

## Dubious Development Concepts in the Thai Highlands: The Chao Khao in Transition

---

Chupinit Kesmanee

Thai government policies for highland development are creating serious problems for ethnic hill tribes, among them environmental pollution, prostitution, AIDS, increasing opium addiction, and social disruption. Three questionable assumptions underlie government policies. Concern for opium eradication not only directs attention and funds away from groups who do not produce opium but has also failed, thus far, to find substitute crops that do not require extensive use of polluting chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The flawed assumption that shifting cultivators, rather than logging concerns, are major destroyers of the forests has led to fruitless efforts to relocate hill peoples. And the questionable theory that ethnic peoples pose a threat to national security has led to educational efforts that undermine traditional forms of village authority.

**T**he ethnic highlanders in the north and northwestern parts of Thailand are called *chao khao* in Thai, which means “hill people.” In official documents the same term is used to mean “hill tribes.” The *chao khao* are the Karen (Kariang), Hmong (Meo), Mian (Yao), Lahu (Muser), Lisu (Lisor), Akha (Bokor), H’tin, Khamu, and Lua.<sup>1</sup> According to figures available from the Tribal Research Institute in 1990, the total number of ethnic highlanders is 562,139, or 1% of the population of Thailand; they are distributed in 20 provinces. At present these highlanders are adapting to a changing situation and confronting new problems brought by government development policies.

The shaping of development policy and administration for ethnic highlanders is influenced by external as well as internal concerns. On one side, there has been international pressure to replace opium cultivation with the cultivation of other cash crops. On the other side, the Thai government is concerned

---

<sup>1</sup> The term *chao khao* also includes the Mlabri, a small number of hunters and food gatherers. Unfortunately, owing to Mlabri nomadism, the government has made no effort to generate development activities for this target group.

about the integrity of the nation-state and has enforced a strict policy in the highlands. Development activities so far have had considerable impact on the highlanders' lives.

The government can claim success at reducing opium production from about 150 tons in the 1965–66 season to 25 tons in 1986–87 (Wanat Bhruksasri 1989:27). In 1990 production was estimated at 28 tons, and this total was expected to decrease to about 27 tons the following year (*Bangkok Post*, 17 Oct. 1991). In my opinion, the success owes a lot to the harsh treatment of the highland people by the Third Army. The development agencies can also claim some success in connecting the highland communities to the lowland market and, therefore, modernity.

The negative effect, however, is that the highland and the lowland communities have both encountered new and even more serious problems, such as environmental pollution, prostitution, and AIDS. So-called economic success seems to be achieved at the expense of social harmony and stability in the highlands. It is time to review development policy and ask whether it is appropriate to orient it toward the commercial economy, with the key concepts being opium production, shifting cultivation, and the threat to the national security.

### Consequences of Eradicating Opium

Concern for opium production largely originated outside Thailand. To understand the problem, we must look at the history of the opium trade since the 18th century. Profit from the opium trade contributed greatly to the accumulation of capital in Western nations, while in China and other Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, opium dens flourished in every corner of every town. Not until 1906 did the British House of Commons declare trade in opium immoral (McCoy, Read & Adams 1972: 363–64). In 1946, Thailand was singled out in an announcement at the first U.N. meeting as the only country in Southeast Asia with a government-controlled opium trade monopoly. The following year the Thai government announced that opium growing would be permitted only in the mountainous areas of the north (p. 137). How closely the two problems of opium production and the presence of highlanders were related can be seen by two legal developments in 1959: the passage of a law declaring opium illegal and the establishment of the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee (Chupinit Kesmanee 1989:65–66). If it had not been for outside pressure on the government, it is difficult to see why it would have bothered to stop the profitable trade.

Opium was the major source of cash income for many highland communities. To eradicate opium poppy cultivation, the government in the 1960s decided first to provide other cash crops for them to grow. Perhaps the best thing the government

has done so far, at least until recently, has been to exercise a benign measure of indulgence toward highlanders in the matter of opium eradication. The rationale for cash-crop replacement right from the beginning has been based on capitalist ideology. In fact, the promotion of cash crops has become an important component of development programs in the highlands. Unfortunately, what is most often forgotten is that more than 50% of the total highland population has not traditionally cultivated opium: the Karen, Lua, H'tin, and Khamu. Most of these peoples, especially in the early years of development, were not yet engaged in commercial crop production. Even the opium growers used their cash earnings mainly to buy rice. At present, the major part of household expenditures is still for food. Gar Yia Lee's survey of Khun Wang village in 1978 confirms this. Rice was the major purchase made in both 1976 and 1977 (Lee 1978:32–33).

Most of the large-scale projects funded by other nations (e.g., Germany and Australia) and by international agencies have been concentrated in opium-producing areas (Chupinit Kesmanee 1989:67–68; McKinnon 1989:336–41; Tapp 1989:32–33). Over the past few years, concern over opium eradication has even intensified; four foreign-assisted projects have carefully selected sites in opium-producing areas.<sup>2</sup> Because of this preoccupation with opium, community development programs are concentrated in only a few provinces (Thailand, Task Force on the Hill Tribes 1987:71, 73). Table 1 shows how project activities are distributed among the highland population.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Development Project Activities among Highlanders

Ethnic Group	Population	No. of Project Activities	Ratio of Population per Activity
<i>Opium growers</i>			
Hmong	82,310	212	388
Yao	36,140	141	256
Lahu	60,321	95	635
Lisu	25,051	92	272
Akha	32,866	89	369
<i>Non-opium growers</i>			
Karen	270,803	124	2,184
H'tin	28,524	54	528
Khamu	7,284	54	135
Lua	1,845	17	109

SOURCE: Information from Tribal Research Institute, 1988; Thailand, Task Force on the Hill Tribes 1987.

The Hmong are well known as opium cultivators. Although they form a group three times smaller than the Karen, they re-

<sup>2</sup> The areas are Doi Pae Per (1987–91) in Chiang Mai and Tak; Doi Sam Mun (1987–91) in Mae Hon Son and Chiang Mai; Doi Wiang Pha (1988–92) in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai; and Doi Yao-Pha Mon (1989–93) in Chiang Rai and Phayao (*Thai Rath* [Bangkok], 9 Mar. 1990).

ceive the largest share of all project activities. The Karen, the largest group, who do not grow opium, receive much the smallest share as measured by project activities per capita. The non-opium cultivators are, in general, worse off in terms of both economic and social status. At root, the cause of this development disparity lies in either deep insincerity or naivete in plans designed to solve the highlanders' problems. It is clear that foreign donors give aid for highland development in Thailand primarily to solve the problem of drug addiction at home.

A result is that an increasing number of highland communities practice two modes of production at the same time: the traditional domestic mode and a commercial mode. A simple schema distinguishes them (Table 2). Monoculture is the method most widely adopted on full-scale commercial farms, but it can present a hazard. Planting 10,000 acres in cotton, for instance, provides a tremendous opportunity for the buildup of a pest population (Olkowski & Olkowski 1976:345). Mixed cropping offers several advantages over monoculture (see, e.g., Merrill 1976:300–303; Fakuoka 1987). Moreover, the practice of mixed cropping allows farmers to harvest food crops over an extended period—at least six months (Chantaboon Sutthi 1989:126–27).

**Table 2.** Highland Modes of Production

Domestic Production	Full Commercialized Production
Multiple crops	Monoculture
Organic applications	Chemical applications
Labor intensive	Mechanized
Small farm	Large farm

Monocropping makes necessary the extensive use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Pesticides affect not only public health but also agro-ecosystems (Olkowski & Olkowski 1976: 342–44). Chemical fertilizers break down quickly under tropical conditions, which means that large applications of fertilizer are needed to maintain production (Janzen 1977:52). Environmental pollution resulting from the heavy use of chemicals on cash crops in the highlands has recently, in fact, become a serious issue. Lowlanders have complained about the downstream effect of extensive chemical use in the highlands. Water tested for chemical residues has been found to be contaminated (*Siam Rath* [Bangkok], 19 Aug. 1989). As a lowland farmer put it:

For poppies, the hilltribes need only a small piece of land. They can be grown only once a year. And they don't require the use of any pesticides. . . . [F]or cabbages, however, the hilltribe people need to clear a lot of land to make it profitable. They use rotating sprinklers to shower the cabbage plots all day. And they grow cabbages all year round. . . . The fish are dying because of polluted water. Our buffaloes get sores if they swim in

the creeks. We get diarrhoea and dizziness if we drink the water. (*Bangkok Post*, 19 Feb. 1990)

Most cash crops introduced into the highlands—tomatoes, cotton, and fruit trees, for example—require the extensive use of chemical pesticides. Commercial monocropping of cabbages alone ensures the wide serial distribution of chemical contaminants to highlanders, rural lowlanders, and city dwellers. The detrimental impact is democratically if disastrously shared.

Farm mechanization is also regarded as progressive and efficient. Michael Perelman (1976:73), writing on farming in the United States, however, draws on statistical evidence to show that from 1950 to 1969, despite the reduction of work-hours on crop production by about 50% (from 6,922 million to 3,431 million work-hours), the cost of operating and maintaining farm capital rose nearly 100% (from U.S.\$5,640 million to \$11,500 million). Fortunately, the steep slopes of highland farms, as well as the lack of capital, makes it highly unlikely that heavy machinery will be introduced. Where highland farms are accessible to heavy tractors, the extent of land degradation is very high, as in the provinces of Phetchabun, Kamphaeng Phet, and Tak.

The promotion of alternative cash crops overlooks the good sense of traditional farming, where a variety of crops are grown together and no synthetic fertilizers and pesticides are needed. The cost of a comprehensive study of traditional farming systems, which would enable us to better understand how they work and thereby use them to improve the existing system, would be minimal when compared to the high cost of research experiments carried out on highland cash crops (Chantaboon Sutthi 1989: 128–34). Chantaboon Sutthi's comment is not too far from the fact: "Aggressive 'Top-Down' development projects which think for people and assume that the experts know best can often come to decisions which, in the long run, endanger the wide variety of indigenous germplasm by replacing it with a few improved varieties" (p. 135).

### **From Shifting Cultivation to Relocation**

Shifting cultivation is everywhere associated with deforestation and deteriorating climatic conditions. Let us look at what shifting cultivation is before assessing its impact.

The traditional way of identifying the *chao khao* agricultural system in Thailand is to distinguish between "pioneer swiddening," which is practiced by opium-cultivating groups (Hmong, Yao, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha) and "field rotation," "cyclical swiddening," or "established swiddening"—a system supposedly followed by groups that do not grow opium, the Lua, Karen, H'tin, and Khamu (Wanat Bhruksasri 1989:10-11; Renard 1986:6-7). The first is characterized by its pioneering nature. As land is ex-

hausted, farmers move to new areas. The latter system can best be described as a village-based 10-year forest fallow, field-rotation system (Kunstadter 1980:4–6, 15–16). The cycle “clearly creates a balance between soil condition, crops, geology, and climate” in an area (Chupinit Kesmanee 1988:29; see also Zinke, Sanga, & Kunstadter 1978:140–59). The positive nature of this balance is confirmed by Peter Kunstadter (1980:6): “If efficiency is measured in terms of the ratio of food calories produced per unit of human energy expended, the Lua’ [field rotation] system was not efficient, but the Lua’ system was very effective in terms of long-term stability.”

Shifting cultivation that allows for a 10-year cycle keeps natural resources ecologically in balance. Once I visited the abandoned land of a Hmong community, a group classified as pioneer swiddeners, up north in Nan Province. The whole area had been exploited over 50 years; after a long fallow period of 20 years or so the region was covered with a reasonably mature forest, and only a few scattered fields had recently been cleared by new settlers. Contrary to widely held belief, it is my opinion that if the entire northern highlands were deforested, it would not be the lowlanders who suffered most, but the highlanders themselves who would be the first and immediate victims of any crisis produced by the current technology of slash-and-burn cultivation. In fact, only within the past two decades have we seen signs of an ecological crisis and that mainly following the large-scale adoption of commercial crops.

To present shifting cultivation as the major cause of forest destruction does not stand up at all well to examination. Established swiddeners like the Karen, Lua, H’tin and Khamu, who constitute over 50% of the hill population, are indigenous to the area. Prior to the opening of the country to the West in 1850, most of Thailand was covered by forest. It was the modernization policies of King Rama V that changed this. After the building of a more efficient transport system, especially the laying of railway lines, most forests in the central lowlands were cut down. After World War II the forests on the fringe of the broad plains to the east and northeast were rapidly cleared. The overall rate of forest destruction remained much lower in the north than in any other region (McKinnon 1989:316–18). To argue that northern forests survived because of the late arrival of commercial logging companies is to miss the point. The British were active in the region quite some time ago. About 100 years ago, McCarthy recorded the presence of a logging operation in Lampang and Chiang Mai equipped with a steam-saw mill ([McCarthy] n.d.:10–11, 16, 65–66). According to Anan Ganjanapan: “During . . . 1858–59 the export of teak from the port of Moulmein was worth 400,000 pounds sterling; almost 95 percent of the timber sold came from the Chiang Mai Area” (1984:50, citing Ramsay 1971:60).

Let me draw the same conclusion here as I have done elsewhere: “[Be]cause of the hill tribes, the Northern region has more forests left than the other regions” (Chupinit Kesmanee 1987:33). Worapotjana Na Nakara, in an essay on the Forestry Department (*Thai Rath* [Bangkok], 30 Dec. 1988), identifies logging concessions as a major cause of forest destruction. Not a single concessionaire observes rigid conservation laws, which are in turn stretched with Royal Forestry Department connivance to accommodate the timber industry. Before the total ban on logging in 1938, the annual rate of forest depletion was 3.2 million rai—a rate that must be seen as part of the concession system (*Siam Rath* [Bangkok], 2 Dec. 1988).

Other accusations made against shifting cultivation—that it reduces rainfall and causes soil erosion, land degradation, and flooding and sedimentation on the plain—are all still matters of controversy. In an argument against these claims, John McKinnon (1989:303–59) provides strong evidence from research and observations made in both Thailand and elsewhere to encourage uncritical environmentalists to be more scientific in their approach to the matter. What usually happens is for commentators to rush to the conclusion that they prefer and believe to be the truth. For example, droughts and flooding in the lowlands are not new phenomena; McCarthy, who traveled through Prae a hundred years ago, commented that “during heavy rains the town has been exposed to floods, which accounts for the dilapidated condition of the walls” ([McCarthy] n.d.:68).

Thus, to replace opium, alternative cash crops are introduced; and to stop slash-and-burn or shifting cultivation, sedentary agriculture is promoted. Irrigated paddy fields are the favored form of sedentary agriculture. Unfortunately, the mountainous topography of the north has limited irrigable, cultivable land. Only small pockets of land on narrow valley floors are suitable for forming into terraces. There is not enough suitable land available to develop, let alone to support the entire highland population. Development agencies promote cash crops and intensive agriculture, which are expected to make it possible for highlanders to maintain stable settlements. Economic development in the highlands is not regarded as a means to a social and political end but rather as the end itself—the way to solve all highland problems.

Although the positive correlation between shifting cultivation and the destruction of forest land and the watershed is not definitely affirmed, the preoccupation with this concern has already had a considerable effect on highlanders’ lives. One idea that has been suggested is that the hill tribes be relocated, moving from the primary forest areas to lower altitudes. What has often been forgotten is that an increasing number of lowlanders are moving into the high hills in search of cultivable and unoccupied land.

To launch a relocation program for the hill tribes en masse would be illogical and at the same time unrealistic, as was proven in two dramatic cases: in Khlong Lan, in the province of Kamphaeng Phet (1987), and in Phob Phra Subdistrict, in the province of Tak (1988). Most of those relocated to Kamphaeng Phet do not yet have a farm of their own to work. An unknown number of Hmong in Tak are still on the run, just trying to stay away from the Phob Phra relocation area. Common sense tells us that if a large area of cultivable land existed, it would already have been claimed.

So far, the lands prepared for these displaced people have been either exhausted or uncultivable. To upgrade the soil of uncultivable land is extremely difficult for a poor farmer who has just been deprived of economic security.

### **A Vicious Circle of National Security**

A threat to national security is like a twin to opium production in that both issues serve as major preoccupations of the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee (HTWC). Concern for the problem of national security was not initiated entirely by domestic interests. It was very much a response to Western pressure, initiated by the United States. In 1956, three years before the inception of the HTWC, the Thai government set up a committee to solve the urgent problems faced by people living in remote areas (Wanat Bhruksasri, n.d.:11). Responsibility for carrying out the tasks set by the Committee for the Welfare of People in Remote Areas was mainly undertaken by the Border Patrol Police (BPP), established three years earlier, in 1953. The BPP was equipped and funded through the U.S. Operation Mission to counteract Communist insurgency (Tapp 1990:32, 70). The target people were not specifically identified as *chao khao* but as “people in the remote and difficult areas.” The subsequent establishment of the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee carefully distinguished the target population, especially those who were thought to have become subject to Communist infiltration. The establishment of the HTWC not only coincided with the passage of the Opium Act, which made illegal the production, possession, and sale of proscribed addictive drugs, but also with a coup in which the military under Sarit Thanarat overthrew the government of Phibun Songkhram. In Phibun’s government, Phao Sriyanont, the director general of the Police Department, had enjoyed the support of a strong entourage system (Elliott 1978:116), in which the paramilitary presence of the BPP played a strong role. Setting up the HTWC was a way to reduce the power of the police and minimize the risk of an early challenge to Sarit’s rule.

It is necessary to see the move within the broader historical policy of nation building promoted during the reign of King



Rama V, when Thailand (Siam at the time) underwent extensive administrative reforms. Various principalities were incorporated into Siam proper, and the authority of local lords was usurped by officials sent directly from the central Thai court (see also Kanala Sukhabanij Eksaengsri 1977:202–4). Education, as well as communication networks, was extended into the periphery of a circle of power of which Bangkok remained the center. National boundaries had been drawn by colonial officers in the employ of King Rama V (Thailand 1964:349, 359, 362). The attempt to modernize was a clear response to the colonial challenge, and the feudal system of lord and vassal came to be regarded as inappropriate. A more stable and unified state system had to be established. The semiautonomous power of local lords on the periphery was a considerable challenge. Newcomers and immigrants were never regarded as a serious threat to the state until well after boundaries had been drawn and Communist activity extended over the border. Even a revolt of Hmong and Yao villagers during the reign of King Rama VI was not taken as a serious threat to state security. Ronald Renard, citing a 1921 document in the Thai National Archive, writes: “In 1921, when King Vajiravudh, Chulalongkhorn’s son and successor, attempted to continue his father’s policy of taxing and conscripting highlanders, Hmong and Yao villagers revolted. Skirmishes broke out and a leading Thai official recommended chasing the non-Thai groups out of the country by burning their villages. Higher authorities, however, suggested that a policy of benign neglect would be more productive” (Renard 1986:3).

Until 1956, then, the hill people were pretty well left to themselves under a state policy of *laissez faire*. In contrast, an invasion of Haw (Chinese from Yunnan) into the north in 1885 elicited quite a different response. The army was immediately sent to suppress and eject them ([McCarthy] n.d.:150–79, 189–90; Thailand 1987:65–85). Here we can see how the drawing of boundaries between countries was not only a cartographic act but also the introduction of a new concept of nationality. Although in the past, warfare between feudal lords was endemic, boundaries were rarely treated as absolute.

Nationalism was in fact the principal international issue of the time. The name “Siam” was replaced by “Thailand” to strengthen the connection between the land and the Thai people, the dominant ethnic group. A great deal of attention was given to propaganda and, even more effectively, the centralized educational curriculum. The tremendous diversity of ethnic people that had existed in this region for centuries was largely ignored. A hundred years ago the multicultural upcountry markets impressed travelers. McCarthy, employed as surveyor to the court in Bangkok, reported on Chiang Mai:

There is a daily market, managed almost entirely by women, who do all the buying and selling, and judging from the different costumes, many races of people congregate at the markets. There cannot be less than three thousand people, without a single policeman, nor, so far as I can see, any necessity of one. . . .

. . . It is no unusual thing to see an elephant stalking down the market amidst a crowd of YANG (Karens), NGIOS (Shans from the SALWIN), KERRNS (from CHIENG TUNG), KAMUKS from across the NAM KAWNG, and even TAI from the distant SIPSWANG CHU-TAI, and HAW traders from YIWANAN. Good order and the best humour prevail among the people. ([McCarthy] n.d.:16, 66)

The various ethnic groups were, before their presence became less admissible, typical of "Thai" society. It was probably quite common for people to communicate with each other in several languages, as is still the case among the highland people in Mae Chan District, Chiang Rai, where several ethnic groups share the same location. Neglect of this reality on the part of the government does more harm than good. Social and political turmoil are attributed to ethnic differences, rather than to government ignorance of the importance of ethnic identity and the role that it plays in people's sense of belonging and sense of who they owe loyalty to. Government misperception impacted seriously on one situation, noted in the *Eastern World* in 1970:

Generally speaking, Communist insurrection in Thailand has acquired some success through the anti-Thai resentment harboured by many of the country's minorities. It has gained ground in areas largely ignored by the Thai government, which has so far done little to improve the status of the minorities or to take into account their basic requirements. . . . The minority issue must be treated as a social problem instead of a political one. (Cited in Kanala Sukhabanig Eksaengsri 1977:196–97)

Contrary to the suggestion in the *Eastern World*, the government seems to be reluctant to act on the issue of citizenship. According to national policy, all ethnic highlanders born in Thailand are eligible for citizenship. In practice, however, eligibility varies from one province to another. In Chiang Rai, for example, many chao khao have not been granted citizenship. The provincial officials believe that ethnic immigrants are still flowing across the Thai-Burma border, which makes it difficult to distinguish the chao khao native to Thailand from the foreign chao khao. This inhibits the process of granting citizenship. As a result, a number of highland communities have not been brought under official administration. The expulsion of highlanders from the country occurs very often in Chiang Rai. The problem seems insoluble: the officials cannot distinguish Thai from non-Thai, so citizenship cannot be granted; and because the people have no citizenship, their nationality cannot be determined. This com-

pletes the vicious circle. Furthermore, those highlanders who have no identification cards with them when traveling are likely to be blackmailed by the authorities. Ironically, highland students cannot receive a school certificate when they complete their education if they have no house registration card. The situation violates basic human rights, but who is there to object?

Ethnic as well as cultural differentiation is often regarded as a threat to national security. The centralization of political administration and education is, therefore, implemented to justify national unification. On the other hand, this effort has eroded both traditional authority and local culture; now there are new village heads and mainstream culture. The rationale for the policy of centralization not only ignores the cultural diversity in the country but also geographical and occupational differences, not to mention economic disparities.

### **Unstable Socioeconomic Conditions in the Highlands**

So far, I have discussed the poverty of the three key concepts underlying development activities in the highlands: opium eradication, shifting cultivation, and national security. Recently, concern for the environment has added the concept of environmental conservation to the account. What we tend to overlook, however, is that by promoting cash crops the government and development agencies subvert environmental concerns by encouraging farmers to operate their farms on a large scale and to use chemicals. During the past few years the Hmong of Ban Khek Noi, Lom Sak District, Phetchabun, whose cash economy is based on ginger production, had to go as far as Pitsanulok, Tak, Loei, and Nan to rent land to continue large-scale cultivation because their own farmland in Khek Noi had already deteriorated.

The situation illustrates what Gregory Bateson (1972, cited in Sale 1980:27–28) calls a double-bind trap, where highland farmers are accused of destroying the national forests and watersheds with shifting cultivation and opium production; but when they abandon their traditional farming and adopt commercial crops to supply to wider markets, they are said to be polluting the environment. The prospects for those living in the highlands are very bleak. The way out of one problem simply leads to another and perhaps more serious one.

The younger generation of highlanders, who have some education, are looking forward to fleeing their agricultural communities. Both the parents and the children expect that the greater the access to education, the greater the likelihood of finding off-farm work. Data collected from the Hmong village of Pattana in Nan show the high percentage (33%) of households whose female members have become involved in the handicraft business to generate more income to support their families (Chupinit

Kesmanee 1991:163). An unknown number of highland girls have found their way to prostitution in the lowlands. The problem is made worse because the number of prostitutes from the highlands who are AIDS carriers has to be kept confidential. Under the circumstances, one or two AIDS carriers can spread the virus easily in a highland community. Unfortunately, the government has as yet no solution to the problem.

Opium addiction was never regarded as a social stigma among the *chao khao*. Smoking opium was often part of social events until both the production and consumption of opium were branded as evil by the government. Now, although the production of opium in Thailand has been reduced to a minimum, the rate of opium consumption does not seem to have gone down. From my casual observations, supported by some evidence, I would suggest that the number of opium addicts among the *chao khao* has been increasing (Alting Von Geusau 1990:21; Chupinit Kesmanee 1991:290–93; Wanat Bhruksasri et al. 1991:27). This is particularly true in the highland communities that are more exposed to development activities. Opium addiction exemplifies the social problems in the highlands.

### **An Overview of Opium Addiction**

Data collected in the course of investigations in Pattana village indicate that just over 20 years ago there were only 30 addicts. At that time, smokers grew opium for their own use, as well as for sale. The Hill Tribe Development and Welfare (HTDW) Centre, in a survey in 1986, counted 86 addicts, an almost three-fold increase over 18 years (Chupinit Kesmanee 1991:291).<sup>3</sup> The villagers had already given up opium cultivation, but the number of addicts rose to its peak. The major supply of opium was smuggled in from Laos. Most opium addicts in the village have gone through detoxification treatment in one form or another at least once or twice, but within one or two years they become addicted again. Most of the opium detoxification programs are admittedly unsuccessful. Their approach, however, has not changed much. Opium addiction among the *chao khao* has long been perceived mainly as a physical illness; thus, the treatment is limited to physical detoxification. The mentality underlying the addiction needs to be reevaluated, instead.

To begin with, we should look at opium as a means to achieve psychological release from the reality of chronic social and economic problems that the addicts can neither solve nor escape. Here, the blocks placed on self-actualization are critical. To be born a highlander is to be accused of opium production, forest

<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, not only has the number of opium addicts increased, but an increasing number of heroin addicts are found among highlanders, especially in Chiang Mai (Wanat Bhruksasri et al. 1991:19–28).

and watershed degradation, and environmental destruction. As an opium addict, one is held in contempt by relatives and neighbors alike. In the past, when the people still grew opium, an addict did not cause much trouble by asking for money or stealing things because enough opium was harvested locally to meet annual consumption needs, as well as to sell. Today, not only do addicts annoy other people in the village, but opium smoking is portrayed by government propaganda as such a low form of self-indulgence that highlanders have adopted an extremely negative attitude toward opium smokers. As a consequence, opium addicts are viewed as failures without pride and self-respect. This view is strengthened when smokers sell family belongings and resort to stealing from neighbors.

There is also good reason to relate opium addiction to the loss of cultural identity. In many cases, treatment depersonalizes and humiliates the addicts. If we hypothesize that addiction is primarily caused by psychological factors, we have to treat several things in different ways. A well-planned course of treatment should take into consideration what must be done before, during, and after detoxification. Instead of aiming to detoxify all the addicts in a community together, detoxification programs should offer individual or small-group therapy. Ways should be found to incorporate the addicts and those who are abstaining from the drug into the preparation, organization, and follow-up aspects of treatment programs, which could provide the participants an opportunity to regain pride and self-respect. Unless we alter our perceptions and our programs, the problem of opium addiction is likely to persist and possibly become more serious.

## Concluding Remarks

For 20 years highland development has been based on the key concepts of opium production, shifting cultivation, and the threat to national security, but these concepts are highly questionable. There are good reasons to argue that development projects based on these concepts have, more often than not, introduced new and intractable problems.

The policy of social integration proclaimed by the government is highly dubious as implemented by various government sectors. Some call the policy "structural assimilation" (e.g., McKinnon 1989:303–59). While the government is more concerned with how to transfuse the Thai identity into the various ethnic cultures, most of the large-scale development projects aim to improve economic well-being in the highlands at all costs. The project experts rarely take into account the social process of adaptation. Anything pertaining to the social dimension seems to be left to the people; whether they can adapt properly to the changing situation is not the concern of the developers. But social and eco-

conomic problems are interwoven. Not just environmental pollution but also prostitution and opium addiction are matters of concern to all. The future of the chao khao is important not only for themselves but for Thai society as a whole.