

Hill Tribe Heritage Revival of Northern Thailand: The Politics of Representing Disappearing  
Livelihood

**Abstract**

Hill tribe minorities in northern Thailand have long been known for their unique ways of life practicing shifting cultivation and roaming throughout the mountainous region. Due to Cold War politics and narcotic drug problems, Thai state agencies have intervened in their livelihoods and transformed their lifestyle to modern cash crop agriculture. Constructed with bamboo and wood, their distinctive houses were considered primitive and were gradually replaced with modern materials. However, as tourism business gained momentum in recent decades, the cultural heritage of hill tribes was subjected to a revival aimed at preserving the upland identity once associated with the shifting agriculture and opium cultivation, which the state previously aimed to eradicate.

**Introduction**

The mountainous region of northern Thailand has long been known as a sanctuary for different hill tribe ethnic groups who sought to avoid the control of lowland states in the regions of Southeast Asia and Southern China during the pre-modern era. For centuries these highland inhabitants had practiced Sweden or shifting agriculture, including growing highland rice and opium. They also occasionally migrated across the border of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and China. Within pre-colonial and pre-industrial contexts, from the perspective of rulers who developed civilizations in the lowland valleys of Southeast Asia and Southern China, the highland communities were considered primitive, isolated and uncontrolled (Scott, 2009).

According to the Tribal Research Institute, the hill tribe groups within the border of northern Thailand include Karen, Hmong, Mien (Yao), Lahu (Muser), Lisu, Akha, Htin, Khamu and Lawa (Lua) (Kunstadter, 1983, Lewis and Lewis, 1984). In fact, most of hill tribes have been in contact with lowland society for exchange of goods for centuries, but they maintained their remoteness. Moreover, many groups deliberately moved from lowland to mountainous areas in order to evade exploitation by rulers, such as tax and labor and military conscription. Some hill tribes in specific areas, such as Hmong, conducted pioneer shifting cultivation which is considered contributing to deforestation, but other groups, such as the Karen, practiced rotation shifting agriculture which is arguably a more sustainable and productive use of forest land (Thatsani, 2003).

With the demarcation of modern nation states, the roaming highland communities came to represent a security threat, since they were viewed as untraceable and responsible for deforestation, opium production and potential border conflicts. Moreover, within the Cold War context, the polarized world politics between the Communist and "free world" factions in the region of Southeast Asia

exacerbated the threat of mountainous minorities, since some groups joined forces with the communist insurgency in border regions. Another serious insecurity for the Thai government was opium cultivation and collaboration with drug narcotic traders. To cope with the insurgency, the state authorities firstly employed force and intensive resettlement of hill tribes, but when these initiatives failed, welfare improvement was implemented instead (Kerdphol, 1976, 1986). The Thai state gradually developed a series of interventions in the hill tribe areas from the 1960s onwards to 1980s and sought to incorporate hill tribes into Thai society (Cohen, 2000:12). Thai state authorities also implemented a series of interventions to change their agricultural practices (Walker, 1992). The Thai state's attempt to settle hill tribe villages also sought to inculcate Thai language, culture, Buddhism and reverence for the monarchy (Reynolds, 1991). Although the government intervention brought them public health, education, and welfare services, these changes also led to a progressive deculturation, marginalization and pauperization of the hill tribe communities since they entered as the lowest class in Thai society (Cohen, 2000:12). These initiatives, which were carried out by Thai government agencies from WWII until the late 80s, were centralized and argueably semi-feudalistic, thus provincial and local agencies in rural areas could not effectively deliver on the promise of development projects in remote mountainous regions.

The Royal Project Foundation was launched in 1958 by Rama IX, King Bhumipol, to improve the living conditions of local hill tribe minorities and coordinate with fragmented local state agencies. The It became the mediator between state agencies at the district level and remote hill tribe villages. Another major conflict within the government agencies and tribal communities was the establishment of the National Forest Act (first in 1964 and again in the late 1980s) that prohibited the highland villagers from cultivating on their farmland within forest reserve areas.. Even though hill tribe villagers were forcibly resettled and pressed to abandon shifting cultivation, rainforests in Northern Thailand continued to deteriorate as a result of modern development and the expansion of cash crop farming (Delang, 2002).

To cope with the national forest conflicts, the Royal Project Foundation established its development centers with a jurisdiction covering mountainous villages within the boundary of forest reserves and national parks. Within the foundation's protected area, villagers could continue to cultivate on their land with the assistance of the center, which supported modern agricultural techniques. As a replacement to opium cultivation, the foundation's research unit introduced various kinds of cash crop agriculture, such as western fruits and vegetables, to meet the growing demand in the Thai market. Since it was launched, the foundation has grown significantly and has become a prominent figure in the highland region. By the late 1980s, the foundation became the central organization to lead the local state agencies in the area, although it is a private non-profit organization. Moreover, through its coordinating role with various government agencies, academic institutions, businesses, local farmers

and media over five decades, the foundation has transformed its role from one of coordination to leading the government's development policies (Chanida, 2007: 471-491). Because of its collaboration with state agencies and its support for agricultural development through contract farming, it became an authoritative figure with higher legitimacy than the government and significant influence on local communities. As of today, it established 38 centers covering most of the mountainous terrain in the northern region mainly in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Mae Hongson and the latest one, Tak Province. Gradually, the foundation also expanded its involvement to the development of education, social welfare, public health, natural and environmental conservation over 312 hill tribe villages (Thatsanee, 2003). To cope with the Royal Project Foundation's expanded role in communities, the government created the Highland Research and Development Institution (HRDI) in 2005, a public organization that supported the Royal Project Foundation in community development with concerns for environmental protection, social security and socio-economic planning.

While Cold War politics intensified the situation along the northern and northeastern borders of Thailand, the presence of American military service personnel in the Vietnam War also stimulated the tourism industry in Thailand, and from the 1970s onwards, it became a major revenue of the nation (Peleggi, 1996: 62). However, Thailand's tourism during the decades of the 70s and 80s was focused on central Thailand, especially in the vicinity of its capital, Bangkok. In the 1990s, Thailand's Tourism Authority (TAT) began to focus on the cultural and natural diversity as its main themes. During the TAT campaign of "Amazing Thailand" and "Unseen Thailand," the images of hill tribe women in traditional attire of different ethnic groups appeared in the promotional media of Thailand's Tourism Authority at major tourist facilities such as Don Mueang International Airport and local TAT signposts to promote their unique culture and "primitive" ways of life. Moreover, tourist-related business also delivered images of hill tribe as unspoiled, exotic and primitive (Cohen, 2001:44-52).

The Royal Project Foundation's development centers located at higher altitudes had provided humble accommodation for researchers and government guests in the early years of its establishment, but with improvement of road networks, growing numbers of visitors to highland areas demand more facilities and amenities. The foundation also began to invest in the tourist amenities of its development center. Information centers, shops and restaurants were also set up inside some of the Royal Project's development centers to meet the demand of tourists and promote its agricultural products.

At the turn of millenium, the Royal Project Foundation was awarded by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) as the best organization supporting the development of tourist places (Chatkaew, 2002). The foundation began to incorporate tourism into its development center's facilities as a part of public relations work (Royal Project, 2003). In 2002, the Royal Project spent 65.5 million Thai Baht, and another 51 million THB in 2003 for the improvement of landscape, accommodation units, road

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network and amenities in its development centers (Anurak, 2006). The budget of 21 million THB was set aside for developing staff capacity to manage tourism. From 2003 to 2004, the foundation organized nine farm trips to visit its centers and conducted road shows in Italy, Australia and England. In 2005, the Ministry of Agriculture funded the construction of bungalow units as an initiative to upgrade accommodation at some of the Royal Project development centers with high potential to be major tourist destinations. From 2003 to 2006, visitors to the Royal Project's centers also increased from approximately 200,000 in 2002 to 270,000 in 2003 and 405,000 in 2006, therefore the foundation also expected revenue from tourism to reach 87.75 million baht in 2003 with the growth rate of 14% and spending rate of 1700 baht/day for each visitor (Anurak, 2006).

In manuals for local tour guides published by the foundation, along with agricultural field visits, demonstration farms, and the natural sightseeing spots, hill tribe village culture such as dance, music, ritual practices and traditional crafts were portrayed as major attractions of each development center (Chatkaew, 2002). The calendar for travel also included ritual practices of different hill tribe villages to help tourists plan their visit to the foundation's development centers. In 2004, the foundation published a road trip handbook, "Traveling Royal Project 36 mountains in 365 days" grouping five different travelling routes to 36 sites of the Royal Project's development centers all year long with the description of the uniqueness of 15 ethnic hill tribes who lived in proximity to the development centers.

In most locations, the Royal Project's development centers became the manager or agent for tourists to experience village rituals and indigenous culture within its domain. Most visitors arrived to the center first for the tour of the plantation or accommodation and then consulted with staff for a trip plan to see the villages and natural attraction spots. On several occasions, staff at the centers contacted the villagers for arranging the transportation, providing meals and performing dance or rituals for tourists. Both Royal Project's development center and Highland Research and Development Institute (HRDI) steered local leaders to form a committee responsible for tourism planning. The HRDI also funded some villages' construction of public facilities such as tourist information centers, public restrooms, and pavilions for panoramic views at unique sightseeing spots. HRDI and the Royal Project's development center also provided training courses for villagers to improve their services for tourists such as workshop for standardizing their local food products and handicrafts. HRDI also supported local highland communities to apply for "Kinnari" TAT's Thailand Tourism Award for best practice in providing hospitality to tourists.

The Royal Project Foundation has its own identity attached to the hill tribes since it was initially founded as the Royal Support for the Hill Tribes Project, and later was changed to the Hill Tribe Development Project, the Northern Royal Project and finally The Royal Project Foundation. Therefore, preserving the unique identity of different ethnic hill tribes within its domain of operation is an

important task for the Royal Project Foundation to confirm its success in supporting highland communities to achieve a secure standard of living. However, it is undeniable that preserving cultural heritage of hill tribes is also an integral part of the strategy to increase revenue of the organization. Some centers with the higher altitude and panoramic views of mountains for instance, the Royal Stations at Ang Khang and Inthanon Peaks, gained significant revenue from tourists and were heavily supported for upgrading tourist service amenities.

Sustainable tourism and heritage conservation was emphasized as part of the Royal Project's effort in its promotional materials (Chatkaew, 2002). However, most of plants introduced to hill tribe farmers are cash crops that bind their everyday life patterns to the market economy. Therefore, the foundation is seriously concerned about how to maintain the natural and cultural identity of the place as a part of its core value of sustainable development. Based on the report evaluating the development of tourism facilities of Royal Project Development Centers in 2006 , it is clear that the diversity of ethnic hill tribe heritage with their conservation program is an important factor contributing to the quality of each Royal Project Center's tourist service and ability to increase revenue (Anurak, 2006). In its tourist promotional materials, the Royal Project Foundation laid claim that

“Presently all communities in the Royal Project are actively conserving their identities, tradition and culture. The road to highland areas of the centers became well-paved with asphalt surface but some are still gravel roads. Gravel roads and rugged area became an adventure for tourists with a keen interest in nature and indigenous people” (Royal Project Foundation, 2004).

However, most ethnic hill tribes around the development centers of the Royal Project Foundation have gradually transformed as a result of their integration into the market economy. Hmong villages in the vicinity of the development centers almost completely changed from the bamboo houses built on flat ground to hardwood structures and cement roof tiles<sup>1</sup>. The traditional fireplace at the center of the house could not be used for cooking since the smoke could not pass through hardwood walls and a cement tile roof, therefore an additional kitchen was added to the back of the house. Traditional stilt houses of the ethnic Karen which were once made made of bamboo are also facing major transformation as houses become hardwood structures with concrete columns<sup>2</sup>. Lahu houses which have a unique bamboo structure as found in several Royal Project Foundation's centers have also changed with concrete materials and hardwood replacing parts of the building, but many Lahu still preserve their

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<sup>1</sup> Observing Hmong houses from Mon Ngor Village which are located in the vicinity of Mon Ngor Royal Project Development Center, Mae Taeng District, Chiang Mai and Hmong village near Huay Luek Royal Project Development Center, Chiang Dao District, Chiang Mai

<sup>2</sup> Observing Karen houses from the village of Wat Chan near Wat Chan Royal Project Development Center, Kalayaniwathana District, Chiang Mai

village atmosphere<sup>3</sup>. The majority of new houses of hill tribes today are not much different from Northern Thai houses in lowland rural villages.

It is very clear that most of the conservation initiatives are not initiated by the local hill tribes alone but by agencies who benefit from their heritage tourism as well. Several scholars have argued that highland tourism which focuses superficially on the cultural heritage and identity of hill tribe minorities as tourist attractions was not derived from local hill tribes themselves. Moreover, they also did not have any role in the tourism development or interaction with tourists to gain substantial benefit or mutual understanding (Cohen, 2001:75).

“Hill tribe tourism has not been initiated by the villagers themselves nor do the villagers have a say in its organization and the direction or regulation of its development. Tourism amongst highlanders is not conducted primarily with a view to furthering the economic or other interests of the villagers. Rather, as we have seen, hill tribes are an attraction, and tourists are brought to view them as they would view any other natural or historical sight. This fact is fundamental to any understanding of the interaction—or better, lack of interaction—between locals and their visitors” (Cohen 2001:75).

This paper attempts to argue that the loss of hill tribe identities and heritage which led to conservation initiatives by the Royal Project Foundation and tourism agencies, in fact, was caused by the long period of intervention and agricultural development originating with the state agencies and the Royal Project Foundation. State and Royal Project policies and initiatives contributed significantly to the change in local everyday life of hill tribe minorities, affecting their cultural identity. As I will demonstrate through a case study of Lahu traditional houses in Baan Khob Dong, the real heritage conservation for hill tribe identities has to come from the will of the community and the collaboration between state agencies and communities.

## **Case Studies**

### **Lahu at Baan Khob Dong in Ang Khang Royal Agricultural Station**

Founded in 1969, Ang Khang Royal Agricultural Station is the first research center of the Royal Project Foundation located at the Mountain Peak of Doi Ang Khang. The area was once a deteriorated

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<sup>3</sup> Visiting Lahu village at Baan Khob Dong in the vicinity of Ang Khang Royal Agricultural Center, Fang District, Chiang Mai and Baan Huay Nam Rin, Wieng Pa Pao District, Chiang Rai

forest with an entire hill denuded by shifting cultivation for growing opium. Located at 1400 meters above sea level, the Royal Station is the research center for growing, harvesting and developing fruit and vegetables in a temperate climate zone. It has successfully supported local hill tribes to adopt modern agriculture to replace opium cultivation. Its greenhouses and plantations are comprised of more than 60 varieties of exotic plants. With cool climates and images of panoramic seas of clouds along the ridge line of mountains, the Royal Station received tourists all year long and it is the top attraction for tourists to visit Chiang Mai for several decades until the present time.

The Ang Khang Royal Agricultural Station was ranked No.1 for the best practice for tourist service among 38 Royal Project Development Centers and received several awards from the Tourism Authority of Thailand. During the high season (November-February) of 2017-18, the station received more than 300,000 tourists per month, thus gaining revenue from entrance tickets of more than 15 million baht a month during the winter period. The restaurant and accommodation generated approximately 20 million baht for the entire season as well while the revenue from selling agricultural produce was only about 1.5 million baht a month. At the present time, the Royal Station employs more than 400 local people to take care of both research facilities, flower plots, gardens, demonstration farms and tourist amenities, generating more than 3 million baht a month for local communities.

Since the Royal Agricultural Station was established, the area around the entrance of the Royal Station gradually transformed into clusters of restaurants and guesthouses for accommodating tourists during the winter time. The Lahu was the first group who lived in the area of Baan Khum village, but when more Chinese came to buy opium and settle down approximately in late 1950s, the Chinese also employed other minorities such as Pa Long to grow opium for them. Lahu then moved to present day Baan Khob Dong Village to avoid the intense atmosphere of Chinese settlements and some pandemics occurred which the Lahu considered a bad sign. Among the restaurants, hotel and tourist businesses in the area of the Royal Station, there is only one restaurant and guesthouse belonging to a Lahu owner, who is the family of the current village headman of Baan Khob Dong. The rest of the hotels, shops and restaurants belong to the Chinese business families.

### **Lahu settlement at Baan Khob Dong**

Lahu (or Musue) at Baan Khob Dong, along with Tai Yai, Chinese (Haw), and Pa Long, is the hill tribe community in the vicinity of Ang Khang Royal Station. The Lahu tribes originally lived in Tibet and southwestern parts of Yunnan Province, China (Soros, 1999). Some migrated and relocated around the mountains in Burma around 170 years ago and began to migrate again to the northern Thailand approximately 130 years ago, then another group moved further to the area of today Laos and Vietnam (Phimuk, 1995). In Thailand, they firstly settled down at Baan Luang in Fang District and moved to the present location of Ang Khang Royal Station due to conflicts with Chinese (Haw), Wa

and Tai Yai minorities. Then, they just moved to Baan Khob Dong approximately 15 years before the Royal Agricultural Station was established. Lahu in Thailand can be classified into 4 groups namely: Lahu Shi, Lahu Na, Lahu Ni, and Lahu Saelae. The first three groups were converted to Christianity thus abandoned the original belief in their indigenous god spirit and gradually lost their heritage. Lahu Saelae is the one who maintained their religious belief and ritual practices associating with it.

Lahu community at Baan Khob Dong belonged the Lahu Saelae group with a minority of Lahu Na. Prior to the arrival of the Royal Project Foundation, Lahu was one of several hill tribes who were practicing pioneer shifting cultivation. They cultivated highland rice and illegally grew opium and also raised poultry and pigs for worshipping various gods and spirits according to their customary beliefs (Riam, 2005, Lalita, 2014). The Lahu people believe in, "Kue Sa", the ultimate god who created the world. Lahu Shaelae tribe communicated to their local spirits and god through the village shaman called "Poo Jong" or "Kae Loo." Lahu Shaelae tribe also constructed "Lan Ja Khue," a round-shaped courtyard in the middle of the village enclosed by a bamboo wall for important rituals and dance. Some Lahu tribes such as Lahu Yi constructed the spiritual tower specifically for worshipping purposes but Lahu Shaelae usually have rituals for worshipping local spirits at the house of the village shaman. The rituals for personal sickness occur regularly in the village. The settlement of Lahu at Khob Dong village is on the hillside of the mountain with a steep slope. The main road to the village is from the top of the mountain. The houses were scattered along the hill with a narrow road running parallel to the ridge line in lower altitude.

The house of Poo Jong and Lan Ja Khue are the two centers of the community. The dance rituals and festivities for the New Year are normally held at Lan Ja Khue at 8 p.m. It is also the place where young villagers can meet and dance. The dancing ground is typically located opposite to Poo Jong's house. If the village's shaman died, the new Poo Jong's house would be the new center and Lan Ja Khue must be relocated close to Poo Jong's house. Most of houses face the eastern direction because the Lahu tribe believes that the sun is an auspicious sign of life. Every house is embraced by a bamboo fence to protect chicken and pigs within the grounds of the houses. There are also several mortars along the road inside the village, providing places that all families can share for milling rice. Firewood is also important for cooking activities especially for the New Year festival. Firewood was usually cut from the forest and stored in towers for the drying process. Most firewood towers are located beside the house along narrow roads in the village. The house with two firewood towers is the house of Poo Jong since more activities using firewood such as cooking food and boiling water for worshipping rituals.

### **The House of Lahu at Baan Khob Dong**

The traditional house of the Lahu is a very simple stilt house of mixed hardwood and bamboo construction. The only hardwood component is the column from ground to the floor. The roof is a



simple gable roof made of grass thatched covering a rectangular floor plan with a porch in the front. The door is at the center of the front wall. The house is partitioned by a bamboo wall separating it into two compartments at the front and a main room at the end. The front part is separated by main circulation which is used to store water in bamboo tubes and wood for making fire. The main room is a place where members of the family cook meals, eat, rest and sleep. The fireplace is at the center of the room and was made of hard wood to bear the sand pit. With a thatched roof and woven bamboo skin wall, smoke can dissipate fast but the room still stays warm. The wood column at the top was carved into a U-shape shoulder to bear the bamboo beam. The beam and floor up to the roof structure is made of bamboo. The ladder to the front terrace is also a broad and thick piece of hard wood carved with shallow holes serving as footholds. These two wooden details are the unique features of the house. Some houses were constructed with more small compartments at the front for guest rooms. For instance, the house of Poo Jong is normally larger than others in order to accommodate sick villagers and their relatives who come to cook or conduct rituals with him. In the morning, the ritual starts with praying and boiling water for tea. The praying continues all day. In the evening, activities are killing pigs, cooking, worshipping and having dinner at the end. In the main room, the wood shrine cabinet for worshipping is at the corner of the room and only Poo Jong can open the cabinet for conducting rituals.

The most important and unique cultural heritage of Lahu is the process of construction of the house, which is traditionally expected to be finished in one day. In the past, they needed to complete the house before sunset. However, as of the present day, the custom was adapted to a modern time frame of 24 hours allowing them to finish up before midnight. The owner of the house needs to determine the location of the new house. The owner, with the help of his friends, neighbors and relatives would prepare all elements for the house prior to the date of construction which is the auspicious day for the owner calculated by the village shaman or Poo Jong. Friends and neighbors would help the owner cutting bamboo, or Oak (Mai Kor in Thai) for the main structure and knit long grass thatch for roof tiles while the owner would provide food mostly pork for the banquet after work. Most of the houses need to be reconstructed every three or four years because the thatched roof became brittle and the rain comes through the house. However, on some occasions they need to rebuild the house such as after a snake enters the house, chicken lays eggs on the roof and bird getting in the house (Riam, 2005: 16-17). These incidences are considered bad luck by Lahu tradition.

### **Lahu at Khob Dong Today**

With technical support from staff of the Royal Agricultural Station, Lahu farmers at Baan Khob Dong today gain significant wealth from growing strawberry, plum and peach during the winter time and other cash crop farming for the rest of the year. They also preserve land for cultivating highland rice,

maize, chili, sesame and pumpkins to maintain their independence from the lowland market economy<sup>4</sup>. Most of them still raise chickens and a lot of pigs for ceremonies and rituals such as weddings, New Year festivities and worshipping local spirits. Pigs are consumed as the main sacrifice for ceremonies such as weddings, making merit for ancestral spirits and appeasing local gods after committing taboos. The villagers estimated that more than 100 pigs were sacrificed every year for all rituals while chicken were sacrificed for encouragement, spiritual healing and initiation of rice farming. The concrete road network inside the village was completed in 2002 and electricity came to the village since 1988. The formal school was established in 1985 at the vicinity of the main entrance to the village. The housing units for teachers were soon built followed by a grocery shop with a Karen owner. The majority of households have pick-up trucks but there are only a few houses near the entrance that allow the owners to park inside their houses. For the houses at lower parts of the hill, the village road to their houses is too narrow for cars to pass through. The area at the top of mountain and main entrance have become clustered with pick-up trucks parking around. The majority of the new pick-up trucks in the village also feature expensive chrome finished license plate frames, door knobs, and tail lights.

Ironically, when tourists visited Baan Khob Dong, their first impression is the image of concrete buildings of educational facilities such as the kindergarten, primary school, craft center shop and teacher's housing units with fancy shiny trucks instead of village architecture. The bamboo terrace overlooking the village's steep fields of strawberry plantations with a panoramic view of the entire valley was constructed to promote the visit of Baan Khob Dong. More tourists visiting the village led to the question for upgrading public health such as public toilet and village's sanitation system. Prior to the tourist boom period, the entire village did not have any proper toilet. Villagers just took a bath at the stream nearby. The Royal Agricultural Station and public health authority firstly built public toilets and bathrooms but villagers refused to use and finally they were demolished. With the assistance of local medical college, staff of the Royal Project and local government have been working on installing a toilet for every household in the village.

### **Taste and price of Modernity**

Approximately half of the houses in the village now are constructed by mixing modern materials such as cement tiles or Zinc roofing with the bamboo and hard wood structure. There are a few houses that were built entirely with concrete structure. The house belonging to the village headman was also a 2-storey modern concrete house. As a son-in-law of Poo Jong, he also built a concrete house for Poo Jong but Poo Jong preferred to stay at his old traditional house. Some houses, for instance, Poo Jong's house, have traditional bamboo houses in the front and a concrete house nearby for keeping important material possessions such as clothes, food, washing machines, rice cookers, and refrigerators.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with village headman, Jaka Kemika

Some houses also place washing machines on the front terrace. The house with cement roof tiles and a concrete structure cannot ventilate well so it is too hot during the summer period, and it cannot keep heat from cooking to warm the room during the winter time as well as a traditional thatched roof. With steep slope terrain and long eaves to cover the side of the house, domestic animals such as dogs, piglets and chickens can jump onto the cement roof and stay there, which is considered bad luck. The thick long grass thatched roof is too soft for animals to jump on. If any villagers spot dogs or other animals on the roof, the owner of the house needs to reconstruct the entire house.

The village headman, who also has the biggest concrete house in the village, said that he did not stay in the house all year long since he has a restaurant and guesthouse near the entrance of the Royal Agricultural Center. Occasionally, he stays at his restaurant and sleeps at the old traditional house of Poo Jong. The reason why more villagers change to modern materials is also obvious that they want a taste of modernity and want to show their success through concrete and permanent materials. However, some villagers, especially working age and elderly, admitted that modern houses were not comfortable and they preferred to live in a traditional house. To build it in the traditional way, they face constraints of limited traditional materials and a modern agriculture life schedule. The thatched roof was made of tall grass that once grew on the empty, abandoned area of burned rice fields around the village. As of today, with the enclosed border of the forest reserve, sedentary agricultural plots, and the prohibition of shifting cultivation, empty field with grass no longer exists in the vicinity. The villagers have to take a risk of being arrested by Burmese military or minority militia groups for travelling beyond the border of Myanmar to collect tall grass. The open fields in Myanmar still burn naturally by wildfire, thus filling up the area with tall grass while most of the agricultural fields in the vicinity of Ang Khang were infiltrated with weed-killer chemical. The villagers need to walk up to 5 kilometers passing the western border to collect tall grass and carry it back. Another solution is buying the tall grass that is already stitch together from the shop in neighboring Chiang Dao district at the cost that is not much lower than cement roof tile, and the grass is not thick enough.

Moreover, to construct a traditional house, the villagers need to find around 600-1000 pieces of bamboo. Bamboo could be found on the outskirts of national forest reserve area at the east of the village but the villagers need to get permission from the head of national forest reserve staff to cut it. Finding materials for constructing traditional bamboo houses has become a time consuming task, while buying modern materials is easier, as one just needs to order them from various suppliers in town of Fang District. Lahu villagers at Khob Dong usually construct a new house during the month of February, after Lahu New Year festivities. Synchronously, this is the period for growing, harvesting and selling strawberries as well as blossoming plum and peach. The bamboo needs to be cut, treated, and woven by local villagers while their plum, peach and lucrative strawberries also need intensive care. Ironically, the highlight event of Lahu's heritage is at the high season for tourists visiting the area and Ang Khang

Royal Agricultural Center. Without proper management, villagers would be inclined to substitute traditional time-consuming materials with modern ones for constructing their new houses.

In interviews, the young generation of Lahu in the village also provided mixed opinions about having a new concrete house. Some of them who were married with children provided similar opinions to the elderly that the modern house was not comfortable and they preferred the traditional ones. The problem for them is the labor and time-consuming process since they also have small children and modern materials are easy to order. However, a building modern house costs significantly more money. For instance, building a bamboo house would cost only around ten thousand baht for the size of 5-meter-wide by 8-meter-long but the cost would be more than two hundred thousand baht for the concrete one.

Teenagers in the village provided a different view, stating that they preferred to build the modern house because the old house's main room is not large enough to sleep. The traditional house has one main room at the end and a fireplace at the center which is the space where all family members cook and sleep together. Some larger families did not have enough space for the small and young members. These teens and young members expressed their wishes to have their own space. However, they would not call the modern concrete building their home but rather an extended storage or silo (Long Khao) or sleeping room, since the essential meaning of home is about cooking activities and family gathering functions. The old traditional house is still an integral part of their family home but the new concrete house is for amenities and is a sign of material wealth. Moreover, the local spiritual beliefs and rituals attached to the meaning of house are strong, such as the belief that the house needs to be demolished and reconstructed if a member of the family died due to an unusual cause such as murder or accident. If the house is concrete, it is impossible to demolish and the family members have a guilt-ridden feeling.

The young generation of Lahu went to Khob Dong public school for kindergarten and primary and return to the village. There are some that can go further to middle school near the Royal Agricultural Center and attend university in the city of Chiang Mai. However, unlike other highland communities, the majority of them returned and got married at a very young age of 14-15 years old and lived in the village rather than moving to work in the cities. The population of Baan Khob Dong is quite stable comparing to highland communities around the Royal Project Development Centers. The Lahu villagers at Baan Khob Dong, in fact, are very seclusive and maintain their independence from outside world even though they are within the vicinity of modern facilities of Ang Khang Royal Agricultural Station. The road to their village was completely paved at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and electricity and modern education reached them since the 1980s. Every household owns a mobile phone and has access to internet. The members mostly work on their agricultural land with the assistance of the Royal Project

Foundation but none of them work as employees inside the Royal Agricultural Station's agricultural research units and tourist facilities. While many highland communities abandoned their cultivation on rice focusing on cash crops and buying food from lowland markets, Lahu villagers here still produce their own rice, maize and vegetable for daily consumption from the plot of land they purchased at the foothill. Village elderly still make baskets and woven crafts from bamboo with minor use of plastic containers. Lahu women generally buy new dresses and fabric only once a year for sewing new traditional attire for their New Year festival. Lahu at Baan Khob Dong did not have intermarriage with other hill tribes and maintain their identity. The young generation who went to kindergarten and primary school with children from Pa Long community but none of the young Lahu members intermarried with Pa Long whose village is very near Khob Dong. There are a few exceptions of one Thai and two Karen in the village of 400 members. Lahu here only married to Lahu from Baan Pa Kha and Nong Tao, another two Lahu villages in the region.

### Conclusion

Lahu villagers at Baan Khob Dong have a strong will to maintain their traditional livelihood pattern and thus preserve their unique identity. However, they still face the constraints generated by government agencies and the Royal Project Foundation. The transformation of the natural environment and fixed agricultural land affected their life patterns. The closed boundary of the National Park area was proclaimed to protect water resources and regenerate tropical forest but it affected the livelihood of hill tribe people such as Lahu. For instance, the open field from shifting cultivation disappeared with forest regrowth, and the tall grass which was once an abundant weed became hard to find. Lahu villagers then needed to travel long distances across the nation's border to get tall grass for their thatched roof. This simple task of local hill tribes should not depend on diplomatic and military relationship between Thailand and Myanmar. Although the pioneer shifting cultivation practiced by Hmong and Lahu was abolished from the area as it was a cause of deforestation, the rotational shifting agriculture is widely accepted by the Royal Project Foundation as a sustainable farming method that maintains diversities in the forest.

For a short-term solution, local government agencies could assist with the transportation for travelling to open fields where Lahu can cut tall grass and delivering bamboo from other areas within Chiang Mai and neighboring northern provinces. However, increasing transportation is not sustainable and could also contribute to increased carbon emissions and global warming. For a long term solution, the land of Ang Khang Royal Station and the National Park could be demarcated and reserved for practicing rotational shifting cultivation, and local hill tribes could benefit from growing highland rice for their food security and they would not rely solely upon income from cash crops. The rotation shifting practice, adopted from Karen hill tribes, normally rests the land for 5-10 years. During the period of

land resting, plants and tall grass gradually grow. As a consequence, Lahu communities could find tall grass for their traditional thatched roof during the land resting period if the government agencies can manage the forest land and adopt the rotational shifting agriculture in this zone. Moreover, the related government agencies such as the Department of National Parks, Department of Land Development and Royal Project Foundation could collaborate to create a bamboo forest zone with clear demarcation in the vicinity of Doi Ang Khang. However, the shifting cultivation or slash and burn practice was long condemned as the cause of deforestation and prohibited nationwide. It is a challenge for the government agencies to change this public perspective.

The modern development of government buildings in the area also contributed to the perception among younger generations of local hill tribes. The village's school buildings, housing units for teachers, gateway to Baan Khob Dong village, handicraft center and other facilities were all built in a typical government concrete structure. These physical appearances could likewise imprint modern living patterns on the young generation of hill tribe communities. In fact, the government agencies should have policies to adopt traditional architectural elements into their building program in local areas.

With advanced architectural technology, bamboo houses can be improved with new materials and details for durability and easy construction keeping the appearance of the traditional bamboo house. For instance, the foundation of the house could be replaced with a concrete base and columns about 0.80-meter-tall, connecting to the original y-shaped, carved hard wood columns to take the load of bamboo beams and girders. The floor, which was traditionally woven bamboo, can be replaced with hard wood for more durability and stability. The roof can be reinforced with special plastic or fiber net underneath the thatched grass in order to prevent water leaking through when the grass becomes brittle. More durable details and materials also benefit the ritual of one-day building process because these parts and details can be recycled and reduce the time to cut new hardwood and bamboo. However, these kinds of architectural implementation also need long term supporting research from academic institutions and experimental workshops with the Lahu community.

Although Lahu villagers at Baan Khob Dong try to maintain major part of their traditional life and beliefs, they still allow some modern comforts in their households such as washing machines, refrigerators, and rice cookers. Moreover, some families also need more space for resting due to increasing number of family members. Therefore, storage and living quarters are its main functions. Another important development is sanitation improvement. The original house needs to install a proper toilet. The key issue is how to incorporate new requirements into the existing house within its plot of land. In addition, the new buildings with modern materials have to be compatible with the original bamboo houses and should not be outstanding. The new structure should be placed in the back of the

original house with a smaller scale and the first floor should not be elevated like a traditional one. The roof should be in similar color to bamboo structure which is brown or light brown.

Finally, the traditional appearances of the hill tribe villages could further be saved if the related government agencies and influential organization such as Royal Project Foundation recognize the values and meanings of the indigenous way of life of the hill tribe communities beyond their rustic image of village architecture, colorful textiles and unique dances. It is crucial to support traditional ways of life in the direction that is compatible with mandatory standard of living such as public health, sanitation and environmental awareness. However, it is also a challenge for these government agencies to change their subtle superior approach to deal with hill tribe communities and accept that their interventions in the past in fact contributed to identity loss of ethnic highland villages.

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