celebrate an important annual religious festival supposed to last for three days. The General Director requested to stop the ceremonies and, soon after, military troops were burning down religious shrines of the Karen. Afterwards, from April 18 to May 12, a group of soldiers and forest rangers marched through the different villages of the sanctuary, threatening the villagers. They demanded to stop growing rice, demolished huts and personal belongings, and burnt down a rice barn.

When these events became public, the General Director of the RFD downplayed his role in the incidents denying any military actions at all. Not so Lt.-Gen. Taweep, the commander of the military troops involved. He seemed rather proud of their achievements, declaring the operation a 'pilot project' in their efforts to control local communities to prevent forest destruction in and around protected areas.<sup>27</sup>

Almost at the same time, from April 26 to May 20 in 1999, about 3000 representatives of the different 'hill tribe' groups demonstrated in front of the seat of the provincial government in Chiang Mai, supported by various Thai NGOs as well as the group of academics 'burnt' by the conservationists in the context of the conflicts around the Community Forest Bill. They demanded their right to be granted Thai citizenship, the simplification of the procedures for naturalization, and the recognition of their settlement and land use rights in protected areas, in which some of them had been living for generations.

On the 2nd of May negotiations with Deputy Interior Minister Watana Asvahame and Deputy Agricultural Minister Newin Chidchob began. In the context of the debate on the Community Forest Bill, Newin already had made clear his position that use rights in community forests shall be granted to Thai nationals only. It was agreed to establish various committees to further negotiate. After discussing this agreement in Cabinet on May 11, the demonstrators had to learn that the composition of the committees had been changed, with no provisions for representatives of the ethnic minority groups and supporting academics anymore.

They therefore decided to continue their demonstration until the assembly was dissolved by force of about 1200 forest rangers and 400 police men in the night of May 18 to 19. The supporting academics in vain tried to negotiate and finally led the scared demonstrators, who had to leave most of their belongings behind, to the university campus.

The following day Thai NGOs and journalists criticized the authorities, arguing the breaking up of the peaceful demonstration was an offense against the new constitution. Those responsible seem to have had a hard time to defend their actions. The Director General of the RFD claimed having sent his rangers only on behalf of the Governor to clear up the place. The Governor wasn't willing to comment on the issue at all, and the Deputy Agricultural Minister declared the incident an 'accident', which would not have happened at all if the 'hill tribes' had not demonstrated, and recommended to the journalists better to forget about it.<sup>28</sup>

On May 20, the demonstrators finally left Chiang Mai after the Minister of the Interior agreed to improve the procedures for naturalization and the Minister of Agriculture declared to reconsider the residence of the ethnic minority groups in the forests after they have registered with their local forestry office. Regarding present politics of the RFD as well as still growing

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<sup>27</sup> For an account of the events in Thung Yai see Buergin/Kessler 1999; BP 5.13.99; BP 5.15.99; Nation 5.15.99; BP 5.16.99; Nation 5.27.99; BP 5.30.99; Watershed 1999a.

<sup>28</sup> BP 5.16.99; BP 5.20.99; BP 6.6.99; BP 6.28.99.



resource conflicts between Tai and ethnic minority groups, one may be skeptical as to whether political action will follow and whether these actions will improve the situation of the ethnic minority groups.<sup>29</sup>

Contrary to the events in Thung Yai, which first happened without public attention, then only caused occasional protests, and later were promoted by the military as a successful 'pilot project' of the new forest conservation policy, the forced dispersal of the demonstration in Chiang Mai aroused broad public rejection and protests so that nobody wanted to take over responsibility.

The fact, that public attention and reactions on the incidents in Thung Yai remained rather limited, may very well indicate that the politics of exclusion work quite well to withhold democratic and human rights from the excluded. In an atmosphere of increasing resource conflicts and growing ethnic tensions, the protected area strategy of the RFD seems to have good chances to be 'successful' in securing the RFD control over considerable areas as well as retaining their 'forests without people' ideology.

In how far the ethnic minority groups, with their organizations and public protests, will be able to support their rights and interests remains to be seen. It may depend to a high degree on their ability to gain recognition as Thai nationals. As such they may find legal grounds for their claims in the new Constitution passed in 1997, granting local people rights over their local resources and cultural self-determination, as well as in a Community Forest Bill in favor of the local people, if the 'peoples version' of the Bill is going to be passed.

The Karen in Thung Yai have to fear further intimidations, acts of violence and resettlement by military and RFD. The sanctuary has become an object of prestige for the RFD, which is determined to evict the Karen from the sanctuary. As long as this legally is not easily feasible, which may change very fast, the RFD is increasing the pressure on the Karen trying to induce them to resettle 'voluntarily'. Whether the RFD will succeed in clearing the area, not least depends on public attention as well as national and international resistance to the protected area concept of the RFD and strategies of exclusion referring to national sentiments and ethnicism.

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<sup>29</sup> See Buergin/Kessler 1999; Watershed 1999a,b; Somchai 1999.

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