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**Change and Identity in  
Pwo Karen Communities in  
Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary,  
a 'Global Heritage' in Western Thailand**

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## Trouble in 'paradise'

In April 1999, the Director General of Thailand's Royal Forest Department (RFD) landed with his helicopter in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary where people of the Pwo Karen ethnic minority group had just started to celebrate an important annual religious festival. The Director General requested to stop the ceremonies. Soon after, military troops were burning down religious shrines of the Karen. Later, from April 18 to May 12, a group of soldiers and forest rangers marched through the villages in the sanctuary. They threatened the villagers and destroyed personal belongings, huts, and rice barns. Throughout the following months, efforts to 'convince' the Karen people to resettle 'voluntarily' continued, and the preparation of the resettlement area for all the villages in the sanctuary was announced.<sup>1</sup>

These events reflect forest and conservation policies of the RFD in the 1990s, which focus on a 'Protected Area System' (PAS) and the ideology that 'people and forests cannot co-exist'. After the nomination of the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary for a World Heritage Site in 1991, the Karen communities in the sanctuary became a political issue of national concern. For the RFD and the Military, their actions in Thung Yai are part of their fight against forest encroachment in their quest to save Thailand's remaining forests, essential for the welfare of the country. Since the late 1990s, their conservation approach is increasingly based on politics of exclusion towards so-called 'hill tribe' ethnic minority groups. In this regard, what happened in Thung Yai is only one example of increasing pressure on ethnic minority groups living in or at the edge of protected areas and forests.<sup>2</sup>

For the Karen who live in the area that was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1974, Thung Yai is also a 'sanctuary', a 'holy place', homeland and base of livelihood for them and their ancestors since more than 200 years. The recent incidents are only among the latest - but most threatening - 'external' challenges that triggered adaptations and transformations within the local communities. Since the 1960s, these external influences increased considerably in the context of the modernization of the country, going along with growing interests in the resources of the peripheral areas and the extension of the state administrative system into these areas. The Karen in Thung Yai, at first, responded with transformations of their socio-religious and -political organization. It was not before the beginning of the 1990s, that their subsistence economies were challenged due to restrictions on the use of fallow areas crucial for their rotational swidden system. These restrictions and the resettlement plans of the Royal Forest Department are threatening the material existence and cultural identity of the Karen in Thung Yai. Due to missing representation and influence in the national disputes on their living place, they depend on rather ambivalent 'transcultural' alliances and advocacy to defend their rights and interests. Furthermore, in these disputes they have to refer to dominant, 'alien' discourses of modernity and conservation, with only few chances to find or shape a position of their own.

After sketching the historical and political contexts of the conflict, this paper will concentrate on the 'internal' transformations and adaptations in the Karen communities in Thung Yai over the last 40 years. These internal changes in response to national integration and modernization, it is argued, reflects so far successful efforts of the Karen in Thung Yai to defend a specific local identity and way of life against various external challenges. The restrictions on their land use system, and even more so their eviction, most probably, will overtax their capability to balance change and identity, 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

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<sup>1</sup> For details on the politics of coercion in Thung Yai see Buergin/Kessler 1999; Buergin 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the history of the Wildlife Sanctuary and World Heritage Site in the context of national and international forest and conservation policies see Buergin 2001, 2002.

## Changing forest policies in modernizing Thailand

The conflicts in Thung Yai are part of a broader societal controversy regarding deforestation and nature conservation in Thailand which often amounts to the question whether people and forests can co-exist. The ideology that 'people and forests cannot co-exist' is rather popular in Thailand and, until today, is the basis for the conservation policies of the Royal Forest Department (RFD). Its origins are to be found in international and national forest and conservation policies as well as in rather obvious conflicts about resources between different social groups of interest and power. Furthermore, this ideology is grounded in culture specific conceptions of 'forest' and 'civility' and the changes of these conceptions in the process of the country's globalization and modernization.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main concern of the RFD was to allocate and control concessions for Teak extraction, predominantly executed by British companies. Territorial control of the vast areas under the administration of the RFD was neither of interest nor feasible. Contrary to British forest management in India and Burma there were few restrictions on forest use of local people in Thailand until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Forest clearance for agricultural purposes was even encouraged by the state until the enactment of the Land Code in 1954.<sup>3</sup> It was not before the 1950s and 1960s that a remarkable shift in forest policies took place. The RFD now increasingly tried to restrict local forest use and to improve territorial control through the demarcation of forest reserves. The reasons for this shift of policies are to be found in the growing importance of the forests for 'national development'<sup>4</sup> as well as in the emergence of conservationism. Both factors, to a high degree, were determined by international developments and interests.

After World War II, the international scientific and political 'forestry community' realized that Europe as well as the United States would be increasingly dependent on the timber resources of the tropical forests in future. Furthermore, the importance of the tropical forests for the development of the developing countries as well as the detrimental effects of shifting cultivation for tropical forest resources were emphasized. Conceptions of tropical forests as important resources for the process of modernization were to guide the forest policies of the FAO and many developing countries during the 1960s and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

The shifts of forest policies in Thailand were, to a considerable degree, in reaction to these international policies. By the mid-1960s, almost 40 % of the total land area were assigned as concession areas. The new objectives of forestry also influenced perception and politics of the state authorities towards the ethnic minority groups living in the forested mountain areas. Most of them practiced various forms of swidden cultivation.<sup>6</sup> In 1961 swidden cultivation was prohibited. Even though the law was never seriously enforced, it put the so-called 'hill tribes' into a state of permanent illegality and insecurity.

The global spread of modernization ideology and the expanding world market after World War II not only influenced forest policies, but national development policy altogether. The driving force of the rapid economic growth in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s was the state propagated diversification of cash cropping for the world market in combination with the extension of agricultural areas on behalf of forest areas. In the early 1950s, almost two thirds of the country were covered with forest. In the early 1980s, the forest cover was officially

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<sup>3</sup> For the history of the RFD and forest policies see Kamon/Thomas 1990; Sathi 1993; Vandergeest 1996. Regarding the roots of Thai forestry in Western scientific forestry see e.g. Lang/Pye 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For an account of this economic development on behalf of the forests see Pasuk/Baker 1997:1-88, with a more specific focus on deforestation see for example Feeny 1988; Hirsch 1987; Rigg 1993; Lohmann 1993.

<sup>5</sup> For a history of international forestry policy regarding tropical forests see Steinlin/Pretzsch 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the politics towards shifting cultivation in Thailand see also Pinkaew 1999 and Achara 2001.

estimated at less than one third of the total land area and deforestation increasingly was perceived as a problem.

The new public interest in forests and deforestation was related to the growing international awareness of a 'global environmental crisis' and the accompanying upswing of international conservationism. It was also due to increasing societal conflicts in Thailand in the context of the 'closure of the frontier' and contested resources in rural areas. In the 1980s, the RFD had to face the rather uncomfortable task to explain the rapid and ongoing deforestation towards a conservation sensitive urban public, who was achieving increasing political power. At the same time, the RFD had to deal with some 10 million rural people, or about one fifth of the total population, who were living 'illegally' in areas that had been declared forest reserves. Of these 'forest areas', more than one third were used for agricultural purposes, constituting at least one third of Thailand's whole agricultural area.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of the conflicts about forests, during the 1980s, a strong civil society movement emerged which increasingly conceived the RFD as one of its main opponents. In the 1990s, the community forest debate and the issue of people living in forest reserves became an important societal controversy over social justice, resource control, land rights, democratization and decentralization. The controversy mainly finds its expression in two opposing positions: On the one side, the Forest Department, conservation oriented academics, and so-called 'dark green' NGOs concentrate on conservation issues. They believe 'people and forests cannot co-exist'. For them the protection of forests requires the removal of human settlements out of the forests and severe restrictions on local forest use. On the other side, groups of the peasant movement, socially concerned academics, and so-called 'light green' NGOs concentrate on the interests and problems of rural communities. They presuppose a vital interest of local communities in the protection of their forests as a source of livelihood as well as for its ecological and cultural functions.<sup>8</sup> This controversy, to a large extent, developed in the context of the drafting of a Community Forest Bill, its outcome is still open.<sup>9</sup>

In this situation of contested competence and growing resistance, the RFD reacted with a forest policy that concentrates on the concept of a 'Protected Area System' (PAS). The PAS is to include all the presently existing 'natural' forests as well as all protected areas and watershed areas with the objective to be enlarged up to 28 % of the total land area.<sup>10</sup> During the 1990s, the PAS became of major concern for the RFD as a way to secure sovereignty over large areas as well as positions of power within the state bureaucracy and society. The appeal of the Protected Area System to the RFD, to a high degree, is due to its deep rootedness in prominent international and national conservationism. But, there is yet another aspect to the PAS which improves the chances of the RFD to succeed in their objectives to establish a conservation area of more than a quarter of the country's land area free of human occupation. The people living in areas designated for the PAS, contrary to the areas in forest reserves apart from it, are predominantly people of ethnic minority groups with a most precarious status in Thai society.

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<sup>7</sup> Pasuk/Baker 1997:62f; Vandergeest 1996:166f.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the community forest approach in Thailand see e.g. Anan 1992, 1998; Yos 1992, 1993; TDN 1994; Sayamol/Brodth 2000.

<sup>9</sup> For the controversy on the Community Forest Bill see Brenner et al. 1999. Regarding its role in the democratization process see Buergin/Kessler 1999, 2000, for the present state of the legislation process see Pearmsak 2000; RECOFTC 2002.6, 2002.7.

<sup>10</sup> See RFD 1993.

## 'Forest people', 'hill tribes' and ethnicism

The RFD's estimates in 1998 accounted for about 600.000 people living in areas designated for the PAS. Contrary to the majority of the estimated 12 million people living altogether in forest reserves, predominantly ethnic Tai, most of the people within the PAS are members of one of the various ethnic minority groups generally categorized as *chao khao* or 'hill tribes'.

The term *chao khao* came into use in the 1950s. It was used as a generic name for various ethnic Non-Tai groups living predominantly in the uplands of northern and western Thailand.<sup>11</sup> Historically and ideologically the term *chao khao* is related to the term *chao pha* ('forest people') which was often used to denote these Non-Tai minority groups before the term *chao khao* came into use. Within the linguistic and cultural context of the various ethnic Tai groups of Southeast Asia, *pha*, referring to 'forest', 'wild', 'savage', quite generally, is conceived as opposite to *muang*, referring to 'civility' or the 'human domain'. Frequently, the pole of 'civility' was identified with dominating ethnic Tai groups, while the 'forest/wilderness' pole was related to marginal ethnic minority groups at the edge of the Tai polities.<sup>12</sup>

These 'forest people', due to economic and political changes during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had lost their former importance for the ruling elites of the center at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>, and were to be left on their own. It was not before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the state began to expand into the peripheral forest and mountain areas, that the *chao pha* re-emerged in national politics as the troublesome *chao khao* or 'hill tribes'. Very soon, the term was identified with a negative stereotype of forest destroying, opium cultivating, dangerous Non-Tai troublemakers. This stereotype became a widespread and influential image in Thailand, revived and instrumentalized in the community forest debate and resource conflicts of the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

From the 1950s until today, state policies towards these groups have been concerned with the three problem areas attributed to the 'hill tribes': opium cultivation, national security (read 'anti-communism'), and 'deforestation'.<sup>15</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, the fight against opium cultivation and communist insurgency had dominated hill tribe policies. By the mid-1980s, both issues had lost most of their urgency. Most of the remaining forest areas in Thailand were now to be found in the northern and western uplands, the settlement areas of the 'hill tribes'. Furthermore, deforestation had become a matter of public interest and the 'hill tribes' were conceived of as the main 'problem group' regarding deforestation. In this context, 'forest conservation' became the dominant concern of hill tribe policies. At the same time, the Military had turned to rural development and 'forest conservation' as new tasks to justify contested political influence<sup>16</sup>, and assumed a central role regarding hill tribe policies, now predominantly a resettlement policy.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For overviews on the ethnic groups of the uplands see e.g. McKinnon/Vienne 1989; McKinnon/Wanat 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding the dynamics and history of this binary classification and social stereotyping see Turton 2000; Thongchai 2000a,b; Renard 2000; Stott 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic minority groups living in forest and mountain areas, the majority of them ethnic Karen, had supplied most of the luxury goods that were important for the regional trade and tributary relations the Siamese Kings were involved in (see Renard 1979:105ff, 1980:19f; Jørgensen 1995:3). Due to shifting trade relations, changing tax regulations, as well as the opening of the Suez Canal the economic importance of the Karen for the siamese state decreased considerably (see Renard 1979:109,170f, 1980:23-25).

<sup>14</sup> See for example Krisadawan 1999; Buergin/Kessler 1999, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> For an account of changing hill tribe policies see Buergin 2000.

<sup>16</sup> See specifically Perapong 1992.

<sup>17</sup> International and national scientists related to the Tribal Research Institute at Chiang Mai University, including its Director Wanat Bhruksasri, had urgently expressed their concerns about the aggravating resettlement policy towards the end of the 1980s. These concerns were among the main motivations leading to the publication

Also on the local level, conflicts between ethnic Tai and hill tribe groups increased during the 1980s. The spreading of ethnic Thai farmers into the uplands as well as the extension of cash cropping by some of the 'hill tribe' groups, induced and supported by the international and national opium substitution programs, increasingly led to resource conflicts over land, forests, and water. In the beginning of the 1990s, these conflicts, often termed environmental conflicts, emerged as a national issue in the context of the debate over the Community Forest Bill.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1990s, the conflicts assumed more and more ethnicist traits, aiming at the territorial, social, and political exclusion of the 'hill tribes' in the context of a more or less outspoken Thai nationalism, even among high government officials.<sup>19</sup> Thai-ness is frequently related to a culturally defined pattern of livelihood and residence: living in valleys (not in the mountains or forests!) and growing paddy (no hill rice and swiddening!). Referring to modern environmentalism and conservationism, in this frame, the Thai valley population and the nation are dependent on the undisturbed (unpopulated!) mountain forests that secure the national water supply as well as the ecological stability of the country.<sup>20</sup> In this perspective, the 'hill tribes' already due to their place of residence and their way of livelihood exclude themselves from the Thai nation. Even worse, they are threatening the welfare of the whole nation by destroying its forests.

Since 1998, pressure on the ethnic minority groups in the uplands even seems to be growing once more, resulting in arbitrary arrests, forced resettlement, terror, and violence.<sup>21</sup> In May 1998, the Director General of the RFD signed an agreement with the Supreme Commander of the Army, specifying the cooperation of RFD and Army to protect Thailand's remaining forests. In this agreement the Army is given far reaching authorities as well as financial support for operations in forest areas where 'illegal immigration' and large scale illegal logging prevail, while the RFD is responsible for forest areas encroached by small scale farmers. According to this division of responsibilities, the RFD will have to deal mainly with the Tai farmers predominantly living in the highly degraded forest reserves, while the Military is supposed to deal with the Non-Tai ethnic minority groups, often living in protected and watershed areas. The fruits of this agreement and the new policy were to be observed in the 'pilot project'<sup>22</sup> of this alliance in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, referred to in the introduction of this paper.

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of the reader 'Hill tribes Today' in 1989 (McKinnon/Vienne 1989).

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed account of the increasing tensions between ethnic Tai and 'hill tribe' groups in the context of environmental and resource conflicts see Buergin/Kessler 1999, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> In August 2000, one of the leaders of the 'conservation' NGOs in the Chom Thong Conflict appeared on a forum at Thammasat University and on TV talk shows on the 'government side' along with the Director General of the RFD Plodprasop Suraswadi and Deputy Agricultural Minister Newin Chidchob. At the Thammasat forum, the RFD Director complained that the territory of Thailand, which once belonged to the king, "is gradually being given away", while the Deputy Agricultural Minister claimed the problem to be that "90 per cent of the hill peoples are not Thai." One of the Chom Thong leaders had already earlier confirmed this view when he declared: "This land is ours. We were here before. Hill people are not our people (*chao khao mai chai chao rao*). If they were Thai, they would live down here in the lowlands." (Nation, 09.18.2000).

<sup>20</sup> Regarding scientific critique of the ecological assumptions of this frame of thought see e.g. Kunstadter et al. 1978; Chupinit 1989; McKinnon 1989; Chantaboon 1989; Lohmann 1995; Enters 1995; Forsyth 1996, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Watershed 1998, 2001; Pinkaew 2000; Buergin/Kessler 2000.

<sup>22</sup> When the events in Thung Yai had become public, the Director General of the RFD downplayed his role in the incidents, at first denying any military actions at all. Not so the commander of the military troops involved. He seemed rather proud of their achievements, declaring the operation a 'pilot project' in their efforts to control local communities to prevent forest destruction in and around protected areas. See also Buergin/Kessler 1999, 2000.



## History, place, and identity: Karen people in Thung Yai

About 3000 people are living in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary. They are almost exclusively ethnic Pwo Karen, born predominantly in Thailand, most of them within the sanctuary.<sup>23</sup> According to their traditions, their ancestors came to the area fleeing political and religious suppression in Burma after the Burmese had conquered the Mon Kingdoms of Lower Burma in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first written historic references to their residence in Thung Yai may be found in Thai chronicles of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup>

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Karen of this western border area received formal settlement rights from the Governor of Kanchanaburi and their leader was conferred the siamese title *Khun Suwan*. When the status of the border area was raised to that of a *muang* or principality, between 1827 and 1839, the Karen leader of the *muang* was awarded the title of *Phra Si Suwannakhiri* by King Rama III. Since 1873 at the latest, *Phra Si Suwannakhiri* resided in Sanepong which became the centre of the *muang*, and nowadays is one of the Karen villages lying within the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this *muang* was of considerable importance for the Siamese Kings guarding part of their western border with British-Burma. Karen living there were consulted for the delineation of the border between Thailand and Burma under King Rama V. It was only in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the establishment of the modern Thai nation state, that the Karen in Thung Yai lost their former status and their importance for the Thai state, re-appearing on the national political agenda as forest encroachers and illegal immigrants towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Thai name *Thung Yai*, the 'big field', is derived from a big savannah in the centre of the sanctuary. In Karen language this place is called *pia aethala aethae* which may be translated as 'place of the knowing sage'. The term *aethae*<sup>25</sup> refers to mythological hermits or saints who, according to Karen lore, have lived and meditated in the savannah. As 'cultural heroes' and 'founder' of Karen culture in Thung Yai, they are of crucial importance for the identity of the Karen living there and are honored in a specific cult. Karen seeking spiritual development are still retreating to this mythologically important place for meditation, where also a big annual festival is celebrated. It was the annual ceremony in honour of these *aethae* the Director General of the RFD interrupted.

To denote their 'community' and 'home place', the Karen in Thung Yai use the term *thong bou tai*. The term, in the first place, refers to a specific way of life and values, focusing on the concepts of the control of greed and spiritual development conceived as opposed to material development.<sup>26</sup> All the villages in the sanctuary, as well as some Karen villages at the edge of

<sup>23</sup> The study on which this article is based (Buergin 2002) concentrated on the 9 villages (6 Muban) in the southwestern part of the sanctuary that constitute Tambon Laiwo. At the time of field research in 1996/97, some 2100 persons were living in these villages. Another 6 villages in the northeastern part of the sanctuary with about 1000 persons are even more isolated and, regarding the cultural changes outlined below, are rather more 'traditional' than the villages studied. In Tambon Laiwo almost 80 % of the persons have been born in Thung Yai, about 9 % of them were born in Thailand outside Thung Yai, and another 11 % were born in Burma. Between 1993 and 1997, only 9 households with about 40 persons seeking refuge from the war in Burma have settled in the villages in the sanctuary belonging to Tambon Laiwo.

<sup>24</sup> See Renard 1979, 1980.

<sup>25</sup> In Thung Yai *aethae* are conceived as pre-buddhist 'hermits' with supernatural powers who live contemplative and ascetic. The Karen term *aethae* generally is translated with the Thai term *rysi*, supposed to refer to pre-buddhist hermits or ascetics in the Mon Kingdom of Haripunjaya (see Turton 2000:26).

<sup>26</sup> This conception of *thong bou tai*, to a high degree, refers to moral concepts of the Telakho sect. This millenarian Buddhist sect among Karen originated in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, possibly in or close to the present day sanctuary. (On the origins of the sect see Stern 1968 and Ewers Andersen 1976.) Even though only one of the villages studied formally bears witness to the sect, its values and way of life are widely conceived as exem-

the sanctuary, are included in this culturally and geographically determined community.<sup>27</sup>

The Karen in Thung Yai conceive themselves as people living in and of the forest, as part of a very complex and lively 'community' of plants, animals, humans, and spiritual beings. Within this community, the Karen feel not at all as the superiors, but rather as highly dependent on the various other beings and forces. Living in this community requires adaptation as well as highly specific knowledge about the interdependencies and 'rules' of this community. Fostering relations to the various spiritual caretakers of the 'forest community' is an integral and important part of Karen life in the sanctuary. Their permission and support continuously has to be sought in order to live in the forest and use the forest and land.

From a 'modern' perspective, many of these rules and traditions can be conceived as 'ecological knowledge'. In these rules and norms as well as in their daily practice of livelihood, passed on and transformed from generation to generation, a very rich and highly specific knowledge about the 'environment' of the Karen is conserved. This 'ecological knowledge' as well as the 'real' and 'imagined' history of the Karen in Thung Yai are at the heart of their identity and of the way they see themselves.

The 'external world', specifically the 'Thai world', is perceived as very different, often incomprehensible (for many of the elder people starting with the language) and rather strange if not menacing. Their relations towards this outside world have changed frequently in history, not the least in the context of Thailand's modernization and globalization process.

The constitution of the territorial Thai nation state was mainly completed in the beginning 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the villages in Thung Yai were formally integrated into the state, it was not before the 1960s that state institutions became of increasing relevance within the Karen communities in Thung Yai. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, external political influences, even in the easiest accessible villages, seem to have been minimal and the Karen villages were highly autonomous regarding their 'internal affairs'. This was only to change in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the growing interest of the Thai nation state in its peripheral areas. In the name of 'modernization', 'development', and 'national security', the state extended its institutions into these areas. In Thung Yai the Border Patrol Police (BPP) and its schools in the 1960s were the first. They were followed by various state offices supporting 'development' in the beginning 1980s, the establishment of RFD stations and Military since the middle of the 1980s, as well as the increasing importance of the Tambon Council, the local administrative organization, in the 1990s.

The permanent presence of ethnic Tai in the Karen villages since the 1960s, as well as the activities of government institutions with the purpose to integrate and assimilate the Karen into the nation state, at first triggered and determined changes of the social, political, and religious organization of the Karen communities. The economic organization of most of the households remained rather unchanged until the late 1980s and beginning 1990s. Main shifts and impacts due to this process of 'national integration' and activities of state agencies in the sanctuary over the last 40 years are:

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plary in Thung Yai. The present centre of this sect, the village Lai Tong Khu, is located outside at the northern edge of the sanctuary, but is regarded as being part of their home area by the Karen in Thung Yai. The term *thong bou tai* primarily refers to a certain way of life, faith and religion. In this regard it is neither ethnically nor geographically exclusive. All people who do not follow this faith and principles are called *wi bou tai*. But the term *thong bou tai* is also frequently used to refer to the Karen in Thung Yai as well as to denote the 'area' they live in.

<sup>27</sup> For the Karen in Thung Yai their 'home area' is constituted by three regions of which the first two areas constitute Tambon Laiwo and the study area: *tamuh nai ghó ráu* including the villages Sanepong, Gosadeng, Laiwo und Salawa, *tamuh mái nong ráu* with Tilaipa und Chakae, and *tamuh pu píá ga* with the villages Mae Chanta, Krueng Bor, Mong Kua und Lai Tong Khu.

- the decreasing importance of matrifocal kinship and cult groups accompanied by the emergence of a more household centered and patrifocal village cult,
- the clash of a rather egalitarian and consensus oriented political organization on the village level with a more authoritarian and hierarchical external political system,
- the challenge of the local Karen identity and the obstruction of its transmission to the younger generations due to the Thai education system in the villages, and
- the threat of the subsistence economy and material existence of the Karen in Thung Yai by way of restrictions on their land use system and external modernization efforts.

### **Ancestors and village trees: Social adaptations to national integration**

Over the last 40 years, the different villages in Thung Yai underwent, to various degrees, considerable social transformations, specifically regarding the ancestor and village cult of the Karen. Until the 1960s, most of the households in Thung Yai practiced a form of the ancestor cult that is called *ong chre* which may be translated as 'eating with the ancestors'. The Karen in Thung Yai conceive *ong chre* as an old and 'original' Karen cult.<sup>28</sup>

The cult group is based on matrilineal descent, children are born into their mother's group. On marriage, the husband becomes a member of his wife's group, but also remains a member in his mother's group. Generally, the eldest female of the group is the ritual head and the ceremonies normally are headed by women. Even though, under certain circumstances they can also be headed by men. The ceremonies of the cult groups may be held annually or in regular periods which the members have determined. Apart from the regular ceremonies they are held as required, be it in case of death, illness, disaster, or bad omen. Size and composition of the relevant group may vary according to reason and objectives of the specific ceremony. In the ceremony bamboo rats, fish, and prawn are caught, sacrificed, and eaten. It generally lasts for three days and requires the participation of all members of the concerned group. If mistakes in the ritual occur, the ceremony may have to be repeated.

For households practicing this *ong chre* ancestor cult it is forbidden to raise chicken and pigs, to consume alcohol, opium, and marihuana. The ceremonies have to be held in a bamboo house constructed in a specific manner. Furthermore, *ong chre* requires the purity of the village that has to be restored in an annual village ceremony called *bion tawong* ('cleaning the village'). As on the household level, the purity of the village is offended by the raising of pigs and chicken as well as the consumption of alcohol and narcotics. During the annual village purification ceremony which lasts three days, all villagers have to be present and all outsiders have to leave the village.

These requirements are difficult to meet in a situation where Thai institutions and ethnic Tai people are present in many of the villages. The situation is even more problematic as the few ethnic Tai living as government officials in the Karen villages, quite generally, raise pigs and chicken and consume alcohol. Thereby they offend the purity of the village and, at the same time, prevent its purification through their presence in the village.

In this situation, since the 1960s, more and more households have turned to a new form of ancestor cult<sup>29</sup> called *ba pho* ('to do flowers'). In 1996, about 16 % of all households in the

<sup>28</sup> Mischung (1984) who studied the ancestor cult in Sgaw Karen villages in northern Thailand confirms this conception of the 'originality' of the Karen ancestor cult.

<sup>29</sup> Since the 1960s, almost all reports from field research in Karen villages in Thailand give indications and accounts of transformations or the abandoning of the ancestor cult of the Karen. (For an overview over the various forms these reported transformations show see Buergin 1992:81-88.) The Karen in Thung Yai recall changes of

study area did still practice *ong chre*. About 73 % did practice the *ba pho* form of the ancestor cult, while less than 11 % of the households reported not to practice any ancestor cult. The difference between *ong chre* and *ba pho* does not so much concern the definition of the cult groups, reason, and objectives of the cult, but rather a relaxation and simplification of requirements. Instead of the different animals required in *ong chre*, flowers and water are sacrificed in *ba pho*. The ceremony lasts only for two days and, compared to *ong chre*, the obligation for members of the group to be present is less strict. Even though there are no explicit prohibitions to raise fowl and pigs and to consume alcohol, most of the *ba pho* households hold to these norms. In principle, *ba pho* also requires the annual village purification *bion tawong* which cannot be performed properly under the present conditions in most of the villages. But, in the context of the more household centered *ba pho* form of the ancestor cult, this seems to be less problematic.

The change of more and more households to *ba pho* was accompanied by transformations of the village organization. As long as *ong chre* was the predominating form of the ancestor cult, the matrifocal cult groups or 'matrilineages'<sup>30</sup> (called *le mu le tschou* or *le tschou le ruai* in Pwo Karen) were the most important social units above the household level. They also structured the village organization, and the ritual head of one of the matrifocal cult groups in the village did have an important social and ritual function for the village community as a whole. As *thei ku* ('head of the tree') she had to foster the relation between the village and *rukkhajue*, the 'spirit of trees', who resided within the village area in a big tree called *thei waplieng*. The relation to the powerful spirit of the trees was crucial for the well-being of the village in the forest. The *thei ku* had to inform the spirit about the activities and plans of the villagers. In this context, the *thei ku* was also responsible for the keeping of the moral norms, specifically regarding the prohibition of premarital intercourse and alcohol consumption, as well as the performance of the annual village purification ceremony. The observance of the moral norms and the village purification were conceived as a precondition for the existence of the village in the forest.

The permanent presence of ethnic Tai in the Karen communities made it difficult or even impossible to perform these functions of the *thei ku*, which weakened the institution. The change from *ong chre* to the more household centered *ba pho* form of the ancestor cult furthermore diminished the position of the *thei ku*. In the context of these changes, the cult of the village tree *thei waplieng* and its spirit *rukkhajue* is substituted by a village cult called *priao* in most villages by now.<sup>31</sup> The new cult addresses *phu pha du*, which may be translated as 'very old grandfather', a kind of village tutelary spirit residing in a spirit house (*peow*) which is generally erected close to the Buddhist wat. This spirit house is still conceived of as being related to the spirit of trees (*rukkhajue*), and in some villages it is located beneath the village tree *thei waplieng*. Responsible for the relation between the village and *phu pha du* again is the *thei ku*, who has to inform him about the activities in the village. Compared to the cult of the village

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the cult that date back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and are attributed to millenaristic and Buddhist influences aiming at the abolition or substitution of animal sacrifices. Contrary to the changes of the cult since the 1960s, there are no indications that these earlier changes did have significant impacts on the social organization of the villages.

<sup>30</sup> On the anthropological debate whether or not the various forms of matrifocal cult groups, found among different Karen groups, actually do constitute 'matrilineages' see Buergin 1992:67-76.

<sup>31</sup> The elders in Thung Yai I interviewed claim a strong connection between the *ong chre* form of the ancestor cult and the *thei waplieng* cult of the village tree in the context of the matrifocal organization of the village community on the one hand, and the *ba pho* ancestor cult together with the *priao* village cult on the other hand. Though, the survey showed that there is no necessary relation between the respective ancestor and village cult. Rather, 4,4 % of all households (or 26 % of the *ong chre* households) did practice the *ong chre* ancestor cult together with the *priao* village cult, while 17,7 % of all households (or 24 % of the *ba pho* households) did practice the *ba pho* ancestor cult without the *priao* village cult, and 7,9 % of all households practiced *priao* without any ancestor cult at all.

tree *thei waplieng*, with its reference to the forest spirit, the village cult *priao*, with its invocation of a 'grandfather', is more directed to a 'human' and 'male' sphere. Spatially as well as ritually it has strong relations to the Buddhist wat.

As long as *ong chre* was the predominating form of the ancestor cult, and matrifocal cult groups the primary structuring features of village organization, an important function of the cult of the village tree *thei waplieng* was to integrate the different matrifocal cult groups on the village level. With the prevailing of *ba pho* households and the *priao* village cult, the cult of the village tree loses this integrating function. The remaining *ong chre* households now have to maintain their relation to their cult tree and its spirit on an individual level.

A tendency from matri- to patrilocality is also to be observed regarding the institution of *thei ku* itself. 'Traditionally', in the context of the *ong chre* ancestor cult, the institution of *thei ku* generally was held by one of the female heads of the matrifocal cult groups and passed on from mother to daughter. Only under certain conditions a man would be entitled to the office. Nowadays, even though the office is still passed on matrilineally, most of the *thei ku* in Thung Yai are male, and some people already conceive this as the normal case.

These shifts of meaning and occupation of the institution of *thei ku*, most probably, are also related to the decreasing importance of the matrifocal cult groups due to the change from *ong chre* to the more household centered *ba pho* form of the ancestor cult. To what extent the weakening of the institution of *thei ku* in these transformations is cause or effect is difficult to assess. In Thung Yai, the triggering factor initiating the decreasing importance of the *thei ku* and the matrifocal cult groups as well as the transformation from *ong chre* to *ba pho* ancestor cult seems to have been the residence of ethnic Tai outsiders in the Karen villages since the 1960s. Other factors supporting these transformations probably became more important later, such as the growing mobility and longer absence of cult group members due to education and work that make the practice of *ong chre* difficult. Furthermore, the increasing importance of the village community as a political and social unit, that resulted from the integration of the Karen communities into the Thai administrative system, quite probably too contributed to the weakening of the matrifocal cult groups as the primary structuring social units of the villages.

The changes from *ong chre* to *ba pho* and the increasing importance of the village cult *priao* probably will continue. The increasing presence of outsiders in the villages, the growing mobility and closer acquaintance of younger Karen with Thai culture, as well as the decreasing importance of the matrifocal cult groups, all tend to further the change from *ong chre* to *ba pho*, a change furthermore supported as it decreases burdens on the households.

*Priao* will be important as a substitute for the cult of the village tree *thei waplieng* as long as the Karen in Thung Yai conceive themselves as people living in the forest, as part of a 'forest community' into which they have to integrate, dependent on powerful spiritual beings guarding this community. With its closeness to Buddhism and its focus on the village level, *priao* furthermore resembles features of Thai culture, thereby probably supporting the process of national integration.

### **Consent and hierarchy: Conflicting political systems**

Like the socio-religious organization of the communities, the socio-political organization underwent considerable changes in the context of national integration which accelerated since the 1960s. Specifically the institution of the Phu Yai Ban (the village head in the context of the state administrative system), as formal interface between the Karen and Thai culture as well as between two different political systems, underwent marked transformations. As long as the Karen and the Thai world had been widely separated, the main task of the Phu Yai Ban

(PYB) was to represent - and shield - the village community towards outsiders and to serve as contact for state institutions to a world rather strange and generally quite uninteresting to those institutions. In the context of the internal, largely autonomous, egalitarian and consensus oriented socio-political organization of the villages, the institution of the PYB was of rather little formal relevance. As the PYB most probably was rhetorically skillful, had made experiences with the Thai world, and was a respected man from the village, his voice would also be heard in the internal disputes and decision making of the village community. But, his political influence in these internal disputes was not based on his 'external' institutional background, but on his reputation and the role he played in the context of the 'traditional' socio-political organization of the community.

This changed with growing interests of the state agencies in the local communities and their resources which were accompanied by their extension into these communities. Expectations and demands of state institutions towards the PYB to push through 'external' interests in the village community grew and the tasks of the PYB became more diverse. At the same time, he became more important for the village community as well as for the single households, be it in his function as mediator between external and internal interests, by way of his growing power to control and sanction, or due to his increasing capacities to allocate advantages.

With this growing external and internal importance, his position within the village community became more ambivalent and problematic as both sides demand loyalty and engagement regarding often contrary interests. Furthermore, his position is even more complicated because the PYB has to act in and mediate between two very different political systems. As 'official' in the state administrative body, he is more or less the lowest rank within a highly hierarchic command structure. The successful performance of his role in this external system, that is to implement and mediate interests and directives of the state system, generally depends on his ability to perform and gain acceptance within the much more egalitarian 'internal' political system. In the context of this system he is, first of all, not more than one voice among many others. Here he has to defend his objectives as PYB and has to try to reach consent. He is confronted with claims of loyalty to the community and has to face its possibilities of social control and sanctions.

After the establishment of the Tambon Council Organization and the intended decentralization and democratization of local and regional administration structures, the position and function of the PYB in the Karen villages in Thung Yai once again is changing. The Tambon Council Laiwo, to which most of the Karen villages in Thung Yai belong, was established in 1985, and upgraded to a Local Administrative Organization (LAO) in 1997. With the Tambon Council, for the first time, there exists a political institution above the village level that predominantly is filled with Karen. The Tambon Council, furthermore, has considerable monetary resources at its disposal compared to the total monetary income of all the Karen households in the sanctuary.

The monthly meetings of the Tambon Council take place in the house of the Kamnan (the head of the Tambon or Subdistrict) in the district capital and are attended by Karen representatives of the villages in the sanctuary as well as various Thai officials. Even though most of the persons present are ethnic Karen, the meetings are very different from other Karen meetings where political issues are discussed and decided. While village meetings are rather informal and 'familiar', open in course and outcome as well as aiming at a consent, the meetings of the Tambon Council are much more structured through an agenda and have the character of briefings. Contrary to the predominantly egalitarian relations in the village meetings, the Tambon meetings are dominated by the Kamnan (an ethnic Karen) and the Thai officials, one of them being the secretary of the council. The purpose of the meetings is predominantly to inform the Karen villagers about activities and plans of the state agencies as well as to request

services and information from the villagers.

Most of the Karen villagers living in the sanctuary conceive the Tambon Council as an 'external', Non-Karen institution that does not represent and pursue the interests of the majority of the people in the sanctuary. They criticize its orientation towards 'modernization' which found its expression in 'development projects' that met widespread reservation and critique among the Karen. Furthermore, many Karen complain that their 'representatives' in the context of the Tambon Council do not behave according to Karen norms, specifically that they drink alcohol and eat chicken and pork.

Regarding changes of the political organization of the Karen and the role of the PYB, the Tambon Council may be perceived as an institution furthering the Thai-ization of the political leaders of the communities. Somehow outside the Karen community, a certain type of PYB is 'socialized' in the context of the Tambon Council. In this 'group' the Karen are conformed to the requirements of the external administrative system to a much higher extent than this was possible before, when the single Karen PYB were rather isolated and 'strange' in the Thai-culture of the administrative system. How these changes in the context of the Tambon organization, together with the election of the PYB and limited periods of office since 1992, will effect the internal political organization of the Karen communities remains to be seen.

### **Transmitting identity: Education, cultural hegemony, and modernization**

Even more concerned than about the influences and activities of the Tambon Council are the Karen about the effects of the Thai education system in the villages. Until the 1960s, the only formal education available in the sanctuary was through Karen buddhist monks practicing a Mon form of Buddhism which is significantly different from Thai Buddhism. In most of the villages a small buddhist temple monastery exists, one of them since more than 100 years. The wat attended by Karen monks are generally well integrated into the village communities, while the two wat in the sanctuary which are attended by Tai monks are rather perceived as 'external' institutions by the Karen communities.

The first Thai school in Thung Yai dates back to 1962, but most of the schools in the villages were not established before the mid-1980s.<sup>32</sup> Most of these schools are run by the Border Patrol Police (BPP). The BPP is a paramilitary police unit which was created as a territorial defence police in 1951 with the support from the CIA. Apart from their task to protect the border areas and fight communist insurgencies, the BPP very soon became one of the most important actors in hill tribe policies. In this regard, the BPP was responsible for schools in hill tribe villages where central Thai language and national Thai culture was taught to support the assimilation of the hill tribe groups.

Asked about the most problematic influences from 'outside' the Thai schools in the villages ranked first in 1997.<sup>33</sup> Most of the Karen conceive the education of their children in Thai schools as their biggest problem regarding the transmission of their own values, worldview, and experiences. In the Thai schools the children learn nothing about their own Karen culture. Quite contrary, their own culture deliberately is debased and denigrated by the Tai teachers. Furthermore, as the children generally stay at the Thai school for the whole day, their possibilities to make experiences in the context of their parent's culture are considerably restricted.

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<sup>32</sup> During the late 1970s, after the military coup in 1976, the area had been a retreat for political dissidents and communist resistance. It was not before the beginning 1980s that government troops regained control over the whole area.

<sup>33</sup> This may have changed during the last years due to the increasing 'physical' pressure which the Karen in the sanctuary experienced since then.

All-day schooling in Thai schools is also an obstacle to the efforts of Karen elders to establish supplementing Karen schools. These schools are desired by most of the Karen in Thung Yai who, at the same time, quite generally concede the need for their children to learn the Thai language and about Thai culture.

Besides these problems regarding the transmission of cultural identity and self-esteem, education in Thai schools statistically is related to tendencies which may be termed 'modernization tendencies' and are indicating shifts from a predominant subsistence orientation to increasing importance of monetary incomes and market relations.

Statistically the education of the heads of households correlates with various economic and socio-religious factors. In their tendencies these may be characterized as follows:

Those who received their education in the Buddhist wat show rather 'traditional' tendencies, being predominantly subsistence oriented, while monetary incomes are of rather little importance. They tended to practice a form of the ancestor cult (either *ong chre* or *ba pho*) without the village cult *priao*.<sup>34</sup>

Within the group of heads of households educated in a Thai school, monetary income was more important, while subsistence orientation was less emphasized. They tended to practice the village cult *priao* together with the ancestor cult *ba pho*.

The group of households whose heads didn't have any formal education at all, to some degree also showed 'modernization tendencies'. But, compared to those who had an education in Thai schools, they showed slightly stronger tendencies of marginalization (insufficient rice production and lower incomes).

In 1997, more than 45 % of the heads of households (compared to more than 21 % of all people older than 6 years) had obtained their education in a Karen Buddhist wat, while over 34 % of them had no formal education at all. Only about 17 % of the heads of households had attended a Thai school (compared to about 47 % of all people older than 6). The percentage of people who had received an education in a school as well as in a wat is rather small with about 3 %. Generally, there is a strong correlation between age and education. The older the people are, the more they have been educated in a wat, the younger they are, the more they received a formal education in Thai schools. Therefore, the substitution of an education in wat by an education in school will increase the share of heads of households who received their education in school in future. Even though there is no causal relation between education in Thai schools and 'modernization', and even the statistical relations between the two factors are not very strong, the 'demographic shift' regarding the education of the heads of the households, quite probably, implies that monetary incomes and market relations will further increase in importance. Not least so because the education in Thai schools also furthers the interests in and possibilities to find wage labour outside of the sanctuary.

### **Subsistence and identity: Economic transformations and constraints**

Until today, most of the households in Thung Yai are living on subsistence farming. They predominantly grow rice on swidden fields and some paddy fields. Monetary incomes, for most households, are of secondary importance. Most of the basic provisions for subsistence are still produced locally.

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<sup>34</sup> Statistically households practicing the *priao* village cult showed the strongest correlations with 'modernization tendencies'. On average they are less subsistent in rice production, have more often and higher income from wage labour, have more often monetary income from several income sources, and more frequently debts than other households.



Their rotational swidden system depends on short cultivation and long fallow periods. Every year each household selects a swidden field within a territory 'controlled' by the village community. The size of the swidden is determined by family size and capacity for work. The secondary vegetation of the fallow area, predominantly a kind of bamboo forest, is cut, and burnt after a period of drying. The swidden is normally used to grow hill rice for one year. After the rice is harvested the field once again is left fallow for several years, while numerous plants growing on the fallow area are used continuously. The long fallow periods of 5 – 15 years (and more), together with specific cultivation techniques, support the long-term productivity of the soils. Until today, subsistence production within the traditional 'territories' or land use areas of the Karen communities is no problem in the context of their conventional land use system. Assuming a mean fallow period of 10 years, the total agricultural area in the sanctuary, including fallow areas, presently accounts for about 1 % of its total area.

By now, many studies have shown that such rotational swidden systems can be sustainable and may even increase biodiversity and food resources for wildlife. The studies done in Thung Yai so far, as well as its appreciation as a World Heritage Site, indicate that this is the case in Thung Yai too. The traditional land use system of the Karen, with its fields and fallow areas, for a long time has been an integral part of Thung Yai, has shaped its 'ecology' and enhanced its biodiversity.

Most probably at least since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Karen living in Thung Yai have gained small monetary incomes by selling traditional 'cash crops' of the Karen<sup>35</sup>, forest products, and domestic animals. These income sources are of importance in the context of the subsistence economy of most of the households until today. In 1996, in Tambon Laiwo about 62 % of all households did have income from these 'traditional' income sources, but its share to the overall income was less than 20 %. The biggest share to the overall income, with about 71 %, was provided by income from wage labour outside of the sanctuary, attained in about 51 % of all households. Since the late 1980s, there is a considerable increase of monetary income in the sanctuary which predominantly is to be attributed to the increase of incomes from wage labour outside the sanctuary. In the middle of the 1990s, these incomes were much higher than those from traditional income sources. Even though, this increase of income takes place on a rather low level in absolute terms. The mean annual income per person in 1996 was less than 50 US\$ (~ 1300.- Baht), and more than a third of all households did have annual incomes per person below 20 US\$ (~ 500.- Baht).<sup>36</sup>

Until today, most of the households are predominantly subsistence oriented and most of the monetary income obtained is still of subsidiary character. But, there seems to be a kind of antagonistic relation between income from wage labour and 'traditional' features of Karen culture in Thung Yai. On the one hand, income from wage labour statistically shows a tendency to go along with higher incomes, less diversity of income sources, and a stronger tendency to get indebted. In the case of Thung Yai these are the most obvious indications of the growing importance of the market economy. On the other hand, income from wage labour and the related factors go along with a tendency to produce less rice and to have a higher probability not to be subsistent, as well as not to produce traditional cash crops. The increase of monetary incomes, and specifically income from wage labour, statistically goes along with a weakening of the subsistence economy.

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<sup>35</sup> These 'traditional cash crops' in the first place are chillies and tobacco, furthermore onions, watermelons, sesame, taro, areca nut, durian, and various other fruits and vegetables grown in house gardens, besides rice in the swidden fields, and on fallow areas.

<sup>36</sup> About 31 % of the overall income was obtained by less than 8 % of the households (26 out of 367 households). For a more detailed account and analysis of the economic organization of the households and communities in Thung Yai see Buergin 2002.

This antagonistic relation between subsistence economy and wage labour incomes raises the question whether households are forced to obtain income from wage labour to compensate for deficiencies of the subsistence economy, or whether income possibilities from wage labour leads to a decrease of subsistence orientation. In the case of the Karen in Thung Yai, in the mid-1990s, the primary motivation to seek wage labour predominantly has not been actual need due to deficiencies in subsistence production. Most of those looking for seasonal work outside of the sanctuary were younger men whose motivation more often seems to have been the attraction of 'adventure' and certain consumer goods than actual need. Though, this does not indicate that these individual experiences in general led to a shift from a subsistence to a 'monetary' orientation, neither on the individual nor on the household level. This shift rather is enforced by way of the increasing external pressures on the subsistence production since the early 1990s (see below).

Increasing experiences with the 'Thai world', specifically regarding job opportunities and consumables as well as a more 'familiar' relation due to education in Thai schools, most likely will increase seasonal wage labour outside of the sanctuary in future. Whether this tendency will go along with a decreasing importance of the subsistence economy probably will depend on the ability of the elders to pass on their values and world views. A formal education in Karen language through Karen teachers is deemed to be crucial to achieve this objective.

The moderate economic stratification along with the increase of incomes from wage labour in most of the villages, until now, did not have wider impacts on the social organization of the villages. But, this may change very fast if the commons regime on land resources is furthermore undermined, for example due to external support for individual use rights on land resources. For two of the villages this is a foreseeable problem if bufferzone plans of the RFD are realized.

The future of the subsistence economy of the Karen in Thung Yai, much more directly, depends on the restrictions of the RFD on their land use system. In the beginning of the 1990s, in the process of nominating the Wildlife Sanctuary for a World Heritage Site, the RFD had tried to finally settle its problem of people living in the sanctuary by removing them. Due to unexpected strong public criticism, the RFD had to publicly reverse its resettlement scheme. Even though, the objective to move the Karen out of the sanctuary remained strong. During the following years, the RFD concentrated on the land use system of the Karen, allegedly being detrimental to the forests of the sanctuary. The Forest Department prohibited the use of fallow areas older than three years. In the longer term, these restrictions necessarily will lead to the breakdown of the traditional land use system, as the soils under constant use rapidly lose their productivity. In the villages where control through RFD and Military was most effective, people already reported decreasing yields in the second half of the 1990s. By now, in early 2002, the RFD has started to plant tree seedlings on this year's swidden fields in some villages (R. Steinmetz, pers. communication February 2002). Thereby the RFD forces the Karen to choose between being charged as forest destroyers or facing severe subsistence problems.

The only possibility for the Karen to adapt to the restrictions on their swidden system, apart from trying to avoid them, seems to be 'modernization'. They may either try to increase the productivity of the fields, using fertilizers and pesticides - which most of them cannot afford -, or right away turn to cash cropping in, or wage labour outside the sanctuary. Intensification of agriculture and cash cropping is already propagated and supported by some of the government institutions and NGOs working in the sanctuary. But, most of the Karen in Thung Yai reject these efforts, and try to carry on with their subsistence farming. Furthermore, intensification of land use, cash cropping, and increasing market orientation - that is 'modernization' - leads to the destruction of their reputation as 'forest people living in harmony with nature'. This im-

age presently is their most important asset in the national debate that will decide about the future of the villages in the sanctuary.

### **Local resistance and transcultural alliances**

In contrast to the predominating stereotype of the forest destroying 'hill tribes', the Karen in Thailand, and specifically those living in Thung Yai, are increasingly referred to as 'people living in harmony with nature'. Within Thailand's public discourse on people and forests they are cited as an example that 'people and forests can co-exist'. This position originated in the rising conflicts about villages in forest reserves and forest policies towards the end of the 1980s. In resistance to resettlement policies in forest reserves, eucalyptus plantations, illegal logging and corruption, an emerging peasant movement, concerned academics, and NGOs developed a community forest concept as an alternative perspective and a counter model to the conservation concept and commercial reforestation approach of the RFD and big agribusiness companies (see above).

The Karen in Thung Yai find their allies among these groups. But for them it is a rather ambivalent 'alliance'. In their encounters with state agencies they frequently feel right- and powerless. Open resistance to continuous repression and acts of violence by RFD and military officials is difficult for the Karen, not least due to specific cultural frames of behaviour and historically grounded interethnic relations between Karen and Tai. They have the impression that their rights and concerns are not relevant in the national and international discourses about their home place. Among them a strong feeling prevails that they cannot communicate their own view, even towards their Thai allies among NGOs and activists. To justify their claims they have to use words, arguments, and ideas that are not really their own. The Karen conceive these 'communication problems' not predominantly as language problems, even though many of the elder Karen have only limited competence in Thai language, but attribute them to different cultural contexts.

Probably all of the Karen in Thung Yai believe that resettlement is neither justified nor desirable, but they do take different positions towards the external influences and the resettlement threat. There is a rather small group, including most of the Phu Yai Ban (the village head in the context of the state administrative system), which is open for 'moderate modernization'. But, even for these 'modernists', to give up their local Karen identity is no option. The vast majority is rather more reluctant to changes, preferring to "live like our grandparents did" as a common saying goes. Among them there are marked differences in their reaction to the external influences. A rather big group, including many influential elders as well as young people, may be labeled 'extroverted traditionalists'. They are trying to shape the changes and resist to the threats by strengthening and revitalizing Karen culture and identity as well as seeking support and advocacy outside of Thung Yai. Another group of more 'introverted traditionalists' also focuses on strengthening 'traditional' Karen culture, but invokes to a higher degree millenarian and more 'exclusive' frames of Karen culture. Regarding their relation to Non-Karen outsiders, they rather tend to avoid transcultural exchange and support.

Despite these differences of position and strategy, all these groups wish to remain in their villages as well as to protect their culture and living place. Furthermore, they all refer to the same specific cultural frame of values and objectives regarding a 'decent' life appropriate for a Karen living in Thung Yai. These conceptions of specific Karen values and objectives focus on the concepts of 'modesty' in opposition to 'greed', 'harmony' in contrast to conflict, as well as 'spiritual development' versus 'material development'. These self-determinations are sharpened, but not created in the clashes with external actors and influences. The counterpart to

these conceptions is quite obvious and explicitly named by the Karen as such. It is primarily the 'modern' Thai society which is increasingly 'intruding' into their traditional living places and spaces, threatening their 'cultural' and physical existence.

None of the three groups, so far, has the opportunity to participate in the national and international discourses and decision-making regarding their own living place. The group of the 'moderate modernists', by now, has a place of political representation in the Tambon Council. But, due to the marginal position of the Karen in the bureaucratic system as well as due to the responsibility of the RFD for the sanctuary, the Tambon Council has almost no influence on decisions regarding the existence of the villages in the sanctuary. For them, as for the 'extroverted traditionalists', external allies do play an important role as mediators and advocates.

For all three groups the relation to these external allies is more or less ambivalent, even though for different reasons. The 'extroverted traditionalists' actively seek interchange with and support from their allies and are trying to find a 'common language' with them. But they widely share with the 'introverted traditionalists' the conviction and the feeling of the impossibility to communicate their own position and view adequately. Furthermore, probably with some reason, they do have doubts about the 'selflessness' and 'sustainability' of the engagement of Thai-NGOs for the interests of the Karen in Thung Yai. They are well aware of their rather 'marginal' role in this relation shaped by inter-ethnic power asymmetries that are not overcome easily.

This specific inter-ethnic relation the 'traditionalists' share with the 'modernists', but the latter are somewhat closer to the 'Thai world' in their values and objectives. Even though they share the conviction that it is not really possible to 'translate' the Karen specific perceptions to the Non-Karen, this problem is not to the fore for the 'modernists'. Their problem in their relation with the external advocates is much more to justify their moderate modernization objectives. As they do not fit into the image of the 'traditional forest keeper unspoiled by market influences', they tend to be 'problematic' for Thai-NGOs who advocate for the Karen, but, at the same time, have to refer to this image to pursue interests and ideologies of their own on the national level.

The idea not to be able to communicate their specific values, views, and interests to the Non-Karen predominates among the 'introverted traditionalists'. Towards the efforts and interests of the external allies they are rather skeptical, if not rejecting them altogether. Their hopes are not so much directed towards a political solution of the threats they are facing, but rather based on their religious faith and strategies of avoidance and isolation.

### **Local identity and global integration: Balancing 'tradition' and 'modernity'**

Regardless of how the different groups may try to cope, none of them can really evade the external influences and pressures. The transformations on the local as well as on the national level that took place during the last 50 years are considerable and highly interdependent as this paper indicates. While the power relations between the local and the national level are obviously rather 'unbalanced', the impacts of national policies and transformations on the local communities by no means are always intended or foreseeable.

Regarding the transformations in Thung Yai, the most important processes on the national level over the last 50 years have been the rediscovery of the peripheral areas of the country as resources for the national development and the extension of the administrative body of the state into these peripheral areas. Both processes were crucial for the modernization of the country as well as for the transformations in Thung Yai.

In the context of national development and national security the Karen were categorized and

stereotyped as 'hill tribes'. Thereby they were assigned the ambiguous position of 'the other within' the nation state (Thongchai 2000a). At the same time their living places, the forests in Thung Yai, were first defined as economic resources supporting economic development, and later, when the costs of national development became more obvious, as national and global biodiversity assets that have to be protected against local people. Efforts to incorporate 'the other within' into the nation, in this context, predominantly focused on controlling the local population as well as supporting cultural assimilation and economic modernization.

The 'otherness' of the Karen in Thung Yai, on the one hand, was assigned to them by categorizing them as 'hill tribes', reinforced through their living place in the forest, their swidden practices and their subsistence economy. On the other hand, this 'otherness' is emphasized by the Karen themselves, expressed in a strong desire to retain their cultural identity that is closely related to their living place in Thung Yai. To cope with the challenge of this identity through external influences, the Karen in Thung Yai reacted with far reaching transformations of their social organization that, at the same time, allowed them to retain their distinct identity as Karen in Thung Yai. With the continuing restrictions on their land use system and, even more, with the implementation of the resettlement plans of the RFD, their capabilities to reconcile adaptation and cultural identity quite probably will be overstrained.

There are strong forces and institutions in Thailand which support either the exclusion or a complete assimilation of the ethnic minority groups categorized as 'hill tribes', including their removal out of protected areas. In the case of the World Heritage Site Thung Yai Naresuan, the Royal Forest Department is specifically keen on pushing through its objectives. But, Thailand not only experienced rapid economic growth over the last 50 years, it also underwent a remarkable process of democratization in which Thung Yai, more than once, did play a quite prominent role<sup>37</sup>. In this process, in October 1997, a constitution was enacted that explicitly grants rights to local communities to cultural self-determination as well as to the use of local resources:

"Persons so assembling as to be a traditional community shall have the right to conserve or restore their customs, local intellect, arts or good culture of their community and of the nation and participate in the management, maintenance, preservation and exploitation of natural resources and the environment in a balanced fashion and persistently as provided by law." (Thailand 1997, section 46).

As a modern nation state, Thailand furthermore has committed itself to the principles of democracy and human rights. The Karen in Thung Yai never had a voice of their own regarding plans and decisions about their traditional living place. They experienced increasing pressure and even transgressions of their human rights by state authorities. The case of the Karen in Thung Yai, as well as the more general problem of the integration of the 'hill tribes' into Thai society, is a challenge for democratic forces and a chance for democracy to gain strength in Thailand.

After having adopted Thung Yai as a 'global heritage', the 'global community' too has to assume responsibility for its heritage. As far as I can see, neither commitments of the 'international community' to principles of democracy and human rights, nor threats posed to 'its' heritage warrant the forced removal of the Karen people from their home in Thung Yai. To almost 100 % they explicitly have expressed their wish to stay in their home places, even if offered improved living standards and development chances outside of the sanctuary. The international institutions concerned with the World Heritage Site, according to their own standards, should speak out against the pressures and acts of terror towards the Karen. They even should support their existence in Thung Yai.

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<sup>37</sup> Be it as scene for a hunting scandal that became an important trigger for the student revolts toppling the military regime in 1973, or in the case of the Nam Choan Controversy that became a milestone for the democratization process in Thailand during the 1980s (see Buerger/Kessler 1999).

When the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary was declared a Natural World Heritage Site in 1991, the Karen were only perceived as a 'disruptive factor'.<sup>38</sup> The studies done in the sanctuary since then clearly show that the Karen people living in Thung Yai are an integral part of the sanctuary.<sup>39</sup> With their traditional sustainable land use system they have shaped the sanctuary considerably over a long time and increased its biodiversity. In their culture they keep a unique body of knowledge about their natural environment to which they maintain a specific and deep spiritual relationship. May be the future will prove cultural diversity as 'valuable' as biodiversity in the process of global integration. In Thung Yai cultural difference and identity, to a high degree, is a 'local identity'. This identity is deeply rooted in the specific place that is home and base for subsistence as well as the spatial focus of the 'real' and 'imagined' history of the people living there. The forests and wildlife of the sanctuary are most likely best protected by recognizing the legitimate settlement and land use rights of the Karen living there, by supporting their traditional sustainable land use system, by securing their right to cultural self-determination, and by integrating them into the management of the sanctuary.

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<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Seub/Stewart-Cox 1990.

<sup>39</sup> See Pinkaew 1992; Ambrosino 1993; WFT 1993, 1996; Chan-ek/ Kulvadee/ Ambrosino 1995; Maxwell 1995; Steinmetz 1996; Steinmetz/Mather 1996; Kulvadee 1997; Buergin 2002.

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