

## **The Monk, the Hmong, the Forest, the Cabbage, Fire and Water: Incongruities in Northern Thailand Opium Replacement**

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Farmers in the Hmong village of Pa Kluai have replaced outlawed opium production with production of cabbages for urban markets. But because cabbage, unlike opium, requires the use of irrigation and pesticides, Thai farmers living downstream from Pa Kluai blame the Hmong for deforesting hills and polluting streams. Unsuccessful attempts to resolve the conflict between Hmong villagers and their lowland neighbors illustrate conflicts over what it means to be Thai, pointing to problems with the so-called three pillars of modern Thai society: race, religion, and king. Not only do the Hmong have different customs from Thai villagers but as swidden farmers who fell and farm upland forests, they come into conflict with Royal Forestry Department plans to preserve forests in watersheds. A Buddhist monk, dismayed by deforestation, has joined Thai villagers in protesting the cabbage-growing Hmong. And the king, who has tried to win the loyalty of highland groups, proposed that opium fields not be destroyed until viable replacement crops were available. So far, efforts to resolve the conflict by relocating the Hmong has failed, due to lack of a suitable alternative site.

**O**ver the past decade, the Hmong village of Pa Kluai, located some 75 kilometers southwest of Chiang Mai city, has been the site of a protracted conflict involving the Hmong, lowland Thai villagers, a noted Buddhist monk, the Thai-Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project, and the Royal Forestry Department of the Thai government. Attempts to resolve this conflict have ranged from attempts to force the Hmong out of their village to making efforts to persuade them to change their way of life. How the unsuccessful attempts at resolution illustrate the Thai process of avoiding conflict in the northern Thai hills is the subject of this essay.

Pa Kluai is located within a forest preserve, and the Hmong are a highly visible minority group in Thailand. A prominent Buddhist monk has become active with lowland Thai villagers downstream from Pa Kluai who are protesting the Hmong agri-

cultural practices that have led, the lowlanders say, to deforestation and pollution in the streams draining into the Thai areas.

The issues coming to a head in Pa Kluai reflect conflicts over what it means to be Thai, pointing to problems with the so-called three pillars of modern Thai society, *chat*, *sasana*, *mahakasat*—which can be translated as “race,” “religion,” and “king.” Although widely considered now to express the essence of the Thai nation, these three pillars date back only some 80 years, to the reign of King Rama VI. Their newness is reflected in Akin Rabibhadana’s observation that Thailand has been a Thai state for only about 50 years. King Rama VI introduced these pillars to help Thailand look respectable to the West, which was a principal means by which the country sought to maintain its independence.

## Chat

The pillars were meant to expedite the rate at which the various groups and cultures of Thailand were being encouraged to unite as Thai citizens and members of the Thai race. By this effort in a process beginning in the late 19th century during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), all of the previous subjects of the country, including hill tribes, were meant to become Thai citizens. Only the inability of the Thai government to reach the most remote areas kept some peoples from becoming Thai. Although there are Karen in or near large cities like Chiang Mai that became Thai so completely that their grandchildren perhaps do not even know that their forebears were Karen, these are exceptional cases. Many tribes still live in the highlands following life-styles that are more traditional than modern. Some of these people are still not citizens, despite much recent effort by the government and development agencies to reach them.

The Thai kings of the late 19th century took other actions to make Thailand seem more respectable, some dealing with forestry. In 1896, King Chulalongkorn created the Royal Forestry Department (RFD), selecting an Englishman from the forestry department of British Burma to be the first director general.

The forestry practices of such officials drew on a tradition dating back at least to the time of William the Conqueror which aimed to keep people out of the forests. “Forest” is in fact cognate with “foreign” and referred to a legal category distinct from woodland, which was open to all. Foresters were those who tried to keep poachers out of the forest so that it could be preserved for the use of the king. Such practices persisted until the 17th century, when German forestry developed with an aim of “scientific” exploitation of the forest. Not everybody appreciated the new approach. A German observer in British India noted that forests “form and thrive best where there are no people—and

hence no forestry, and those are perfectly justified who say, Formerly we had no forestry science and enough wood: now we have that science, but no wood" (Cotta 1902 [1816]:3). Nonetheless, the British adopted commercial forestry in 1859. They brought a German, later Sir Dietrich Brandeis, to Burma in 1856 to run the forestry department there. During his tenure he surveyed the forests of Burma and prepared estimates of forest yields in terms of exploitable girth.

As a result, forestry development in Burma took place within an exclusionary mind-set whereby forests were preserved for the use of the state rather than for the use of the people. Whether forests were used by English kings to hunt or by concessionaires in Burma to harvest teak, the exclusion is the same. People engaging in hunting and gathering or swiddening were, as Anan Ganjanapan commented, not favored.<sup>1</sup> Swiddeners, who not only removed forest produce but burned down portions of the woods to cultivate the land in a rotational scheme, came under particular disfavor by the foresters.

Thailand's Royal Forestry Department of Thailand was founded with the main purpose of resolving difficulties caused by the princes of northern Thai states, such as Chiang Mai and Lamphun, in their effort to capitalize on teak. At that time, English firms, such as the Borneo Company and Bombay-Burmah, and a Danish company, East Asiatic, were logging the teak forests of the north, much of which were controlled by northern Thai royalty. Conflicts arose, mainly over what the Europeans alleged was the leasing of forests simultaneously to different companies. Although some of these disputes may have been based on faulty surveying techniques, the threat of armed intervention by the English so worried the Thai king that he set up the forest department with an English director-general to reduce tensions—a task in which the department was successful.

The Royal Forestry Department, partly because of this promising beginning as well as of the importance of lumber export earnings, managed to increase its authority throughout the 20th century. From its start in 1896, when the RFD controlled only teak trees (not the land), its sway increased. In 1913, all logging was placed under the RFD, and in 1938, a new forest conservation act gave the department control of all forest land. Since forest land was, by legal definition, "uninhabited," this brought the RFD into conflict with the many peoples who were living in the

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<sup>1</sup> Few topics arouse more contention than the impact of shifting cultivation on forests. Many authorities now agree, however, that if there is ample room for swidden agriculture and if allowance is made for ten or more years to pass before a particular portion of the forest is cultivated again, soil quality need not be seriously reduced. See Zinke et al. (1978) for the results of a study to the west of Chiang Mai. Villages inhabited by the tribal group studied by Zinke et al. have been in certain sites for over 400 years. They surely were engaging in the same agricultural practices earlier.

forests and conducting shifting cultivation there as well as those who used the land for hunting and gathering or other purposes.

More recently, the RFD devised a development plan that led eventually to the National Economic and Social Development Board's national planning scheme. In 1985 and 1986 the RFD established watershed quality zones in northern Thailand regulating what kinds of activities were sanctioned according to factors such as forest degradation, slope, and natural resources. Those areas deemed most in need of preservation were rated class 1A (absolutely protected); those in valleys where people had been living were rated class 5.

By having done this, the state meant to exert complete control over the forests. Formerly, persons living in the *muang* (traditional states) of Thailand were so afraid of the *pa* (forest) that they considered people living there—even though they might be subjects of the ruler of the *muang*—a different kind of human being, a *kha* (for details see Renard 1993). Establishing watershed quality zones constituted the *muang*'s complete eradication, at least legally, of the *pa*. Now everything was seen as belonging to the nation-state. The old distinction between the people of the *muang* (Tai) and the people of the *pa* had disappeared, and all persons living within the country were either Thai citizens or aliens.

## Sasana

*Sasana* (religion) conventionally meant Buddhism but since at least the beginning of the 20th century has included other religions such as Islam, which has millions of adherents in Thailand, particularly in the four southern provinces.<sup>2</sup> Even Christianity, with fewer than a million followers, was sufficiently influential to inspire Prince (and future king) Mongkut to establish a new sect of the Buddhist monkhood, the Thammayut. The good impression 19th-century missionaries made on the prince, who was then in the monkhood, led to his founding a sect he believed would be as strictly devout and progressive as he saw the missionaries as being. Taking its lead from its learned founder, the Thammayut sect grew most rapidly among urban dwellers, intellectuals, and the younger generation.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most prominent monks to emerge in the 20th century was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who in fact was not Tham-

<sup>2</sup> As early as the reign of King Vajiravudh, some Muslim leaders gave the king the title Protector of Islam. See Yoneo Ishii's essay in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> The Thammayut sect has maintained a close relationship with Thai royalty. The current king, for example, when he became a monk, was ordained at Wat Bowonniwet, the same monastery at which Prince Mongkut was the abbot in the previous century. A former abbot of this monastery is now the Supreme Patriarch. All persons holding this position since the inception of the Thammayut sect, except one, have been Thammayut monks.

mayut. Before his death in 1993, he made his retreat in the southern province of Surat Thani, a center of nonscholastic Buddhism. Choosing to remain outside the traditional Buddhism of the Thammayut hierarchy, Buddhadasa taught a return to the practices of early Buddhism.

Buddhadasa attracted many followers who were dissatisfied with traditional Thai Buddhism. One such person was Phra Phongsak Techadhammo, who, as a young monk, found life at the famous Bangkok temple, Wat Mahathat, to contain what he believed were inappropriate extravagances. He left and, despite being Thammayut, traveled to Surat Thani, where he found the teachings of Buddhadasa to his liking.

Later, on a trip to Chiang Mai, Phra Phongsak went to meditate in Tu Phu cave, near where the village of Pa Kluai would be founded in a few years. In 1983, when he came back, he discovered that because of commercial logging and inroads by Thai lowlanders and Hmong highlanders, "astounding" forest devastation had occurred. He decided to help preserve the forest. He built a large following, some of whom established the Dhamanaat Foundation for Conservation and Rural Development, which later received the Good Supporter award of the Royal Forestry Department and was named to the Global 500 Roll of Honour Award by the U.N. Environmental Programme (Suchira Payulpitack 1991:248).

Regardless of the testimonial by the RFD director-general, the idea of protecting a forest for its own sake and for becoming involved with Buddhist monks to preserve a forest run counter to RFD tradition. For a Buddhist monk to become actively involved in forest preservation also runs counter to the thinking of conservative Buddhist monks. So it is not surprising that Phra Phongsak, who had in the 1970s been suspected of being a communist, was the subject of cautionary cables from the U.S. consulate in Chiang Mai to the U.S. State Department and has aroused the mistrust of local provincial officials.

Nonetheless, monks in Thailand are increasingly becoming involved in forest preservation. Perhaps the tradition of having meditated in the forests for centuries put many rural monks in a position to appreciate the forests. In this social involvement by the Buddhist monkhood, Thammayut monks have taken the lead.

## **Mahakasat**

From the beginning of the changes making Thailand a nation-state, Thai kings have taken an interest in the peoples living within its borders and in helping them become citizens in the new Thai state operating under the rule of law. King Chulalongkorn himself made several trips to the Karen area along

the western border, where he became personally acquainted with Karen leaders. Groups such as these Karen had served as spies, scouts, and porters in Thailand's wars with its western neighbor, Burma. However, after the start of the reign of King Rama VI in 1910, when the country's territorial security became more certain, Thai leaders lost interest in groups like the Karens and a policy of benign neglect toward them developed.

This lessened only in the 1950s. With the start of fighting, involving Hmong and other highlanders related to those in Thailand, the hill tribes began to be perceived as a security risk. Some years later, when opium was declared illegal in 1959, the Hmong and other growers became further suspect as a threat to the nation. The government then began to regard the Hmong and others as a "problem" in a way it had never done before. The fact that the Hmong had a unique dress, did not often speak Thai, and led lives quite different from those of lowland Thai meant that they were also seen as non-Thai—particularly because of their practice of cultivating land by burning forests in a way officially discouraged.

Government agencies were set up to deal with these peoples, Hmong and others, who had never been given the chance to join the Thai mainstream. Also becoming active in dealing with the hill tribes was the king, who suggested that the best policy would be to win their loyalty. He further suggested that to do this, opium fields should not be destroyed until adequate means for the survival of the hill tribes were available. Viable crop replacements, he suggested, had to exist before poppy destruction took place.

This policy set the tone of international crop replacement aid, like that by the U.N. Fund for Drug Abuse Control, whose first project in the world was implemented in northern Thailand in 1973. A successor project, known as the Highland Agricultural Marketing and Production Project (HAMP), included within its project area the village of Pa Kluai.

The Hmong in Pa Kluai had come to Chom District, 60 kilometers southwest of Chiang Mai, in the 1930s and settled about five kilometers from the present village. They moved to Pa Kluai in the 1970s. HAMP found it difficult to reduce opium cultivation in Pa Kluai, where, as elsewhere, opium held many advantages for growers. "Agricultural extension agents" enter the village with seed and other incentives at the start of the growing season. At harvest time they return with cash to buy the crop. Opium yields a higher income than other crops, its small payload is easily transportable over jungle trails, and is not subject to bruising or rotting, as are many crops. It grows well on the poor tropical soils of the area, requiring only a modest level of technology, and the poppy itself contains alkaloids that are of medicinal value, giving opium intrinsic appeal to a people with little

access to a modern pharmacopoeia. Also, no sophisticated packaging or refrigeration is required to ship opium. And until very recently, growers in Thailand were largely safe from arrest. When Richard Mann, a HAMP administrator, wrote the final HAMP report, he called Pa Kluai a “particularly difficult” village, reflecting frustration over the inability of HAMP to significantly reduce opium cultivation during the life of the project from 1980 to 1984 (Thailand & United Nations 1984:26). As a result, a new undertaking, the Thai–Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project (TN-HDP), which began in 1984, continued to work with Pa Kluai villagers.

By this time, however, the government had decided that ample replacement crop options were available, and some opium was destroyed in Pa Kluai and one villager was arrested. The villagers then requested replacement crop materials, and within three years, opium cultivation had ceased almost completely. Only small plots where people cultivate poppy for their own intake remain.

To replace opium, the Hmong turned to cabbages. Rather than receiving assistance from the TN-HDP, which did not promote cabbage, the villagers turned to Hmong in nearby villages, such as Mae Tho<sup>4</sup> and Mae Wan, where cabbage was grown on a large scale. A marketing network was set up by which trucks and pickups came to these villages to ship produce to Bangkok. Villagers reported earning an income comparable to that from opium.

To grow cabbage on this scale, however, requires the use of pesticides and new irrigation schemes. Stone retaining walls and gravity sprinkler systems were built. By 1985–86 villagers in the lowlands downstream from Pa Kluai began to notice a decline in stream flow, for which they blamed the Hmong. They also complained of water polluted with pesticides.

These villagers saw the Hmong as not being Thai since they were not Buddhists, were not Thai citizens, or holders of any kind of land rights. The Hmong also engaged in shifting cultivation, which the lowlanders saw as different from their agricultural practices, which they identified as “Thai” agriculture. The lowlanders became convinced that the Hmong should be evicted from Pa Kluai. At one point, the lowlanders became so angry that some made threats to burn down the village. Phra Phongsak then sought to lessen the anger by building, with funds raised by his supporters, a 14-kilometer barbed-wire fence along the watershed line between Pa Kluai and the Thai lowlanders’ area.

A conflict arose over whether, as TN-HDP officials contend, the Hmong were clearing new forest. A complicating factor was

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<sup>4</sup> The anthropologist William Geddes (1978), who studied Mae Tho in the 1950s and 1960s, called the village “Meto.”

that in shifting cultivation, growers can only grow crops in one area for a year or two, then must let the forest grow back. In certain areas where regrowth has been unchecked for seven or eight years, those unfamiliar with this kind of agriculture might think the forest was old growth, not new.

Nonetheless, successive attempts by Chiang Mai provincial officials to solve the problem went unrewarded, since their efforts were mostly predicated on the Hmong's leaving the area for a suitable alternative site. In fact, high-ranking RFD officials have on a number of occasions declared that Pa Kluai is the first village in all of Thailand that must be relocated. But because the hills of Thailand have been so thoroughly used, there are no suitable alternative sites. The Hmong remain in Pa Kluai.

Phra Phongsak has grown ill and, following the publication of pictures in local newspapers showing a man (purportedly him) wearing disarrayed monk's robes and with a young woman, chose to leave the monkhood. Although he has continued wearing white robes and his supporters contend that he was framed, he has been so discredited that his effectiveness has been curtailed. Without him as their effective leader, the Thai lowlanders have been unable to mount further opposition to the Hmong's presence. As for the Hmong, they remain in the hills growing cabbages.

Two Thai participants at the conference discussed with each other privately that, of the three pillars, the king was the most prominent. The experience of Pa Kluai bears this out. The king—although he has not visited Pa Kluai (at least since the village became controversial)—has given constant support to the Hmong as they become loyal citizens of Thailand. This process is facilitated by the presence of an elementary school in Pa Kluai. Since the village children are now able to speak Thai, they are learning to think like educated Thai lowlanders. Perhaps (and optimistically) the Hmong will become sufficiently Thai-ized to relate directly to the Thai lowlanders and resolve the situation on their own and outside the legal framework for resolving disputes, which has not worked thus far.