

NTOO XEEB: CULTURAL REDEFINITION FOR FOREST CONSERVATION AMONG THE HMONG IN THAILAND

PRASIT LEEPREECHA

Critical constraints around natural resources in northern Thailand have resulted in government officials and local villagers setting up strategies to manage watershed areas. The government, with the Thai Royal Forestry Department (RFD), bases its policies on the assumption that villagers cannot live in forest areas, whereas villagers argue that they can live harmoniously in forests by using their local wisdom. Villagers, supported by members of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and intellectuals, have revived and redefined their local culture in relation to issues of watershed management. The Hmong, most of whom live in watershed areas, have chosen the *ntoo xeeb*,¹ or the *tong seng*,² an annual tree offering ritual, to represent how their local wisdom can play a role in regional efforts in natural resources management. It is my argument that choosing and redefining the *ntoo xeeb* for natural resources conservation by the Hmong in northern Thailand is a reflection of the uniting of local villagers and grassroots movements in relation to natural resources management. It is also, critically, about the representation of Hmong ethnic identity in mainstream Thai society. The Hmong have been alleged to be destroyers of forests, due the system of shifting cultivation that they have practised for decades. By contrast, this article shows how a network of Hmong villages is applying the *ntoo xeeb* ceremony to natural resources management. The first such ceremony I observed took place in Mae Sa Mai, a Hmong village in Chiang Mai province, during the Hmong New Year on 2 January 1998.

To understand the current confrontation, let us first consider the historical background of the Thai government's policies towards highland people and local movements in relation to the conservation of natural resources. I will then describe the *ntoo xeeb* ceremony in Mae Sa Mai and its significance.

CONFRONTATION ON NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN NORTHERN THAILAND

The dilemmas around development issues and natural resource conservation in highland areas first arose some four decades after commercial agriculture was introduced to highland people, at the time when many national parks and wildlife sanctuaries were created.³ During the 1990s some highland communities were forced to relocate (Chupinit, 1987–88; Anurak, 1991), while today, others are still in the process of debating their futures. Tensions over forests initially sprung up between highland groups, but the tension went on to include rural lowland Thai and forest officials. In recent times, the two main opposing sides have been local highlanders and lowlanders, while local forestry officials have partly restrained from participating in confrontations.

In 1998, there was a confrontation between lowlanders and highlanders in Doi Inthanon National Park concerning water resources and the relocation of highlanders outside the park's watershed area. On 27–28 April and 26–28 May, 1998, more than ten thousand lowlander demonstrators blocked the road to Doi Inthanon, which also gives access to highland villages. Groups of tourists could not go up to the mountain. Lowland villagers were upset by the fact that the Thai cabinet had not addressed, in a particular meeting, the issue of relocating highlanders from the mountains. The leaders of the demonstrators said that allowing highlanders to settle on the mountain was the cause of forest fires and drought in watershed areas, which in turn caused troubles for lowlanders. The demonstrators pressed the government to drop its resolutions of 17, 22, and 29 April 1997 and the Wang Nam Khaeo resolution.⁴ Finally, Mr. Pancha Kesonthong, then deputy prime minister, negotiated with the lowland demonstrators and promised to bring the issue to the cabinet by 23 June 1998. The lowlander demonstrators then stopped blocking the road (*Thai Rath*, 28, 29, 30 May 1998; *Daily News*, 29 April 1998).

On 22–23 June 1998, however, around 5,000 highlanders and some lowlanders gathered in front of Chiang Mai City Hall to pressure the cabinet not to bring the issue to its meeting on 23 June. Highlanders wanted to carry on living in the forest, their birthplace. They argued that they had their own customary wisdom in relation to forest preservation, going back many generations. In the end, the issue was not raised at the cabinet meeting of 23 June and the highlanders went home that night. They pledged that around 50,000 of them would come down to demonstrate again if the resolutions of 17, 22 and 29 April 1997 were to be canceled by the cabinet.

Some time after the first flaring up, highlanders, together with northern Thai farmers and poor people, took to the streets again on April 25, 1999, over the issues of fundamental rights relating to their communities and over cultivation areas and citizenship issues. Around 4,000 villagers from eight provinces in upper

northern Thailand gathered in front of Chiang Mai City Hall. They demanded that the four forest laws and regulations, as well as forest-related cabinet resolutions, should be changed or revised in accordance with the new constitution. The new constitution recognizes the right of individuals to participate in resource management and protection and it recognizes community rights in relation to conservation, agricultural management and the environment. They also asked the government to reconsider the draft of the "Community Forest Bill" they had proposed several years ago, and to pass it without delay instead of a draft that had been created by the government. The demonstrators were finally dispersed by around 1,000 policemen, RFD officials, employees and lowland villagers, before the dawn of May 19, 1999 (Chayan, 1999; Subin, 1999; and Northern Farmer Network, the Assembly of Tribal Ethnic Minorities and Assembly of the Poor, 1999).

Though no further demonstrations have been held, hidden confrontation remains between upstream highlanders and downstream lowlanders, and between people who live in forest areas and forestry officials. Among the six main highland ethnic groups in this region, the Hmong were regarded as the first group to create problems in relation to the depletion of natural resources. Despite the fact that the Hmong are no longer mountain migrants or opium cultivators, they are still often accused of destroying natural resources, due to their dramatic adoption of new commercial cash crops to replace opium. The cash crops grown in Hmong communities are totally dependent upon Thai lowland and world markets. New methods of commercial cultivation inevitably cause ecological problems as they require using more land, water, chemical input, fertilizer, and hired labor than in the past, when subsistence agriculture was practised. These changes developed at around the same time that the Thai government, after the removal of the Communist threat, proclaimed more forest conservation areas, such as national parks, to be wildlife sanctuaries and priority watershed areas. Also, during the past twenty years the Hmong population more than doubled. (Kunstadter, et. Al, 1991 and 1994). The Hmong started to be accused by lowlanders and forestry officials of destroying more forest, taking more water to sprinkle crops, and spraying too many chemicals upstream. Confrontations occurred over Hmong communities in Doi Inthanon and Doi Suthep-Pui national parks in Chiang Mai province and at Doi Phukha National Park in Nan Province (Renard 1994, Pinkaew 2000, Thongbai 2000).

Examination of the Thai government's natural resources management policy reveals that it has been overly centralized and inconsistent, based as it is on precepts of Thai land law that stipulate that all land and natural resources in the country belong to the King, or, in the modern sense, to the state (Sophon, 1978; Thanet 1992). Officials representing the state are then officially in charge of forest management and protection. The policy of the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) is that human beings cannot live in the forest (Jermasak, 1992; Hirsch,

1987). Government officials then have not recognized local villagers' rights, whether individual or community rights, over the land they cultivate. National government policy frequently changes depending upon the political faction in power. In addition, each governmental department has its own policy towards highland ethnic groups. For example, during the Second Indochina War, the military and border patrol police needed such groups as strategic buffers. Currently, the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) wants to retain highland communities intact to attract tourists, while the RFD pushes a policy of relocation. In the meantime villagers, especially highland ethnic groups, are depicted as the main encroachers on forest areas, while encroachers such as lowland capitalists who own logging companies and are granted concessions from the RFD are ignored. Against this, some NGO workers and intellectuals support the idea that villagers, including highland ethnic peoples, can live with forests harmoniously, due to their indigenous knowledge and their reliance upon forests for many generations. Such actors propose the solution of giving villagers whose communities were settled before forest conservation areas were proclaimed, community rights over the forest and over natural resource management. The same actors also believe that local wisdom related to supernatural beliefs can be used and expanded for the purpose of reforestation (Chalardchai, Anan, and Santita, 1993; Prawes, 1996; Vivat, 1993). This paper proposes to study one such case.

TRADITIONAL CIVIL MOVEMENTS ON NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

This conflict over natural resource preservation in Thailand has arisen partly because the government generally does not recognize rights to collective property, such as land and forests. It is understood by both villagers and government officials that any plot of land or forest that is not private property belongs to the state or the public—in Thai, *khong luang*—instead of the local community (Sophon, 1978). Thus, villagers argue, anybody has the possibility to use or even destroy this public property—if there are no strict protection rules enforced by the state. Meanwhile, government officials do not have the human resources to take care of all public natural resources all the time. In some cases, such as in the current situation in Salween National Park in Mae Hong Son and Sri Nakharin Dam in Kanchanaburi, the possibility to corrupt government officials provides a way for influential outside investors to encroach on the forest. This happens regularly and seriously complicates the situation for the locals.

In fact, there are traditional forms of common property owned by local villagers—for example, community forest (or ritual forests) and community irrigation canals. Traditionally, villagers have for generations used their local wisdom to handle common property. But the state does not officially

acknowledge community rights over such property, and does not encourage villagers to engage in the process of taking care of it (Bowonsak, 1991; Chusak, 1994). For instance, drafts of new community forest legislation submitted by villagers, NGO workers and intellectuals since 1993 were subject to delays and changes before being finally turned down by the Senate in early 2002.

Due to problems of flooding, drought, and forest fire in local communities, many lowland community leaders and Buddhist monks have encouraged villagers to undertake reforestation. Instead of waiting for government officials to initiate suitable rules to protect local natural resources, villagers have formed their own groups and drafted rules on forest conservation. The main purposes of these actions have been to define village boundaries with neighboring communities, to protect the area from encroachment by outsiders, to create fire zones and to control local villagers' utilization of trees. In addition, many communities have redefined and expanded their community forestry practices based on local traditional beliefs, such as beliefs about cemeteries and ritual forests, for the purpose of reforestation. According to a rough survey by the Social Research Institute of Chiang Mai University in 1991, there are at least 150 community forests in northern Thailand (Chalardchai, Anan, and Santhita, 1993).

With the collaboration of NGOs, academic institutes, and community organizations who believe that local communities have their own potential for preserving forests, local wisdom on forest preservation has been widely redefined and promoted over the past decade. For instance, Buddhist ceremonies for protecting forests, such as "*Buat Pa*," or forest ordination, have been adopted in conserving local cemeteries, ritual forest, and watershed forest areas (Darlington, 1998). The role of Buddhist monks in forest conservation is based upon the Lord Buddha's being born, enlightened, and dying in the forest. For the same reasons, many Buddhist monasteries in Thailand are located in the forest. Some ecological monk activists thus play important roles in forest conservation, not only in the monastic area but also in the surrounding communities (Chartsuman, et al, 1991; Prasopsuk, 1992).

The local movement for forest conservation primarily occurs in highland communities, especially among the Karen ethnic group, who are mostly Buddhist and live in the forest. Instead of there being conflict between Karen and Hmong due to their different styles of cultivation, they have built networks around forest conservation as people who live in the upper watershed, or "upstream people"—"*khon ton nam*" in Thai. The watershed network groups, both among different highland ethnic groups and between highlanders and lowlanders, have also linked up and work well together in some areas. One NGO that plays an important role in building watershed networks among highlanders is the Association of Inter-mountain Peoples' Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT). The Northern Development Foundation plays a similar role between highlanders and lowlanders.

After many watershed networks were created, both in lowland and highland areas, one of the common activities to arise was *Buat Pa* or ordination of the forest,⁵ since a majority of Thai are Buddhist and Buddhism is the national religion. With the collaboration of various groups of people, a project involving the "ordaining of 50 million trees in community forests" was initiated in eight provinces of upper northern Thailand in 1996. This project was started to celebrate the anniversary of the King's 50-year reign (Department of Environmental Quality Extension, 1996a, 1996b). Many Hmong communities also joined this project by adopting the Buddhist concept and ceremony of forest ordination. However, some of the Hmong traditional ritual performers saw this Buddhist ceremony as having no meaning in their own culture and for their people.

As far as I have observed, our "*ntoo xeeb*" ceremony can protect more forest than the Buddhist's *Buat Pa* ceremony. Their ceremony works only for the trees covered by the yellow cloth, Buddhist monk's dress, but our ceremony works for the whole forest area. Moreover, our ceremony makes more sense to our villagers than the Buddhist ceremony, because we believe in local deity (Nplajthoj Xyooj, 1998).

In 1997, representatives of twenty Hmong communities in Chiang Mai and Kamphaeng Phet provinces formed a "Hmong Environment Networking Group" to work on encouraging village members to conserve the forest around their communities, and to promote their own wisdom on forest conservation to outsiders. Among those villages, Ban Mae Sa Mai was selected as the first Hmong village to launch the traditional *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony in this new context.

HMONG TRADITIONAL *NTOO XEEB* OFFERING CEREMONY

In their migration from southern China to northern Thailand, the ancestors of the Hmong faced hardships such as the illness of their people and low yields from animals and crops caused by natural disasters, wild animals, and insects. The first thing the Hmong in those days thought about and relied upon were the supernatural deities which governed the mountains, rivers and forest around their communities. The greatest local divinity for the Hmong is "*thwvtim*," or "*xeeb teb xeeb chaws*." It is not clear where the Hmong *thwvtim* lives, but it is believed that it governs everything in a watershed or around a range of mountains. In order to have a particular place to make offerings, ritual leaders in the Hmong communities usually invite *thwvtim* to settle on the biggest tree near the village. This tree is called *ntoo xeeb* in Hmong.⁶

In some communities, the *ntoo xeeb* has to be assigned to a tree immediately after the community is settled, while other communities delay the assignment until the villagers face a serious problem, and still others may just ignore the task

of assigning it to a particular tree. Details of the procedure of assigning a tree to *ntoo xeeb* immediately after the community is settled, are described by Nplajthoj Xyooj, a ritual leader in Ban Mae Sa Mai, as follows:

After we settled this village, we promptly chose the biggest and strongest tree near the village to be *ntoo xeeb*. We then brought a pair of red cocks, paper money, joss sticks, and candles to offer it, then informed it that we had moved into this area and settled in this village, so we would like it to protect us.

In another case, *ntoo xeeb* was assigned after the villagers confronted a serious problem. Ntxoovyeab Yaj, a village leader of Ban Mai Sa Wan, explained that,

When we lived in a previous village on the mountain, many tigers slaughtered our livestock near the village. We had no idea how to kill and drive away all of them, so we asked the *ntoo xeeb* to protect our animals. The tigers finally left our community. However, we do not have any *ntoo xeeb* in the present village because today we live in the lowlands and we do not raise as many livestock as in the past.

Usually there are four criterion for selecting the *ntoo xeeb* tree for the *thwvtim* to settle in. First, it must be a kind of hardwood tree, which will live for a long time. It would be an evil omen for the village if the *ntoo xeeb* tree died. Second, the selected tree should have many branches and leaves. This indicates fertile land, and suggests that the land would be productive for villagers, animals, and crops. Third, it should be a big tree which is higher than, and far from, surrounding trees so that it will not be hit or crashed into by nearby trees, especially when strong winds blow. Last, and importantly, the tree should be located on top of a hill, due to the belief that the greatest spirit settles in the highest place.

After the tree has been selected by the community's ritual performer, he must proclaim this to all the villagers, and set up the date of the offering. The ritual leader has to prepare and bring a pair of red cocks, paper money, joss sticks, and candles, while other villagers, usually one person representing each household, bring their own paper money, joss sticks, candles and foodstuffs. On the offering day, villagers have to help set up fencing around the tree in order to protect it from disturbance by animals. After the ritual is performed, all representatives have lunch together and then leave for home. Later on, the same ritual has to be performed once a year during the Hmong New Year celebration, by offering the tree a pig instead of a pair of cocks. On some occasions, like when the villagers get sick or face disasters, they may perform a special offering ceremony.

In general, the ritual performer and villagers ask *ntoo xeeb* to govern and protect everything they want in the village. For example, they ask it for help in

escaping from sickness, drought, theft and crime, and for success in raising livestock and cultivating crops. Traditionally, there are prohibitions against villagers insulting the *ntoo xeeb*, against cutting down any tree that might hit or crash into it, against burning it, against shooting any birds or wild animals near it, and against defecating and urinating near it. If the *ntoo xeeb* is insulted, the person or villager who violated it may face disaster. Usually, the village ritual performer, as a cult medium, will get sick after the tree is harmed. Villagers may diagnose the cause of such misfortune by performing an *ua neeb* (shaman) ritual, or it may be revealed by the dream of some black-faced shaman in the village.⁷ The village ritual performer and other villagers must bring offerings to it, if the diagnosis is proved.

Many Hmong communities in Thailand, especially big communities in lowland areas, have abandoned the *ntoo xeeb* sacrifice ritual. The communities that still perform this ceremony are in mountainous areas. Most lowland communities do not assign *ntoo xeeb* when the village is first located. Often, there is no big tree near the village because all land is used for cash crop cultivation and fruit tree planting. Again, in big villages composed of many clans, there is no particular community ritual leader to perform the ceremony. Some villagers have shifted their village to other watersheds, spontaneously abandoning the ritual. According to Neejkhwb Lis, a former ritual performer in Paklang village in lowland Nan province,

After we moved from the former place, the spirit of the *ntoo xeeb* I used to make offerings to appeared several times in my dreams. I finally went back there and performed a last ceremony. I told it that I no longer lived in that area, so it could ask for offerings from other persons who lived nearby. Since that time, the relation between that *ntoo xeeb* spirit and me was cut.

In brief, *ntoo xeeb* in the traditional context is a sacred tree within which the greatest local spirit, or *thwvtim*, settles. Its function is to govern and protect villagers, livestock, and crops from harm by wild animals and natural disasters. Presently, it is estimated that only half of the Hmong communities in Thailand (the total number is 242 villages [Tribal Research Institute, 1996]), still perform the *ntoo xeeb* ceremony.

THE PERFORMING OF THE *NTOO XEEB* CEREMONY IN MAE SA MAI VILLAGE

Mae Sa Mai is a Hmong community located in Pong Yaeng sub-district, Mae Rim District, Chiang Mai province. The village is about 40 kilometers northeast of Chiang Mai. In early 1998, there were 184 Hmong households, one lowland

Thai household and one Chinese household in the village. The total population was about 1,590. According to my survey in 1998, 58 percent of the people believed in animism, while others were Christian or Buddhist. The village was settled nearby before the Second World War, but in 1965 shifted to the present area. The Suthep-Pui National Park was declared after that date, and its boundary was expanded to include this village.

According to Nplajthoj Xyooj, and based on local oral history, the villagers' ancestors have practiced the *ntoo xeeb* ceremony for 200 years, including in previous settlements in Laos and Burma. Their ancestors were distributed into many villages after moving to the area presently designated as Thailand. As they lived in different communities, each community established its own *ntoo xeeb* to protect village members. In each village, ritual leaders passed down the responsibility of making offerings to the *ntoo xeeb* from generation to generation.

In Mae Sa Mai village, Ntsumteem Xyooj was the first ritual performer to initiate *ntoo xeeb* when the village moved to its current site in 1965. The *ntoo xeeb* tree is located on the top of a small hill, about two kilometers above the village. That hill is located between two small streams that flow down to the village. Once Ntsumteem had selected the *ntoo xeeb*, he led the villagers in a ceremony in which they offered it a pair of red cocks, joss sticks, paper money, and candles. Later on, he brought villagers to make offerings once a year during the Hmong New Year celebration, with a pig and other offerings. The second ritual performer was Txooskuam Xyooj. In 1983, after he had performed the ritual for many years and was too old to climb up the hill, Nplajthoj Xyooj was appointed by Txooskuam Xyooj to take care of the *ntoo xeeb* offering.

By this time villagers had already cut down most of the forest in the watershed of these two streams, except for a small area nearby the *ntoo xeeb*. They frequently cut down dry trees around the *ntoo xeeb* for firewood. The village ritual performer became sick many times because the *ntoo xeeb* was insulted by villagers. The turning point in *ntoo xeeb*'s function then changed. In 1985, Nplajthoj and the village leaders declared a larger size of the *ntoo xeeb* area to be ritual forest—about 100 rai (1 rai = 0.395 acres) around the *ntoo xeeb*. The boundary was marked by painting white marks on trees. It was announced that any person who invaded this area and insulted the *ntoo xeeb* would be punished by the *thwvtim* spirit.

Later on, it was revealed that there was less water in the two streams. In addition, villagers could not use water from the streams, especially during the rainy season, because too much mud from the fields in the watershed area was washing into the water. Community leaders consulted over the serious problem. They finally came up with the solution of abandoning the fields in the watershed area. In 1990, they declared another 2,400 rai to be community conservation forest. Reforestation was implemented, so that villagers not only let the existing trees grow up but also planted more trees every rainy season. In 1993 they also

created a firebreak zone around the whole ritual forest and conservation forest area.

To prevent anyone from destroying the natural resources of the area, Hmong village leaders, by agreement with villagers, drafted village rules and penalties for rule-breakers. For example, anyone who took forest products would be fined 200 baht. There was a 1,000 baht fine for shooting a bird and a 3,000 baht fine for shooting any four-legged wild animal. To prevent forest fires, two volunteers patrolled the firebreak zone every day in the dry season. If a fire broke out in the community forest area, all village fire volunteers, one man from each household, would be called to help stop it, even during the night. Anybody who caused a fire in this area would be fined 100 baht per rai. If the person who caused the forest fire could not be identified, the first person that entered and occupied that area would be automatically suspected to be the person who started the fire.

With the expansion of the community forest area to about 3,000 rai, the *ntoo xeeb* ritual could still be regularly performed since the *ntoo xeeb* tree is located in the center of the area. All of the villagers, led by Nplajthoj Xyooj, bring offerings to offer to *ntoo xeeb* every Hmong New Year's day. Despite the fact that 42 percent of the villagers have been converted to the Catholic, Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist sects, all household representatives still attend the *ntoo xeeb* ceremony. The reason is that it is believed that *thwvtim* is the main local supernatural spirit, which governs all villagers, animals, trees, and other natural resources in the area. "As a village member, everybody must respect and make offerings to the *thwvtim*, because it is the greatest deity, but when at home or in church, one can pay respect and make offerings to his own religious prophet," said Nplajthoj Xyooj.

An extraordinary *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony was prepared and performed during the Hmong New Year celebration on 2 January 1998. Staff from the IMPECT Association and the Hmong Association in Chiang Mai worked closely with community leaders on activities such as publishing documents, raising funds, and contacting outside speakers for the event. Most importantly, the lowland Thai model of fund-raising for *Buat Pa*, or forest ordination, was applied. Thousands of invitation letters, with empty envelopes asking for donations, were distributed to individuals, offices, and villages. Reporters from various journals, newspapers, radio stations, and television stations were invited to attend. Academics, NGO workers, and both highland and lowland community leaders were invited to join the discussion at a forum regarding community rights and the decentralization of natural resources management. The local District Officer (Nai Amphoe Mae Rim) was invited to chair this event, since the governor could not come.

About 300 participants joined in the ceremony. At the entrance to the path to the ritual area, a large sign written in Thai read "*Pa dong seng ban Mae Sa Mai, pa chumchon chaleom phrakiat nuang nai warokat phrabat somdet phrachao yuhua khong rat khrop ha sip pansa, ban Mae Sa Mai*" (Mae Sa Mai Tong Seng

Forest, community forest celebration of the anniversary of the King's 50 year reign, Mae Sa Mai village). The ceremony started at around 10 A.M. The highlights of this event were the Hmong tradition of making offerings and the forum discussion. After the Nai Amphoe had addressed the crowd and opened the ceremony by shooting a gun three times into the sky, the Hmong ritual performer reported to the *ntoo xeeb* by beating a gong and throwing *kuam*, or a pair of ox horns, on the ground. Subsequently, the dead body of a pig, paper money, joss sticks, candles and two cups of whisky were offered to the *ntoo xeeb*, as is the custom. After the pork had been boiled and foodstuffs had been prepared, pieces of these were offered to *ntoo xeeb* again. Each participant bowed down and burnt his paper money, joss sticks, and candles.

Forum discussions were held over two sessions, while villagers prepared food and after lunch. Topics included the history and details of the *ntoo xeeb* ritual, and community rights in natural resource management. All participants referred to the new constitution of Thailand, which gives increased roles and basic rights to villagers in protecting and resolving their own natural resource problems, and especially in relation to reviving and redefining ethnic wisdom in preserving forests. The rituals of neighboring ethnic groups, which share similarities with the Hmong *ntoo xeeb* were also discussed in the debates that continued until 3 P.M. Journalists and reporters then interviewed villagers, particularly the ritual performer and the village headman, for more details on the ceremony. The participants later joined a young Hmong group in a ball tossing game as part of the village's New Year's celebrations, and departed in the evening.

The next day, pictures and details of this event were publicized on the front page of various newspapers, especially local newspapers in the northern region. A few days later, the ceremony was televised repeatedly throughout the whole country, broadcast on local radio stations, and publicized in national papers. In later development and academic forums the *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony was presented as an example of the constructive wisdom of the Hmong people. At the same time, many Hmong in other communities were asked by visitors if they still performed *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony like the villagers of Mae Sa Mai.

Since the *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony in Mae Sa Mai was performed and publicized, the community members of the Hmong Environment Networking Group has continued to hold meetings once every two months, moving from village to village. In 2002, there were two Hmong Environment Networking Groups, covering 35 Hmong villages in Chiang Mai, Kamphaeng Phet, and Tak provinces. They work on promoting the concept and model of the Mae Sa Mai approach in other Hmong villages. They have urged village members to take on board the idea of redefining the Hmong traditional *ntoo xeeb* ceremony for conserving natural resources. Consequently, many villages have requested support for organizing their own *ntoo xeeb* ceremonies in future Hmong New Year celebrations.

Proposals relating to creating forums on forest conservation have been raised repeatedly at monthly village meetings. The most enthusiastic village groups taking part are the village committees. Other supportive groups include housewives, youth groups, and clan leaders. Outsiders such as NGO workers and intellectuals are also invited to share experiences at the village forums, and to help villagers develop proposals and find funding sources to support a *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony. However, some villages that still perform the *ntoo xeeb* ritual face problems such as having only a single village *ntoo xeeb* tree, or a *ntoo xeeb* tree that is not located near any watershed area. In some locations villagers are not in agreement about abandoning fields near the area of the *ntoo xeeb* tree to turn them into community forestry. For some villages that no longer perform the *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony, especially villages in lowland areas, the problem is that they cannot find an appropriately large or strong tree to be the *ntoo xeeb*.

Some Hmong communities have already adopted the Buddhist ceremony of *Buat Pa*, or forest ordination, instead of holding a Hmong ritual. In these cases, Hmong villagers invite local Buddhist monks to perform the forest conservation ritual. However, the focus of the Buddhist ceremony is to give each participant a piece of yellow cloth to tie around big trees, which does not connect to any Hmong belief. Many leaders of these Hmong communities intend to return to the *ntoo xeeb* offering ritual in the future.

CONCLUSION

The performing of the Hmong *ntoo xeeb* tree offering ceremony is part of self-definition in relation to natural resources preservation in the Hmong community. The evidence implies that the Hmong are struggling to create a cultural space for themselves in the Thai nation state, after having been labeled forest destroyers for decades. Local people have proved to state authorities and outside peoples that they are well equipped to handle the problem of natural resources diminution by themselves, if their local wisdom is recognized by state authorities. Therefore, a new trend in rural development policy, i.e., projects proposed and implemented by local people and NGO workers with the collaboration of intellectuals, has recently emerged as the concept of "community participation" has taken root. The new constitution of Thailand, promulgated in 1997, is partly the result of this movement. To the developpees, the main issue with respect to this new constitution is in regard to government officials' acknowledgment of their local culture and their human rights in relation to living in their communities and preserving their natural resources.

During the Indigenous Peoples forum movement in the early 1990s,⁸ and during the demonstration by highland people in front of Chiang Mai City Hall on 30 July 1998, part of the declaration on self-determination stated,

On behalf of the Indigenous Peoples Assembly of Thailand, we proclaim that the land on which we were born, our residential areas, the cultivated areas which we have occupied since our ancestors' generation, the forest and streams on which we have relied and which we have continuously preserved for a long time, are our lives. These are our legitimate natural resources forever. We cannot accept state authorities or other groups of people accusing us of being deforesters, and intentionally driving us out of our motherland. Without these components, our peaceful lives will be gone (The Indigenous Peoples Assembly of Thailand, 1998: 100, author's translation).

The revelation of this evidence is also a reflection of the dilemmas created and maintained by the Thai government's top-down development policies, particularly regarding the concept of forest conservation which has been adopted from Western countries. Since the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) based its policy on the assumption that people should not live with or within the forest, local wisdom with respect to the process of forest conservation has not been given serious attention. Moreover, development projects that emphasize commercial crop cultivation in rural communities and highland areas, as part of the economic growth of the country, have contributed to environmental degradation.

In order to receive acknowledgment from the state authorities and the public, both local and national symbols were combined in the Hmong *ntoo xeeb* offering ceremony in Mae Sa Mai. Instead of adopting the Buddhist model of *Buat Pa*, the Hmong have chosen their own *ntoo xeeb* ceremony to present to outsiders. This strategy also serves a purpose among community members interested in fighting environmental devastation. In the public domain, reference to the institution of the monarchy as part of this ritual event serves to encourage the participation of government officials and other neighbors who share no common ethnic background with Hmong community members, since the monarchy is one of the three pillars uniting all ethnic groups within the nation of Thailand.

NOTES

1. In the Barney Smalley script.
2. In the Romanization of the Hmong language widely in use in Thailand.
3. The creation of nineteen national parks, totaling about 8,362,475 rai (one rai equals 0.395 acres), was officially declared in nine provinces in northern Thailand in 1995.
4. The resolutions of Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyut's cabinet were issued on 17, 22, and 29 April 1997, after the cabinet was pressured for three months by farmer demonstrators in northern, northeastern and southern Thailand. There were four main points in these resolutions. The first point mandated the establishment of a committee to establish whether villagers had settled before or after the creation of the conserved forest areas (National Park wildlife sanctuaries, and primary watershed areas). If they had settled before, the government would give them permanent land rights. Evidence could include documents issued by the government; clues to or signs of villagers having utilized the land area, such as built structures or planted fruit trees; or references from witnesses in the village. Second, the resolutions sought to stop the movement of villagers during the discussion period. Third, if there were any new encroachment cases, the invader would be arrested according to the law governing forests. Finally, the cabinet would process the draft of the community forest statutes and submit them to a vote in the parliament within one year. This resolution covered 107 communities in 19 national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in northern Thailand.
5. *Buat Pa* or *Buat Ton Mai*, which is a combination of Buddhist and animist belief, was formerly a ceremony for ordaining a single big tree, as a "king of trees" in northern lowland villages. Later on, many communities applied the beliefs of Buddhism to conserving forests. *Buat Pa* is based upon basic beliefs to do with avoiding harming nature. For more information, see Susan M. Darlington, 1988.
6. According to Tooj Vwj, a Hmong community leader in Paco, Mai Chau district, in Son La province of northern Vietnam, their ancestors not only performed the *ntoo xeeb* ceremony, but also the ceremony of making offerings to the *pob zeb xeeb* (big stones) which were placed around the village at the time of settlement. However, at present, they do not pay any attention to these ceremonies because they do not believe in the supernatural like their ancestors did.
7. A black-faced shaman, *neeb muag dub*, *neeb thaj*, or *neeb thawj* in Hmong, is a kind of shaman who, in his or her performance, uses black fabric to cover his or her face. The shaman sits on a bench when performing the shaman ceremony. It is believed that only a black-faced shaman performer can have a feeling for, and communicate with, spirits in daily life. Such communication is generally effected through his or her dreams. The second kind of shaman is a white-faced shaman, *neeb muag dawb* in Hmong. It is believed that this kind of Hmong shaman can only retrieve the soul of a person who is sick, or *kho ntsuj plig*. The third kind of shaman is *neeb xua nplej*, or rice husk shaman. This type of shaman deals directly with the world of death or *txoj kev ploj kev tuag*, and contacts the souls of ancestors who have passed away.
8. In 1993, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples (Kingsbury, 1995:15). Many indigenous people's forums had been previously held in different parts of the world. In Thailand, a national forum for indigenous peoples was organized in Chiang Mai, in 1992, after intra-ethnic forums were launched in 1991. Thirteen ethnic groups, including highland peoples from the north and the Chao Le

and Sa Kai from the south, gathered in Chiang Mai in 1992. They formed a group of committees and proclaimed a form of "self-determination" which mostly focused on the issue of legitimate rights over natural resources around their communities.

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1. *Daily News* 29 April 1998
2. *Thai Rath* 28, 29, 30 May 1998
3. *Bangkok Post* 17 September 2000

INTERVIEWS

1. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, Ethnic Studies Network, Chiang Mai University, May 1999.
2. Neejkhwb Lis, a former village leader of Ban Paklang, Pua district, Nan province. 5 March 1998
3. Nplajthoj Xyooj, a village ritual performer of Ban Mae Sa Mai, Mae Rim district, Chiang Mai province. 2 June 1998
4. Ntoovyeeb Yaj, a village leader of Ban Mai Sa Wan, Mae Wang district, Chiang Mai province. May 1998.
5. Tooj Vwj, a Hmong community leader of Paco commune, Mai Chau District, Hoa Binh province, Vietnam. 17 December 1997.