

## Space of Resistance and Place of Local Knowledge\* in Karen Ecological Movement of Northern Thailand: The Case of Pgaz K'Nyau Villages in Mae Lan Kham River Basin

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### Abstract

This paper is based on an insider's view of the ecological movement in Northern Thailand as carried out by Sgaw Karen (Pgaz K'Nyau) people whose knowledge was accumulated in the form of cultural capital including oral traditions such as legends, storytelling, *hta* (traditional songs or poems), and rituals. Through the movement, in which each of these repositories of knowledge were put into practice, the Pgaz K'Nyau image as conservationists was shaped and reinforced. Leaders of the Pgaz K'Nyau movement used their ecological knowledge, which was reinterpreted to represent Pgaz K'Nyau as children of the forest. Such images were the result of converting knowledge into symbolic power to create a space of resistance, which served as an instrument to contest the hegemonic discourse imposed by the state forestry agencies. A shift in Pgaz K'Nyau identity occurred through the process of inserting their relatively little-known cultural image into the political context of rights framed by the newly promulgated (1997) Constitution.<sup>1)</sup> This paper focuses on the use of *hta* in the eco-political conflict in the Mae Lan Kham river basin, Sameong District, Chiang Mai Province.

**Keywords:** eco-politics, local knowledge, identity, reinterpretation, symbolic power, space of resistance

### I Introduction

Moj hif hkof av iz av iz, Paj dai lau av iz av iz  
Soof lauz sav swi saf of div, Soof lauz mav ngai saf of div  
Kwaj htauf av hki av hplef hsi, Wif lauz sav tuz lauz sav nyi

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\* "Place of local knowledge" in this paper means the position or location of local knowledge in ethno-ecological movement such as *hta*, which is reinterpreted such as to take on new meaning related to the current eco-political context.

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1) The 1997 Constitution was the first constitution of Thailand to be drawn up with strong participation from different groups, particularly local communities. However, it became invalid following the coup d'état of September 19, 2006.

[The village my mother settled is here, here.  
The village my father settled, is traced here, here.  
The pomelos they planted are still here.  
The limes they planted are still here.  
Look and observe the many fruits up in the trees.  
Their delicious taste remains unforgettable in our heart.]

The green hills of northern Thailand harbor a variety of ecological systems with high bio-diversity and diverse ethnic groups. I have chosen this fragment of the New Year song to express the warm feeling of the Pgaz K’Nyau for their homeland in the highlands. The fruit trees are the footprint of the long Pgaz K’Nyau social history, which reflects landscape on the one hand and social life on the other. The Pgaz K’Nyau have lived and died within the forest community. They watch over and look after their fruit trees like they do their children. Fruit trees link generations in the process of settlement and making a living. Even the Government forest authorities often search out fruit trees in the forest as a sign of human settlement.

This paper focuses on the use of one part of the Pgaz K’Nyau oral tradition, *hta* poems, to create a space of resistance in the context of the eco-political struggle with government agencies concerning resource management and land rights. The paper attempts to show how Pgaz K’Nyau leaders used the power of *hta* to mobilize their people in the struggle, and how a space of resistance could be created by transforming cultural capital into symbolic power.

#### I-1. *Methodology*

The author was involved in this movement as a Pgaz K’Nyau who was directly involved in this problem. The author can communicate directly in the Pgaz K’Nyau language for all kinds of interviews, recorded on tape and written down in Pgaz K’Nyau as the first step and translated into other languages later. The author considers it important that he was an “insider” in this research. Not only is the Pgaz K’Nyau language his first language, but he also has knowledge of the oral traditions of the Pgaz K’Nyau, which have been acquired during the process of growing up in Pgaz K’Nyau society. It is thought that this research would be extremely difficult for an “outside” researcher to carry out from the points of view of depth of knowledge of oral traditions and also the question of trust between the researcher and the informants involved. This knowledge and perspective is also thought to have been necessary for the preparation of guidelines for the in-depth interviews.

The author also played the role of a supporter as a member of staff of an indigenous NGO. To conduct my field study I used three main research methods. These include archival research, structured interviews, and formal and informal in-depth interviewing. The archival research was carried out first, mainly at Chiang Mai University Library and at NGO offices. I used structured interviews with the movement’s leaders. Structured interviews are based on guidelines, a predetermined list of questions to be asked, and points to be elicited during the interviews. These interviews were intended to examine how the movement’s leaders have acquired, produced and reproduced a field of specialized knowledge for the Northern Ecological Movement. During the

interviews there was a special focus on the role of oral tradition, *hta* poems, storytelling, and so on. The purpose of focusing on oral tradition was to reach an in-depth analysis of the knowledge that local specialists possess to create a space of resistance.

Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, persons familiar with oral traditional knowledge related to *hta* (poems/songs), folktales and rituals, some time after the structured interviews. These in-depth interviews focused on how the leaders selected these oral traditions and how they used the knowledge in events during the struggle for rights, and how they reinterpreted the knowledge to link it to the eco-politic context. Guidelines, a predetermined list of questions to be asked, and points to be elicited were not used in the in-depth interviews. Many of the in-depth interviews were carried out in the format of group discussions and informal discussions.

Based on the author's close relationship with the key informants over a long period of time, and as a Pgaz K'Nyau who communicates directly in the Pgaz K'Nyau language, it was possible to gain in-depth insights into the knowledge, the interpretation, and the feelings of the key informants. In the informal in-depth interviews, the researcher was closely involved with the informants during working times, both in the fields and the forest when they were gathering and hunting. The researcher sometimes stayed with them overnight in the fields and forests for some time. This was a good time to carry out indirect in-depth interviews with informants, as it is not only that research questions can be asked and answered, but informants may also have something they wish to tell the researcher. This in-depth interview process was carried out in a lively atmosphere and was closer to interpersonal communication than an interview. These people were mostly either formal leaders or informal leaders. The key informants were movement leaders, elders, young leaders, and men and women of different generations, numbering around twenty people in total.

#### I-2. *History of the Pgaz K'Nyau and the Mae Lan Kham River Basin*

The term Pgaz K'Nyau is a self-denomination meaning "people" or "human beings." Cau Nif, the well-known Pgaz K'Nyau leader from Nong Tao Village, Mae Wang District, Chiang Mai defines the term "*pgaz mi pgaz pgaj*" as "the old people/elders" and connects it to "*mi hkof pgaj pooz*," which can be interpreted as "the place of elders." This is also the Pgaz K'Nyau term for "the forest." Therefore, Cau Nif's interpretations of *pgaz mi pgaz pgaj* (elders) and *mi hkof pgaj pooz* (forest) show that the two terms amount to the same thing, which points to the Pgaz K'Nyau being an integral part of the forest. This meaning of Pgaz K'Nyau is appropriate in the age of eco-politics, implying the wisdom of environmental conservation of those practicing rotational farming and co-existing sustainably with nature. The term Pgaz K'Nyau has come to have symbolic meaning for a people able to represent themselves as "children of the forest" [Yos 2004: 1], or people who co-exist with nature. This meaning has symbolic signification in the context of the appropriation and acquisition of a space in which their identity can be symbolically represented in the eco-political context. This study emphasizes this particular interpretation of the term Pgaz K'Nyau.

Concretely, this paper will focus on the construction of a discourse for the creation of an identity of the Pgaz K'Nyau as people who work to protect the forest through the use of cultural

practices, in this case oral traditions (*hta*), by reinterpreting them in ways that create new meanings to counter the dominant discourse and policies of the state forestry agencies. Within this process of resistance, oral traditions (*hta*) take on new meanings through reinterpretation in the context of the eco-political struggle. I use examples from my work among the Pgaz K’Nyau of the Mae Lan Kham river basin to illustrate the point that the Pgaz K’Nyau use tradition and shifting identity as a strategic means of generating a space of resistance.

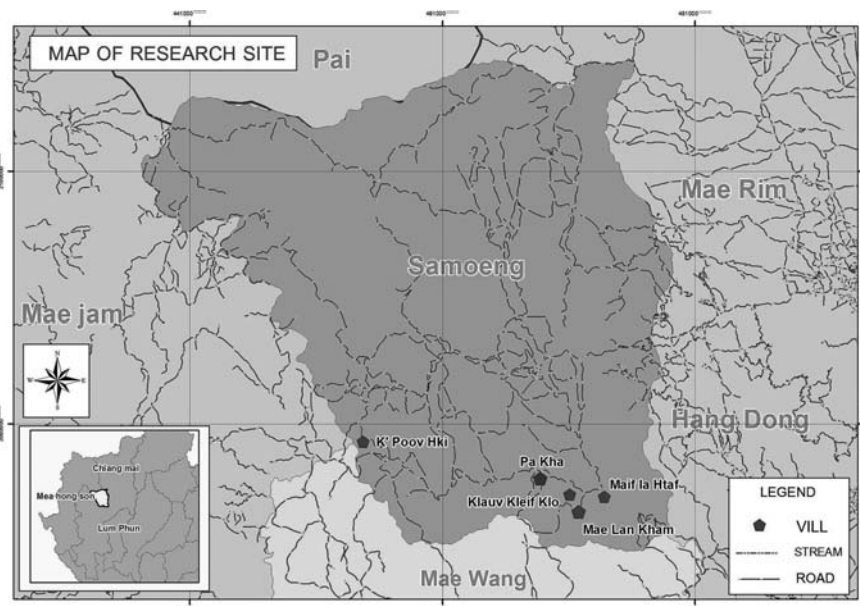
The Mae Lan Kham river basin is located in the Mae Lan Kham valley 600–700 m above sea level. Mae Lan Kham Village is officially Village No.6 and is the core village of five hamlets. Pa Kha Village is officially Village No.11, a core village of three hamlets. Both villages are located in Samoeng Tai Subdistrict, Samoeng District, Chiang Mai Province. They lie approximately 18–23 km from the town of Samoeng and 70 km from Chiang Mai City. The two villages were selected for the study because they are both located in Mae Lan Kham river basin, were both at one time the same village (No. 6), and because they were both covered by the same RFD reforestation project and therefore both faced the same problems with regard to the loss of rotational farming fallow lands.

In 2007, Mae Lan Kham Village had 121 households and a population of 517, all of them are traditional animist and Pa Kha Village had 106 households, with a population of 485. Sixty-seven households are Christian, and 46 households are traditional animist. Mae Lan Kham and Pa Kha are Pgaz K’Nyau communities with a history that can be traced back approximately 400 years. The Lua were settled in the area before the Pgaz K’Nyau, but have now become assimilated into the Khon Muang (the lowland northern Thai people) [Keyes 1979]<sup>2)</sup> society and have remained settled nearby up to the present as Khon Muang villages. The term Pa Kha comes from Kham Muang (the northern Thai dialect) and refers to the abundance of *kha* grass, known in English as “lalang” or “cogon” (genus *Imperata cylindrica*).

The elders recall that when the Pgaz K’Nyau moved here, this area was covered completely by *kha* grass and there were very few trees. The new residents removed all the grass in order to carry out rotational farming in the dry fields. After the harvest, people left the land to fallow so that the free range cattle could eat the new, lush *kha* grass; this also served as a means of controlling the grass. This helped to recover soil fertility, and produced a natural crop of young trees waiting to be felled at the beginning of the new cycle of rotational farming. Trees in areas not suitable for rotational cropping purposes were left untouched, providing a totally green area all year round. Thus, Pa Kha Village describes a place associated with the identity of rotational farmers, the name itself inferring the validity of rotational farming — and local management of resources — and constituting a form of resistance to the dominant scientific forest management discourse of the Royal Forestry Department (RFD), which have contradictory ideas of natural resource management.

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2) As regards the Lua, Keyes found in his work in Mae Sariang that most Lua had long become bicultural — being Khon Muang as well as Lua and that many former Lua had simply become Khon Muang when they moved into the lowlands.



Map 1 Research Site

## II A History of the Royal Forestry Department's Involvement in Northern Thailand

In 1959, the term *chao khao* was coined by the Thai state to refer to “hill tribe” peoples living in the forest. This Thai term *chao khao* can also mean “other people.” This was in support of a hegemonic discourse during the nation-building process aimed at constructing national unity. In particular, during the American war in Viet Nam and the era of the Cold War, the so-called “hill tribes” came to be regarded as troublemakers with respect to national security, drug production and abuse, and deforestation [Thailand, The Committee on Improvement of National Security on Hill Tribes and Drug Cultivation, National Security Council 1992; Anan *et al.* 2004: 25]. One result was that the term “hill tribes” continues to carry a negative connotation. These highland people become “the others” or “aliens” from the perspective of the Thai people and the Thai nation-state [Thongchai 2000: 56; Renard 2000: 79–80].

The “hill tribes” continue to be seen as a national problem by the State, because of their practice of “shifting cultivation,” which the state claims causes deforestation. The forest management policy of the Forestry Department adopted in 1960 aimed at preserving 50% of the total national landmass as forested areas. However, this policy was decidedly unsuccessful as the government, at the same time, promoted the clearance of forests in relatively flat areas in order to grow cash crops for the export market. In 1992, the government lowered its sights and subsequent forest zoning was directed at achieving a total forest cover of 40%, with at least 25% comprising conservation forests. The figure of 40% derives from a water yield study that indicated a need for at least 38% forest cover, especially in head watershed areas [Thailand, Royal Forestry Department

1989: 30]. The goal of the RFD was to develop forest areas, but the resulting reality was that it opened up channels to create economic tree plantations rather than areas of forest [*ibid.*: Articles 4 and 5]. This policy confusion created opportunities for logging companies to replant trees in plantations after having cut down the existing much more valuable forest trees [Article 8]. Private companies and government tree plantations, feeding paper industries, used the economic plantations for fast-growing tree varieties, such as eucalyptus and pine [Articles 11 and 12]. Soon after, the government declared the Forest Orchard Act in support of these efforts, which formed the genesis of the tree-planting project implemented through the RFD [Anan *et al.* 2004: 33-34].

The RFD played the leading role in launching reforestation programs in highland areas, often through the Watershed Area Management Units (WAMU). One such unit will be examined more closely in this study, which investigates the situation in the Mae Lan Kham river basin, where this unit has been active.

In 1983, a reforestation project was initiated in the Mae Lan Kham river basin by the Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit (MLWAMU), beginning in three major areas of the watershed, covering T'Kwai Klo and Huai Ya Sai hamlets. The total area was approximately 1,000 *rai* (160 ha), plus an additional 2,000 *rai* (320 ha) in the hamlets of Sop Lan, Omkun, Pa Kha Nork, and Pa Kha Nai. Details are shown in Table 1 below.

One villager, Saf Nyauv (50) from Pa Kha Village noted, "Before the RFD came, it made use of individuals in the community, such as the teacher and the Village Chief. They told the villagers that they would come in to restore the watershed and would plant eucalyptus, which they referred to as *ton fon*, i.e. 'rain trees'. In addition, they would help the villagers to clear land for paddy fields. For each *rai* (0.16 ha) of land converted to paddy field, they would pay 500 baht. Each villager who cleared fallow land in preparation for reforestation by the Mae Lan WAMU was to be paid 30 baht a day for his/her labor. If the villager decided to grow certain designated trees on such land, the

**Table 1** Reforested Areas/Tree Plantations of the Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit between 1984 and 1995

Year	Area ( <i>rai</i> / hectare)	Type of Tree/Plant
1984	150/24	Eucalyptus
1985	100/16	Eucalyptus
1986	300/48	Eucalyptus
1987	200/32	Eucalyptus
1988	—	No planting
1989	36/6	Eucalyptus, <i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> (Lamk.) de Wi and wild peanut
1990	350/56	Pine, <i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> (Lamk.) de Wi, <i>Pterocarpus macrocarpus</i> , wild peanut and teak
1991	450/72	Pine, <i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> (Lamk.) de Wi, <i>Pterocarpus macrocarpus</i> , wild peanut and teak
1992	400/64	Pine, <i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> (Lamk.) de Wi, <i>Pterocarpus macrocarpus</i> , wild peanut and teak
1993	600/96	Pine, <i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> (Lamk.) de Wi, <i>Pterocarpus macrocarpus</i> , wild peanut and Teak
1994	250/40	Pine, <i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> (Lamk.) de Wi, <i>Pterocarpus macrocarpus</i> , wild peanut and teak
1995	200/32	Pine, <i>Leucaena leucocephala</i> (Lamk.) de Wi, <i>Pterocarpus macrocarpus</i> , wild peanut and teak
Total	3,036 <i>rai</i> [=486 hectares]	

Source: Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit document (Year of publication not specified)

farmer would receive a remuneration of 1,000 baht for each *rai*. This project lasted for only six years, after which time it was withdrawn from the village.”

One woman, Nauj Kof from T’Kwai Klo hamlet, also noted, “WAMU deceived the villagers, saying that eucalyptus trees have sweet fruits, with one fruit selling for 30 baht.” Another woman, Nauj Pax Lax, said, “The WAMU said that they had come to establish a plant nursery only. But it has not happened like that. After the nursery, they planted the seedlings in our fallow areas. They also said that if young people worked for them, when they are 15 years old, all boys and girls will have a lot of money and would be able to buy anything they like to have.”

It can be seen from the above, that the villagers were considered to be ignorant and easily deceived. At the same time, this shows the lack of sincerity of the officials toward the villagers and their willingness to lie to them in a variety of ways in order to implement their reforestation project. The elder Hpa Kei (74) warned the villagers through a *hta* (two “lines,” each of seven syllables, are shown for convenience here and below as one line) during the meeting organized by WAMU officers and teachers at the Mae Lan Kham school to promote the tree planting project:

Klei mux naj yaz s’kiz hti, klei mux naj y’naj paz htiv  
[The seductive song of the cricket, the seductive voice beside your ear.]

The seductive song of the cricket is but an attempt to fool you. Be advised that sweet words are always filled with poison. This is what your children must beware of.

After hearing this *hta*, a small group of five or six villagers came to meet him at his house to discuss more about how the project would affect them and how they should react to it. This small group later became the core group of leaders who opposed the WAMU tree plantation scheme.

In 1985, the WAMU came to Mae Lan Kham<sup>3)</sup> to reforest the land and take care of the area. At that time, they planted eucalyptus trees along the road to the village and the areas near the RFD camp, which had formerly been used for rotational farming by the communities of Mae Lan Kham. The officials claimed that such areas were government forest areas and could not be owned by others. The government then expanded the areas to be reforested, particularly on the lands left fallow in Huai Ya Sai and Pa Kha Nork. As the villagers were constantly losing their land they protested to the Chief of the WAMU.

The Mae Lan WAMU also chose to be the decision-maker, the one who had full authority to establish their office where they wanted, which was at the “Waf Kleif Hkof” watershed site situated between Mae Lan Kham hamlet and Huai Yang Sai hamlet. The chosen site was suitable for them for coordinating work in the two villages because they could select the areas for reforestation just as they wanted. It was clear that the site chosen for establishment of the office was strategic, since the location allowed the RFD easy access to both the people and the land.

The action intensified when the RFD came to transform the land. They seized part of the land left fallow and owned by a villager named Cax Hpe and cleared it to build an office along with 4-5 guesthouses, a pond, and a flower garden. It was instantly converted into a resort, at the very site

3) The road, school and temple were constructed at Mae Lam Kham in 1977.

claimed by the authorities to be an area where no non-forest activity was permitted, i.e. “illegal land.” Such a contradiction confirmed that the authorities considered themselves to be above the law. This action confused the people and strengthened the facade of power constructed by the RFD. The people, however, questioned whose land it was and saw it as a misappropriation of their claim on the land and their identity.

The WAMU seemed to want to convince the people that they had the authority to do whatever they pleased and that the decision was theirs to make, not the villagers. The tacit justification for the government was that it intended to push for reforestation so that it could claim the fallow land used by the villagers in their rotational farming system. Once that was done, the villagers knew that the government would be able to declare it as government land. The government officials also wanted to have the villagers reforest their own fallow land by their very own hands.

Another strategy they used was to ask the local Karen workers from this area to form teams and surreptitiously plant trees on the fallow land of others in different areas. Then the WAMU officers could claim, “It is not us, it is your own people who reforested on your fallow land.” Such actions created increasing conflict among the residents of Mae Lan Kham Village.

However, the number of the villagers working for the reforestation project continued to increase, to the point where they ceased farming their own land and labored the whole year for the government project. Nauj Pax Lax said, “They work at the camp, collecting their wages and buying their food there. Everything is available and if they don’t have enough money they can get an advance. Their entire life cycle is dependent on the project. They don’t even have time for the traditional ceremonies, such as the tying of strings around the wrists at the New Year. They have no time to return home and join in these ceremonies, because they must work every day, no stopping. This expands and deepens the conflict, affecting the traditional customs and culture that have been practiced for so long. The lifestyles of the people of Mae Lan Kham are in conflict, there is no cohesion because the WAMU pressures the people to work, without consideration for their local customs and traditions. Perhaps they don’t even know that such things exist.”

Subsequently, many villagers were employed by the RFD both in the field or indoors doing housekeeping. They saw themselves planting the new tree species on their land. More and more villagers came for the work to earn an income despite attempts by their socially and politically aware neighbors to stop them.

These factors led the majority of the villagers to take part in the project by which villagers were transformed from Pgaz K’Nyau — who at Mae Lan Kham or Pa Kha Villages practiced rotational farming — into government employees reforesting their own rotational farming lands. The image of the latter is weak in terms of power relationships within the larger eco-political structure. The weakness exists not only at the image level but in the content as well. The authorities took the opportunity to draw some of the villagers who once opposed the RFD onto their side as watchdogs. This action served as a strategy to weaken community solidarity. The fate of the villagers participating in the government project was in the hands of the RFD.

The reforestation of fallow land under rotational farming was thus given a new meaning and context. This new image was to “present” the land as a gift to become “Government reforestation



land.” The conversion of fallow land under rotational farming into land set in a new cultural idiom was clearly an attempt to de-contextualize the forestation land and make it less political. This represents the appropriation of the meaning for the new piece of land, which in this way had been re-contextualized.

One particular event helps to illustrate the tactics of the Forestry Department in this regard. Hpa La Toox, a traditional leader who had supported the project when it first came to the area, purchased PVC pipe from the WAMU project for his own use. Later, the project officers accused him of an illegal activity and he was sent to jail for six months. This event was really serious for the villagers, who gathered at Hpa Keiv’s house to discuss the matter. While they were talking, Nauj Kof, Hpa Keiv’s daughter, responded to the visitors with a *hta*:

Htif hkauf lauj taz hkauf lauj eh, htif k’caj taz t’boof lez  
 [When you see footprints you challenge them,  
 But when you see the owner, you don’t dare challenge anymore.]

This was interpreted by Nauj Kof to mean: What was previously said (about the tree plantation scheme) seemed good in many ways, but when it really happens it’s very distressing and has no end.

Her father, Elder Hpa Keiv, a knowledgeable and well-respected elder in the village, added:

Lauz p’qax le seif hpoo hkle, pauj yaj t’blaiv loj laj lez  
 [When you’re caught under a log, there’s not much you can do about it.]

This means that by the time you realize you’ve made a serious mistake you’re already in no position to do anything about it. The villagers who were involved in the discussion agreed with the *hta* and some of them added some more *hta* of their own about the case. Discussing with the use of *hta* made the people really aware of how dangerous it was to follow the WAMU and how cruelly the WAMU responded to someone who was honest with them.

As told by two Pa Kha Nork women villagers, Nauj Hsiv Poov (40) and Nauj Taz Mu (43), the WAMU deforested large target areas, especially for long distances along creeks, something which was horrifying for the villagers. They had never before seen anything like that in their lives. The authorities ordered the workers to burn off the areas and, when they did, the fire moved dangerously close to their homes. The fire also destroyed community forestry areas, including the ritually important forest site for saving all umbilical cords. This was the first time the community forest had ever caught fire.

These new phenomena prompted many questions among the villagers. They were confused to see the project that had begun with good intentions — to restore the watershed areas — turn into a destroyer of their forests. Even though the villagers carry out activities that may seem similar, the result is, in fact, quite different. Although the villagers clear trees from mature fallow areas, they know exactly when and where to clear. They burn the area carefully with many safeguards that involve the entire village to keep the fire under control. All these activities are conducted with respect for traditional concepts of forest utilization. No structures are ever built in the well-preserved community forests.

These conflicts reflect the thinking behind Thai State policy, and the stereotypes of ethnic

groups as destroyers of the forests. Thus, the obstructive policies using both the law and armed force in threatening the villagers and laying the groundwork for encroachment on existing farm lands. With their traditional lands taken from them, they were forced to construct their own — new — space, focusing on their struggle and responses. This new space came about through *hta*, folktales, rituals, and political activities, in concert with their continuing struggle.

One fact the researcher would like to stress is that virgin forests like the Mae Lan Kham support wide bio-diversity as well as rapid forest cover growth. There is not the slightest necessity for reforestation. It is not a forest denuded by the local communities, as the officials claim. State forest management systems waste the natural resources, clearing and burning off fields in order to remove native species and replace them with eucalyptus and others. This is a waste of natural resources, financial resources (to hire local labor), and time and administrative personnel. Not only are these actions a collective waste, but they open up opportunities for corruption within the government agencies responsible, e.g. by the sale of large felled trees by local officials. Worse than that is the creation of an enemy relationship with the villagers, and local anger and hatred toward government agencies. This develops into an increasing bias against the State, one with no end, and negatively impacts on the State's desire to promote love for the nation, religion, and Monarchy. This is counterproductive to the State's desire for nation-building. Furthermore, government forest management methods reflect the acceptance of western approaches by Thai officials, approaches inconsistent with the management of watershed areas in tropical zones such as Thailand.

### III The Communities' Reactions to the WAMU of Royal Forestry Department

The reaction of the villagers can be divided into two groups: one supporting the project because they hoped to be employed and earn income; the other questioning the value of the project — “What will be the effect of this project?” They had heard that many other villages were negatively impacted by such projects. In San Pa Tong [Mae Wang District at present] in Chiang Mai Province, they fought to stop the reforestation project. In 1984, leaders from Mae Lan Kham traveled to Nong Tao Village to discuss the impact of reforestation with Cau Nif and other leaders, local elders, and some local politicians. Cau Nif was especially respected as a Pgaz K'Nyau leader who had both charisma and experience with struggles against mining projects, Chinese merchants, and the RFD reforestation project. They were told that they needed to start their fight by themselves first, and then others would provide support.

Similarly, in 1993 leaders from Mae Lan Kham and Pa Kha attended a workshop at Wat Huei Ma Nao (a Buddhist temple), Mae Wang District. There they met leaders from Mae Wang who had experience from their struggle with the Sam Mun Highland Development Project,<sup>4)</sup> as well as a

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4) A joint project between the RFD Watershed Management Unit and the United Nations Programme for Drug Abuse Control (UNPDAC) launched in 1991 in Doi Sam Mun, Mae Taeng District, Chiang Mai Province .with the project title, Sam Mun Highland Development Project (SM-HDP).

progressive group of RFD officials, whose idea was to allow local inhabitants to co-manage local resources together with RFD. This increased the confidence of the local leaders in their struggle to win back their fallow land.

It was apparent that at first, the people's resistance was uncoordinated and non-confrontational. However, the WAMU officials did not reciprocate, simply growing more and more aggressive and using excessive power. The situation then changed from individual resistance, to collective resistance. The community systematically drew up plans to resist the authorities by fencing off their community land and negotiating with the authorities not to expand the area for the reforestation project.

### III-1. *Creating Power through the Establishment of the River Basin Network for Resisting the Dominant Discourse*

At the same time, local networks formed and gained more bargaining power. The villagers had transformed themselves from victim to protagonist. The continuing oppression caused the villagers to seek allies outside the community. They found a good example in the Mae Wang River Group, which had established the Mae Wang River Basin Network<sup>5)</sup> and acquired substantial negotiating power. The lesson here was that you need many friends in order to build a network and power base in opposing oppressors. As a result, Mae Lan Kham River Basin Network expanded to become the Mae Khan River Basin Network and was officially established in 1995, representing 5 Pgaz K'Nyau villages and 18 hamlets, with a total population of 2,774 persons in 548 households. Next they joined the Northern Farmers Network (NFN).

Following that, they invited local leaders, such as Cau Nif, Chairman of the Northern Farmers Network, a regional ecological movement, and also the founder of the Mae Wang River Basin Network, to talk to the people at Mae Lan Kham. During the meeting Cau Nif said that, "K'sa le pgaz nav dei t'geiz" [Don't try to breathe through other people's noses]. The meaning is that no one can solve your problem unless you start to work on it yourselves, and no one present this (the rotational farming) issue better than the women who are experts. Nauj Pax Lax said that Cau Nif challenged the women with this poem and made the people who attended the meeting, particularly the women's group feel very confident about reacting towards the WAMU activities. The women started the processes of awareness raising and motivation through the mobilization of women's groups in responding to WAMU.

The elder Hpa Keiv also (add) mentioned a proverb during that meeting, "Hti t'koj nyaf maif t'keif baf" [If the water is not boiling, the tail of fish will not bend]. The meaning is clear: If the people are not faced with sufficient pressure, they will not wake up and fight. This means that unless the people are facing a hot situation like the threat represented by the tree plantation project, the people will not wake up to try to solve the problem together.

In 2001, WAMU seized their fallow land again and began to clear it for reforestation.

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5) Thai government agencies use the term "watershed" (*pa ton nam*) to describe water-source forest areas. Pgaz K'Nyau feel that this concept is better described by the term "river basin" (*lum nam*).

Another meeting was organized at Huei Ya Sai hamlet. This meeting was attended mostly by women and young people. Soonthorn, Hpruv, and Kri Htau (young leaders from the Mae Khan river basin), Surapol (a young NFN activist/supporter), and the local women who owned the fallow land occupied the land to stop the reforestation project. Initially, there was only a small group, but later the numbers increased until there were hundreds standing against the WAMU officers and workers. The women were the main drivers in this struggle, some brave enough to speak out and negotiate with WAMU officers. One women leader remarked, “They plant trees on our fallow land, so we must talk to them ourselves. If we do not speak out, who will do it for us.” The RFD workers lacked the courage to continue with the reforesting work.

Hpruv, the eldest son of Cau Nif, and a young leader from Pa Kha Village by marriage, had become experienced in struggles by leading the youth group in providing logistical support for the elders in the struggle against the RFD in Nong Tao, at both the local and national levels. He observed that “the background of the women who are brave enough to speak out, were the ones who used to be ‘Moj Hsov’,<sup>6)</sup> who used to play a role as leaders of the *hta*, such as Nauj Tiv Moo (50) from Huei Ya Sai, some women who used to have a difficult life such as Nauj Hpauv Muj (47) from Sob Lan and some women who are the new young leaders who can speak Thai fluently, such as Nauj Pax Lax, a young housewife from Mae Lan Kham.”

The author asked Nauj Pax Lax why most of the women were brave enough to confront the RFD. She replied, “The fallow land belongs to the women. If women don’t fight for their own land, who will do it for us? The men just support us, but the women need to go forward. Another reason is that we don’t have anything left if we lose our fallow land. We are no longer scared, even to lose our lives. What’s more, we also know that if they hurt us women, they will break the law. It’s a case of assault or molestation.”

During this meeting the woman leader Nauj Pini who came from Mae Wang river basin warned her women friends by saying, “Dauv bauf sov of av hkof hkwei lauz t’geiz, hpeij qav mav mav meij hkwei lauz k’auf keiz naz neif lauz” [When riding on the back of the tiger, you can’t get off. The tiger will eat you!]. She explained this as follows: Once you’ve begun the process of demanding your rights, you can’t stop. If you do, the villagers will lose their power of negotiation and the powerful can do whatever they want with you and we will even lose our lives.

Nauj Kof, another woman leader from Mae Lan Kham said, “Htiv guj sau av hkauv, plaj t’geiz, n’meij plaj neif k’hplav hkof hki naz sei neif lauz” [If you’re holding the cobra’s head in the fork of a stick, you can’t let it go, because it will strike you].

Nauj Pax Lax, said, “Meij maz maz div av htuv, maz t’hkoov t’lei t’bgaif nauf k’kai keiz p’tox p’tax neif lauz” [If something’s worth doing, it’s worth doing properly. When you do weeding, if you only make one pile of weeds other people will point the finger at you].

All of these speeches from women leaders made the numbers of people in the women’s group increase and react strongly towards the WAMU activities. After the meeting the women’s group

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6) Moj Hsov, comes from the experience when he or she was young and used to be very good in *hta*, better than others. He or she became a *hta* leader for others, which is respected by other young people so they become natural leaders called “Moj Hsov.”

and the young leaders started to take action by going to the field where the WAMU workers were planting trees. They demanded that the workers stop planting trees in that area and made all the workers stop work in that area immediately.

After this event, the elder Hpa Keiv reflected as follows, through a *hta*:

Pgaz kij t'geiz mej mau yaz, pgaz gauz t'geiz mej mau yaz  
Cif le klai hpau hkof kauv kav, cif le klai hpau lax kauv kav  
Soov dauv hsgauf pgaz blaf dauv hsga, kai htauf hsau suv kaux nav bgav  
[I didn't grow up to be strong like others, and don't look very pretty,  
I run up the path clumsily, my shape makes it hard to run down the path,  
But properly cut and shaven, I am woven into a beautiful chicken coop.]

Hpa Keiv explained this *hta*: "Like the bamboo, women may be weak, easily frightened, and not really good in fighting. But when they are faced with a serious threat, and their awareness is raised by different leaders in different ways, they become a potent force in the struggle for their land."

The relation of rotational farming to women is important here. Women are the "owners" of rotational farming in both knowledge and in the process of implementation of cultivation. Pgz K'Nyau culture is based on matrilinearity, and the women have a strong sense of and important role in protecting their people and territory. Thus, in the case of this situation, the women became strongly aware of their need to become the main agent of resistance to the problem, and also, strategically, if the women confront the officials, the officials will need to be careful to react to the women with more respect perhaps than they would react to the men.

According to the villagers employed by WAMU, the project had many gaps that made it vulnerable to corruption. One condition for eligibility for employment was a Thai ID card, and the officials required a photocopy of the ID for payment of wages. This gave corrupt officials the chance to produce fake receipts and transfer the money to their own pockets. Moreover, according to Saf Ngauv, one of the Pa Kha villagers, "WAMU officials tried to use their presence there to sell large amounts of illegally processed lumber. This became but one more story to add to the existing evidence of excess power abuses by government officials in remote areas."

According to Hpruv, "After reforesting the fallow areas, the WAMU officers began to do the same on the tops of hills and mountains. In doing this, they felled the good trees to produce boards and furniture for sale. The WAMU head officers used official vehicles to transport the wood, selling to the rich people from Bangkok with a house in Samoeng District."

Local reaction began with a meeting of all villagers in Mae Lan Kham and Pa Kha, wherein they decided not to allow the people to work with the RFD any more. However, some of the villagers continued to work with the RFD and some had married with Khon Muang (northern Thai). Thus, there was conflict among the villagers, and they started to fight with each other. Some even spied for the RFD.

III-2. *Local Cases Move to the National Level*

In 1999, a rally was conducted on the grounds of the Chiang Mai Provincial Government Offices to bring attention to the increasing impact of reforestation on rotational farming in the Mae Lan Kham area, as well as the sale of timber and lumber by WAMU officials. Mae Lan Kham and Pa Kha villagers presented their own side of the story.

Hpruv and other young leaders started to collect data and contacted the Northern Farmers Network (NFN) for its support in the struggle at the national level. Open letters from the Mae Lan Kham river basin residents and the NFN were sent to Prime Minister with a copy to the Minister of Environment, Hpruv and others attempted to present evidence to the Minister of Environment in the form of photographs.

At the same time that Hpruv was at the rally in Chiang Mai, a fire started at one of the RFD sites in Mae Lan Kham. Following this the Chiang Mai Provincial Forestry Office stated in an interview on television that Hpruv was the arsonist. Fortunately, Hpruv was photographed at the rally on that day, providing evidence to the contrary.

As a result of this, the government sent the Secretary of the Office of the Prime Minister, to Chiang Mai and Sameong District to investigate. At the same time they knew that Hpruv's situation was not secure and the Secretary made a speech in front of the district governor and RFD officers to the effect that "This man (Hpruv) is my brother, if any one hurts him, it will be like he hurts me, and it will become a big case, so don't touch him or do anything to him."

The NGOs who supported the villagers forwarded the case to the Provincial Governor, who referred back to the local level, and the RFD started to become scared of the case in spite of the fact that the police had not seen any real evidence. The villagers sent the case to the "National Corruption Control Agency."

In 2000, during a demonstration in front of the Chiang Mai Government Offices, the Minister of the Environment ordered one of his officers to conduct a survey at Mae Lan Kham Village to determine what was what. At the same time, a forestry official accused Hpruv of ordering the villagers to go back to work in their own fallow lands. The NFN and NGOs then sent a letter to the Prime Minister, requesting him to transfer the staff of Mae Lan WAMU out of the area. This was done.

In conclusion, the struggle began at the village level, with individuals each resisting each in their own way. This resulted in strong reactions from the authorities. The villagers then started to look for better answers, meeting with knowledgeable persons at various levels until they discovered that they must take collective action. When they initiated such action at the village level, they found it was not very effective and, thus, joined together at the larger Mae Khan Watershed level. This brought them into contact with the Northern Farmers Network (NFN), which further expanded their alliance, ultimately joining with the Assembly of the Poor at the national level. This enhanced their negotiating power to the point where the government took notice and investigated the problem at the local level — the encroachment of the reforestation project on traditional farm lands in the Mae Lan Kham area. Thus, local incidents became a national issue and the problem was, at least partially, resolved as discussed above.

#### IV The Use of *Hta* in the Creation of a Space of Resistance (Local Opposition and Community Resistance)

Cultural idioms [Moore 1993: 393-394] in the space of resistance among Karen communities are manifested in events, particularly ceremonies and rituals which are important means to recall the past and convincingly produce legitimate redefinitions of tradition. They mobilize the social memory and knowledge of the past and situate them in a contemporary context in terms of practices and words meaningfully.

*Hta* are traditional Pgaz K'Nyau poems which are spoken, chanted or sung. In their most basic form they consist of a couplet of seven syllables in each line. The last syllable of the first line nearly always rhymes with the last syllable of the second line. *Hta* are traditional poems which may be included in folktales for the young, or the tale might be one long *hta*. *Hta* are also an expression of values and have a direct relation to culture and world view. Each *hta* consists of at least two lines and many *hta* have two lines, four lines and six lines. There are many forms or types of *hta*, some types of *hta* having no limit on the number of lines for one *hta* such as *hta loo laux* (responding back and forth in *hta*).

*Hta* are cultural idioms of the Karen people used in the continuous process of change, adaptation, contestation and coexistence, depending on the situation and context. The *hta* singers are often seen to improvise the content of the rhyme to fit the situation. Therefore, they are cultural idioms that are carefully utilized in gaining symbolic power of expression of Karen culture. Thus, they are closely related to situated knowledge [Nygren 1999: 267-288; Anan 2001: 167-172].

The number of Pgaz K'Nyau *hta* are uncountable, the elders have said that there are more than the leaves of trees in the forest, or some elders have said there are as many *hta* as seeds in a handful of tobacco seeds. This means that there are many thousand *hta*. Batoo [Batoo (1963) cited in Chumpol Maneeratanavongsiri 1993: 85-86], a Pgaz K'Nyau scholar from Burma,<sup>7)</sup> claims that *hta* can be divided into five groups: 1. *Hta htoo hta ywaz* (*hta* for the Supreme Being), 2. *Hta miz hta pgaj* (elders' songs), 3. *Hta auf moov* (wedding songs), 4. *Hta taj ca* (funeral songs), 5. *Hta hsgei hta dei* (general and miscellaneous songs) and the author would like to add 6. *Hta maz miz hposaf ho* (lullaby songs to help small children fall asleep).

Pau Lei Paj, an Pgaz K'Nyau elder who is a well-known Pgaz K'Nyau author from Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai Province, divided *hta* into five categories based on the use of *hta*: 1. *Hta mux hpo hpawv hpo* (general and miscellaneous songs) are the most popular for every age and sex and can be used at any time and place. 2. *Hta taj iv* (elders' songs) are the *hta* sung by elders at the new year, wedding ceremonies, and so on. These *hta* carry the teachings for the children, family life, warnings, the value of living a balanced life, the unity of the communities and among the Pgaz K'Nyau group and teach Pgaz K'Nyau to keep their culture alive. 3. *Hta hpawa* (songs for wedding ceremonies) is sung on the same occasions as *Hta taj iv* (elders' songs) but people of all ages can sing them, except women's groups. They are used for dialogue between parties, and also for enjoyment or showing

7) This book was published during the time when this country was called "Burma" not "Myanmar."

the wisdom of *hta* as art form. 4. *Hta pluz* (ritual *hta* for the dead) are used only as the opening song at funeral ceremonies and are strictly sung only at funerals. The purpose of these songs is to communicate with the dead person and to protect the spirit of living beings. 5. *Hta taj ca* (general funeral songs) are *hta* which are sung for the funeral ceremony, and normally only young people sing them at funeral ceremonies. The Pgaz K'Nyau believe that we need to sing these songs to the dead to send them to another world with a peaceful new life. They can be courting songs between young people, competing with each other to see who is better than the others in *hta*. They are used to make friends or to signal interest to people of the other sex [Pau lei paj and Yordrabam (1995) cited in Busaba 1998: 99-101].<sup>8)</sup>

In 1998, the case of RFD threatening the rotational fallow land at Mae Lan Kham became the main case at the Northern Farmers Network (NFN) level. NFN made plans to rotate meetings among the members of each river basin and the cycle came round to the Mae Lan Kham river basin. All members of the different river basin networks of NFN came to Mae Lan Kham and held a meeting with the focus topic being the impact of the reforestation.

First the village leaders criticized the RFD through *hta*. Hpatij Moo Sauj from K'Poov Hki recited several *hta* to the Mae Lan Kham and Pa Kha villagers:

N'k'luj hse dauv kwaiv cau v N'sav hkaf div cuf av hpau  
[Your voice is sweet like honey, your heart is bitter like a poison flower.]

N'htav hkof liv looj av pleiz, kauv sei sei k'mai sei sei  
[Your mouth is like the tongue of squirrel, it can cry out and it can sing like a bird.]

Nauj wai mej dauv kax av sav, av k'bliv a k'blaf a  
[Your heart is like the Dauv Kax fruit, it's multi-layered and complicated inside.]

Seif hpoo hkof pgaz pgaj hpaiv be, pgaz pgaj koof pgaz le av he  
[The elder hid the log of the tree he cut down; the elder has something fishy there.]

All of these *hta* reflect the hidden insincerity, deceit and dishonesty of RFD, the elders wishing to warn the villagers through these *hta* not to fall into the RFD trap.

The elder Moo Sauj (57) was a leader in a struggle against a mining project while still in his early twenties. He was also one of the assistants to the Village Head in his village when a Hmong group encroached on his village lands. He was the first to confront the Hmong in the struggle to retain control over the village lands. Moo Sauj said that "All experiences and solutions are already included in the *hta*, so the way to memorize the experiences of the elders in the past is to learn the *hta*. Here we link the *hta* to our present problems. They help us to understand meanings and solve our problems by following in our ancestors' steps, which have already been

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8) Books of collections of *hta* are available: *Lix Pgaz K'Nyau av hta* (Karen *Hta*): "Yoz sei lix Pgaz K'Nyau sei hta" le p' dof Cauz tauz pax hpgof wai (T.S. Press CO.,Ltd.); *Hta Pgaz K'Nyau 1, Lix Romei* by Karen Network for Culture and Environment in Thailand (KNCE); "*Hta*" *Lammam Chivit Pgaz K'Nyau (Hta songs for the life of Pgaz K'Nyau)* 2006, by Prasert Trakansuphakon and Taworn Kampolkul.



used from generation to generation. Now we are in a critical situation these *hta* show us how to solve the problem.”

Continuing by Hpa Keiv, one of the elders from Mae Lan Kham Village, reflected his villagers through *hta*:

Hti k'hav gauz auh nauj eh, Kauj k'hav gauz auh nauj eh,  
 Htof wai auf of t'mux lez, hsau wai auf of t'mux lez,  
 Kwaj lauz taj soo pleif nauj se, nauj laiz taj de hauf de yez  
 [Women, our water is being destroyed, our land is being destroyed.  
 The birds are too sad to sing, the chickens are too depressed to crow.  
 Look down into the farmland below you, see the women cry as they go to work.]

The elder interpreted this by saying, “This *hta* reflects our current situation. It is full of worry. When we see the faces of our people, all of them look sad, worried and without hope. This *hta* arouses us to respond actively to the problems we are facing.” This *hta* made all of the members who were involved in this meeting understand and be aware of the serious situation in Mae Lan Kham.

Hpruv, the young leader from Pa Kha Nai (30), said that it was the third line of this *hta* which raised his awareness about the struggle. Hpruv said that this made him very sad, when he saw the women work for WAMU on their own fallow land, with frightened eyes and full of tears. Hpruv added another *hta* like this:

Hti mej htauf k'luv mej kai, hki gaz of le nyav beif aiv.  
 [In a big flood or fire, we two can hide inside the stalk of a wild banana tree.]

The wild banana tree is a symbol of rotational farming land and a cool place. Hiding inside the stalk of a banana tree can protect you from fire and also from floods as the banana tree does not sink.

Hpruv said this meant that “We will be saved from difficult times only by our rotational farming and fallow land. If these are gone, so will be our security. That is why we fight for our fallow land.”

The *hta* by the grandmother Hpi Nauj Tuz (78) of Mae Lan Kham told to her children in the meeting in Mae Lan Kham shows the real anxiety concerning her children's fallow land:

Giz guz of av wai giz guz, giz guz hso av wai giz guz  
 Giz guz hav pgaz hti t'mux, giz guz hav pgaz kauj t'mux  
 Pgaz mej maz si baf giz guz, av swif lauz cau kauj s'uv  
 [We stay here by ourselves, we are farming here by ourselves.  
 We don't like to go to other places; we don't like to go to other territories.  
 If someone kills us to take our land, the blood will flow down and curse the land.]

Oov ngaux kauv hti cauf kauj mux, koko kwaix pgeiz kauj s'uv  
 [If the evil owl sings it will make the land peaceful, if the *koko kwaix* bird sings it will make our territory hot and dangerous.]

All of the villagers become quiet when they heard her *hta*. The villagers had focused on the last part of both *hta*, which predict that unpleasant circumstances may arise.

Cau Nif (59), the leader from Mae Wang, warned the Mae Lan Kham villagers in the meeting at Huei Ya Sai hamlet, saying that: “K’caj wa tai wai le pgaz k’hai kauw puj naz, pgaz k’hai kauw waij naz auh, sai t’geiz. . . .” This is based on Khru Ba Khao Pi’s (a holy *Lanna* monk followed by the Pgaz K’Nyau in the 1950s and 60s) warning in the past, which says that, “People will come and call you ‘brothers and sisters’ but don’t answer them.” Cau Nif means that the people who will come and call you ‘brothers and sisters’ are the RFD people who now come and make friends with the villagers. The holy monk warned us that we need to refuse them.

Cau Nif continued by saying, “Now you look like ‘*taj t’cav klai meij p’dai, laiz daf wai hav hplaww daf wai*’, the one who never asks which way to go is the rabbit; they just go by themselves and just lose their way.” Cau Nif interpreted this as meaning “You lost your way by following the WAMU without consulting among yourselves and learning from others’ experiences. When you followed the WAMU, you started suffering with the problems of losing of your own fallow land.”

At the same time, Moo Sauj, another well-known leader from K’Poov Hki started to refer to a *taj leplez* (folktale) named “Kauz Klaif” by picking up a *hta* from this story to the effect that “Kif le huv to le av hkle, taj k’auf naz waij nauj eh” [Spots on the stomach, stripes on the back, it will eat you my sister]. Moo Sauj continued saying that “you will be eaten by WAMU, do you know it yourself or not.”

The young housewife of Mae Lan Kham, Nauj Pax Lax reflected by saying that “K’naf pau le plez, y’hpuv kruj! Sav uv htauf taj, k’tuz pgaz, p’laiz taj iz t’sai, t’baf baf, hpuv kruj, nauj baf lauz keiz sav ‘pruv k’la hai keiz’ pruv keiz k’la t’htif qau neif lauz.” This means “When I heard this tale and the interpretation by uncle Moo Sauj, I was frightened, and started to be very anxious that this had already come so close to us. We can’t follow the WAMU. If we follow them we will be in trouble and I started to become conscious of myself (my position), and I called my soul back immediately.”

She believes that if she doesn’t respond, she will have trouble. The meaning of “*pruv k’la hai keiz*,” or “call the soul back,” is the expression of someone really frightened when he or she hears about something which strongly impacts on their feeling and consciousness. Nauj Pax Lax, after hearing the tale and its interpretation, felt strongly and exclaimed “*pruv k’la hai keiz!*” This shows the power of *hta*, and *taj leplez*. It is rooted deeply in the consciousness of the people, or as Bourdieu [1977] termed it, “*habitus*,” and is internalized inside the feelings and behavior of people. It can enhance communication between people who have the same cultural roots and help them to understand clearly the meaning of the problems they face.

During that meeting, the spiritual leader Kham Daeng from Klau Kleif Klo hamlet said through *hta* to the villagers in the meeting:

Auf s’kauw taz hsif taz oo, htej s’kauw hti lauj kauj pooz  
[Eat the sour taste together, and stand together for fight for our territory.]

He interpreted this as saying it is time to position ourselves in our motherland territory, and fight for our land. He tries to create awareness in the villagers to grapple with their problem with WAMU together.

He added another *hta*:

Lej tauv eh, hti k'cuv naz, htej lauz wau lauz pax n'sav  
[The stone blocking the flow of the river, the water will push you; you need to prepare to defend yourself against the rush of water.]

The spiritual leader gives meaning as; we will be attacked by the strong power of WAMU. We need to prepare ourselves by uniting ourselves into one so they cannot destroy us.

Another explanation from the spiritual leader Kham Daeng noted: "If we use only ordinary language (secular language) [Mischung 2003: 131] it does not go deeply enough into our heart to understand and create consciousness and belief. *Hta* are short, but the meaning is clear and it covers many aspects. The words are soft but it has power for the listeners, because *hta*, folktales, and poems come from the words and wisdom of our ancestors [Hoskins 1988; and Fox 1988b cited in Mischung 2003: 130] and links to what is happening again in the present or helps us to know what to do in order to deal with actual situations such as the problem we are facing with WAMU now."

IV-1. *Hta and Folktales Bring the Workers Back to Join the Protest*

At another meeting at Mae Lan Kham Village, the villagers asked Cau Nif, Hpatij Moo Sauj, the well known leader from K'poov Hki, and other leaders to come and talk to the Mae Lan Kham villagers who are involved with the WAMU project. During that meeting Hpatij Moo Sauj told the story "K'hsau tij," the elephant chief, to warn the villagers. Once upon a time, the King would not allow the orphan and widow to carry out rotational farming. They had to carry the soil from another place and put it on the bare rock and grow their rice there.

Hpof qai leplez pgaz maz e, hkoof hauf hkof wi le lej hkle  
[When the orphan was threatened in the past, he carried soil up to the rock.]

Hpof qai leplez pgaz maz e, hpaiv auf keiz quv le lej hkle  
[When the orphan was threatened in the past, he farmed the rice on the rock.]

While the rice was growing green on the rock, a wild elephant came and ate all of the rice.

Moj laiz kwaj quv bu hav gauz, moj sav htauf k'seij k'hsau  
[Mother come and see, the rice is destroyed, mother was furious at the elephant.]

In her anger she tried to follow the elephant, but could not catch up with it. She felt very thirsty and drank the water from the footprint of the elephant. When she came back, she became pregnant because of the water from the elephant's footprint. She later gave birth to a boy named

“Hpa Yaij Yoov.”

Auf hti k'hsau hkauf lauj pooz, lof htauf av hpo Hpa Yaij Yoov  
[Drinking water from the elephant's footprint,  
She gave birth to a boy named “Hpa Yaij Yoov.”]

When this son grew up, she allowed him to follow the elephant and the boy met his father elephant, who was the chief of all the elephants. Soon the chief elephant gave one of his magic tusks to his son and his son returned and built the big city called Weij Kif Mai, nowadays known as Chiang Mai. The elder Moo Sauj said, “If we lost our fallow land as if we had lost our life, we need to take it back, in the same way as our ancestors who are the two persons, mother and son, in the folktale.”

The young housewife Nauj Pax Lax said: “K'naf *hta*, pau le plez naj pej lauz sav dauv maz hpuv seif nauf lauz sav le baf hsau t'laiz sav, of div sauv le nya t'sei lez baf p'mej t'maz hpla htauf p'gij p'ba baf neif, le of dauv taj qoo taj hpauv baf neif, pgaz k'maz e pgaz tiv tiv neif lauz.” This means “After I heard the *hta* and the folktale, immediately I understood myself that we need to change ourselves to create our own power. If we do not show our power, they (RFD) will threaten and oppress us more and more.”

Another young housewife Nauj Kof (41) said, “P'maz auf hsgif auf quv pgaz kwaj pgaz le p'maz hav gauz seif waf, p'mej t'hoov htauf maz qoo maz qauj lauz p'sav baf neif k'baf do pgaz hpav nav nya neif lauz.” This means, “We farm our land for our survival, but they watch us as if we are doing something wrong; destroying the forest. If we do not wake up and move to claim back our lands, it will have a very painful impact on us.”

Cau Nif again warned the villagers that:

P'trez of pgaz hti t'geiz, p'trez of pgaz kauj t'geiz,  
Pgaz hti of pgaz hti baf pgeiz, pgaz kauj of pgaz kauj baf pgeiz,  
K'tauz htauf p'kauj soo lei, pgaz sauv auf mei p'auf mei  
[Don't covet other water sources; don't covet other lands.  
Those water sources and lands cannot be used for free.  
We must build up our own Kaw Soo Lei,<sup>9)</sup> as others eat rice we will also eat rice.]

From listening to this *hta* Nauj Soov Hka (48) said “K'naf *hta* hkwaiv htauf sav, hpuv seif nauf htauf keiz, sav hsoof le k'tauz keiz p'hti lauj kauj pooz, pgaz maz hav gauz p'taj p't'aif baf qaj lauz” [Listening to *hta* arouses my heart, wakes me up, helps me to have a strong heart willing to protect our fallow land by ourselves, the others (RFD) destroy our fallow lands, but we won't allow them to do that].

After that Cau Nif talked directly to the villagers who were working for WAMU, saying, “Cei pau maix cei pau sav, mej hpe lauz pgaz maix hkiv pgaz maix blauf” [Money is placed on the eyes and heart of a corpse during a funeral. This is a warning against the dangers of money. When

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9) Kaw Soo Lei is the name of the independent Karen state.

you have money in your eyes, your eyes become dark and blind]. Cau Nif interpreted this by saying it is the same as your case here; the RFD uses money to destroy you and your village. The RFD changed you into people who only think about money, who are just looking for money and who will do anything to get money, even leave their friends and community, as in the following *hta*:

Hti le pleix nyoov kwix av co, Nauj nyoov kwix cau raix bu bo  
[The water denies its river course, the girl refuses the boy who gave her a charm.]

The meaning the elder gives is that the villagers who throw away their way of living, rotational farming, not only throw away only their own system, but also throw out their ancestor's heritage of land, culture, villages, and try to make problem to their friends in their own village.

The workers started to become aware of the meaning through *hta*, and *taj leplez*, which reflected their life as people who are causing problems for the village and their ancestors land. One of the workers stood up and responded the meeting through *hta*:

Auf baf t'hkoov av maij hki, auf le soof hsiv le sav biv  
[Eat the tail of the monitor, I feel hot and gasp for breath.]

Auf baf t'hkoov maij t'bo, auf neij taj civ taj k'toz  
[Eating one monitor tail, is like eating the curses and slander of the people.]

The monitor is sometimes used as a medicine for asthma, but here it is a symbol for the RFD. Most people do not like monitors because they are considered to be unclean or inauspicious.

The workers started to clarify for themselves that, when they worked for WAMU, they were also ordered to cut down big trees and saw them to make boards, but they were not paid the full labor rates. Their labor was used unfairly. They also talked about how to hide the boards by making a small dam and putting the boards into the water, making furniture and carrying the boards by pickup truck, putting the boards underneath and covering them over with animal dung or rice straw.

After many village meetings, WAMU became angry with the Huai Ya Sai villagers who began to resist cooperation with the authorities (as some were becoming aware of their loss over the long term) and withdrew the PVC pipes that supplied the village with drinking water. This angered the entire village and they revealed the illegal actions of the forestry officials and agreed to provide evidence and become witnesses. From that time on, the villagers had increasing power.

#### IV-2. *The Power of hta to Mobilize the People to Resist the Dominant Power*

In 1998, the meetings of the NFN network at the level of each river basin network needed to point out the main issue and focus for that area. When the NFN organized the rotation meeting at Huei Ya Sai, Mae Khan River Basin Network pointed out the case of the WAMU tree plantation project, which had had severe impacts on the rotational farming fallow lands. The tree plantation problem now became linked to the regional and national level. Nauj Tiv Moo (55) (a housewife from Huei Ya

Sai), Soontorn, Hpruv, Kri Htau and Surapol started to take up the case of WAMU planting trees all over the fallow lands and taking over all of the fallow land from the villagers in the meeting at Huei Ya Sai village temple.

In the meeting they also talked about the new project of WAMU, planting peanuts in a villager's paddy field at Huei Ya Sai. Some people were angered by this, most of them women and marched to the peanut field and uprooted the entire peanut crop in the field without any response from the WAMU workers. This is the first time the villagers expressed their power to resist the WAMU openly. Hpruv said that at first just a few people came with him, but after that the number increased more and more, until it became a hundred people, most of whom were young people and women.

The young leader Sunthorn from Mae Lan Kham expressed his feeling through *hta*:

Maz kwaj de cau tauj plaij hpo, raix si pgaz le hkof bof loz ?

[Why do you challenge me, a young man, who can kill by use of magic through the hair ?]

Maz kwaj de cau pgaj t'gaz, t'pauj cei kauv lai av gaz

[Why do you challenge me, an adult man, whose people are all brave warriors ?]

These *hta* make the people brave enough to challenge the power of the WAMU. After uprooting the peanuts, the people continued on to the WAMU office where they knew that there were illegal wood boards and furniture for selling for the profit of the staff there. After the meeting a large number of villagers continued by going to the RFD Camp, climbing the fence and prizing open the house where the boards and furniture were hidden. One of the women leaders shout a *hta* to her friend that:

Pgaz sauv moro p'moro, t'moro p'baf k'toz

[Others go, we need to go, if we do not go, others will blame us.]

Dau puj waij hkwa p'meij qoo, k'nyauj neij hkei le av doo

[Brothers and sisters, if we unite we will be more fierce than the ferocious lion.]

This means that if we come together as one, we will have invincible strength and will be even more fearsome than ferocious lions and tigers.

The attack on the RFD facilities this time was in part based on the illegal timber, but gave the RFD a way to counter by accusing the villagers of violence. However, the strategy of the villagers was to agree beforehand not to reveal who the leaders were in order to show that the action was for a problem that affected all of the villagers and this made it impossible for the RFD to arrest even one person.

In this case the officers accused the villagers of trespassing in their area and reported the case to the police. When the police came, they could not arrest any people because the villagers told them that all of them had gone there because the WAMU were selling illegal wood, and why would the police not arrest them instead of arresting the villagers. The police went to the WAMU office,

but could not see any evidence because the WAMU staff had hidden all illegal items at another place already, and the police also were not really prepared to investigate it. Nauj Kof said, “*Auf av hsaf klauw t’beif qau.*” They [the police and WAMU] eat from the same plate, which means that they share their interests with each other.

Indicating the power of *hta* to mobilize the people, a woman from Pa Kha Nork, Nauj Hsiv Poov told the researcher that, “one day when I participated in the rally in front of Chiang Mai City Hall, one Karen leader asked me to go up on the stage to sing a *hta* to tell the people in the whole Thailand about why we were there. I went up on the stage and sang a *hta* about rotational farming”:

P’dau puj mux dau puj mux, p’dau waij mux dau waij mux  
Puj laiz klauj le waij av quv, waij laiz klauj le puj av quv  
Klauj klauj muj lauz nux neij pu, dau puj waij htuv laux p’cu  
[We younger brothers and sisters all feel very happy together,  
We older brothers and sisters all feel very happy together,  
The younger ones go to weed the older ones’ swidden fields,  
The older ones go to weed the younger ones’ swidden fields,  
We weed till the sun goes down, and then we all hold hands [walking home].]

Nauj Hsiv Poov expressed her feeling by saying that “I explained how deep the relationship is that is created between humans and nature when we practice rotational farming, but how nowadays we are facing difficulties in doing rotational farming, this was the reason that made us come to rally. ‘Ki Htau, a young Karen leader from K’Poov Hki translated into Thai for me in front of many media groups’. The next day, a big group of Karen friends from Mae Hong Son Province came to support us and said to me they had seen me on television and had heard the *hta* I sang. The scene and the message induced them to come and support us.” This is the power of *hta* which expresses the deep feeling of Pgaz K’Nyau for their rotational farming and creates a space of resistance by mobilizing the people to resist the dominant power.

## V Taking Back Fallow Lands from the WAMU through the Power of the Network

The people recognize that to unite into a network is power and they expanded the network not only to the Mae Khan river basin of Sameong District but they expanded their network to include Mae Wang, Chomthong, Mae Chaem and others, in the name of the Northern Farmers Network. In 2002, NFN members from Mae Wang, Samoeng and Chomthong and others came together at Pa Kha, in the former fallow area which had already become a tree plantation of the WAMU. They started to cut down the trees to prepare for the new rotational farming for that year for the Pa Kha villagers to show their power and rights to come back and farm on their former fallow land.

A complaint was filed with the Prime Minister who sent his secretary to come to the area and investigate. The result was the reduction of the role of RFD personnel. In early 2002, the villagers collectively returned to the land declared reforestation areas and began farming again.

They chose to do so only in the areas less critical for the watershed. The approval came from the local Mae Lan Kham River Network Committee.

Although a new unit chief was appointed by the Watershed Conservation Division to replace the former one, the villagers repudiated the Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit in almost every future instance. Furthermore, they affirmed that the Royal Forestry Department should abolish the Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit without conditions. In all, the Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit had seized 618<sup>10)</sup> *rai* of fallow land from 65 families (in Mae Lan Kham, 232 *rai* belonging to 26 households, and in Pa Kha, 386 *rai* belong to 39 households). This land comprised 20.36% of the total area reforested by the Unit. Recently, villagers have begun to retake their seized land and return it to rotational farming. It now appears that the villagers will continue to return to farming on lands previously seized by the Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit. As of 2002, 23 families had reclaimed 131 *rai* (59 *rai* belong to 10 households in Mae Lan Kham, and 72 *rai* belonging to 13 households in Pa Kha), 21.19% of the farm land encroached on the government (see Table 2).

At present, about one fourth of the reforestation areas have been reconverted to rotational farming areas. The other three fourths have been maintained as community forest. After the situation become quiet and Mae Lan Kham become peaceful again, the author attended the meeting with the villagers. Hpa Tij Hpa Keiv mentioned his land and territory by reflecting through *hta* to his villagers and the guests who came that day:

Oo kwai hsgaf sau sij meij sei, kauj mux, Htauv Mai Paj' ha keiz  
 [If we can blow the horn around Mt Sau Sij, as the territory is peaceful Htauv Mai Paj will come back.]

Htauv Mai Paj is a mythical Pgaz K'Nyau leader who discovered the Pgaz K'Nyau lands. When he comes again, the Pgaz K'Nyau will have their own lands. He is a symbol of victory for the Pgaz K'Nyau.

**Table 2** Number of Households and Area Seized by RFD Watershed Unit and Later Reclaimed for Rotational Farming in Mae Lan Kham and Pa Kha Villages

Village Name	Land Seized by RFD Unit		Land Reclaimed by Villagers	
	No. of households	Area ( <i>rai</i> /ha)	No. of households	Area size ( <i>rai</i> /ha)
Mae Lan Kham	26	232/37	10	59/9
Pa Kha	39	386/62	13	72/12
Total	65	618/99	23	131/21

Source : [Phai Bun Hengsuwan 2004: 241]

10) In reality, more land than this was seized for reforestation, but some areas were distant from the current location of the communities and, thus, the villagers would rather let those lands return to nature or become community forests. Furthermore, the Mae Lan Watershed Area Management Unit continued to seize the farm lands of other nearby communities for reforestation, e.g. Mae To Village. However, these sites are outside the area of this study.



Auf kauj k'tauz kauj geiz geiz, kauj mej mux 'Ywaz' hkof wij keiz  
[If you use the land you must look after the land well, when the territory is peaceful 'Ywa' will come back.]

Ywa is the great grandfather (or ancestor) of the Pgaz K'Nyau. He left when he gave the three books to the three children (the black man, the white man and the Pgaz K'Nyau), but will return when the Pgaz K'Nyau have their own peaceful homeland.

Hkof soo laj tau plaj laj bau, soo keiz pgoz keiz kwaj t'blau  
[The beautiful long hair with yellow *tau plaj* flowers, a miracle of good life will appear to us.]

*Tau plaj* are magic flowers from a peaceful land. When you can put them in your hair it means you will be back in your peaceful homeland.

This made all the villagers feel proud of their life in overcoming difficult times. They came together in difficult times and in happy times they also come together. They feel how the power of *hta*, which have been transferred to them from their ancestors, and which are now an important constituent of their valuable heritage situated in the present context, is a part of their life. The sources of *hta* are their spirituality which creates human beings to be Pgaz K'Nyau, and last but not least *hta* are the self identity of the Pgaz K'Nyau.

## VI Discussion

The Pgaz K'Nyau Movement in the time of eco-politics in the late 1990s awoke to the interest of reclaiming their rights because of the history of lost land and natural resources dating back to the pre-modern period. The media have also created an unfavorable image of the Pgaz K'Nyau and laws have limited their rights, especially with regard to the lands they inhabit. New education systems are also eroding their culture and are a veiled attempt to assimilate them into the mainstream population. These are among the reasons why Pgaz K'Nyau people have awoken to the movement; to protect and assert their self-identity, their rights, and ensure their survival as human beings and respect as indigenous peoples. This however does not mean that all of the Karen people are involved in the process.

In "Internal and External Discourse of Community. . ." Yoko Hayami [1997: 576] has stated:

Moreover, Karen themselves they are not in one voice. Those Karen who find the voice to outwardly emphasize traditional Karen community an integral relationship to the forest are more often Christian or younger educated Karen who gained perceptiveness on the practices and are able to select strategy and promote what is traditional among them.

One difference between the study by Hayami and that of the author is in that of place and time. The studies were carried out in different locations and contexts, including the time period. Hayami was researching in Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai Province at the time of the movement opposing the Forestry Industry Organization (FIO) at Ban Wat Chan during 1992-93, which was a very early part of the struggle concerning highland problems. A further difference involves the actual personalities involved in the two struggles. Hayami mentions that the more vociferous Karen were

“more often [Protestant] Christian or younger educated Karen.” In the Mae Lan Kham struggle, the leaders tended to be predominantly animist by belief, with a few Roman Catholic Christians, and older men with less formal education, but with a deep background in oral traditions and experience with previous struggles in their locality.

However, what links Hayami’s work to the author’s study is that the struggle at Wat Chan Village became a model for local people’s movements in other areas, particularly the Mae Wang river basin, which was established in late 1993. It was here that a river basin network was established on the basis of, and very soon after, the Wat Chan success. In 1994, the Northern Farmers Network was established. Later, in 1995, the Mae Khan River Basin Network, which includes Mae Lan Kham, was established. The establishment of the people’s networks effectively set up a clear leadership which would lead the movement from within, NGOs and academics playing a supporting role.

The author also saw some differentiation in people’s reactions to the movement, in the Mae Lan Kham river basin where the villagers were claiming rights for rotational farming fallow land in the forest to be returned to them from the RFD. Thus, the author agrees with Hayami in that the Pgaz K’Nyau includes people who have different ideas and reactions to the movement. In the case of Mae Lan Kham, the author found that there were internal conflicts between those who wish to oppose the RFD project and those who supported it because of the employment opportunities it represented. After a long process of conflict and negotiation, the two sides were eventually reconciled.

This is similar to Keyes’ [2003: 216] statement that Thai Karen are engaged in proactive efforts vis-à-vis some agencies of the Thai state to be recognized as capable of managing natural resources in sustainable ways. In doing so, they draw on their traditions in situating themselves within the modern political economy of Thailand.

On the other hand, Walker [2001] has posed the existence of a “Karen consensus,” as though a unanimous view of Pgaz K’Nyau identity in terms of rotational farming existed. “The ‘Karen consensus’, or the Karen image, as benevolent shifting agriculturalists has somewhat limited legitimacy, as it plays down the historical importance of long-term agricultural intensification and commercial exchange, and runs the risk of undermining Karen claims for a greater share of natural resources and development assistance.”

Yos [2004] states, however, that Walker has underestimated the importance of the symbolic dimension of ethnic politics and the reframing of Karen farmer issues in term of eco-politics, and it is for this reason that Walker is not correct in his positing of a “Karen consensus” in which the Karen movement is a monolithic body facing the opposing outside world in a state of conflict. The actual situation within the Karen movement is far more complex than the “Karen consensus” makes it out to be.

This can be compared with Keyes [2003: 218] opposition to Walker: Walker has created a straw man which he labels the “Karen consensus” which he accuses of promoting a “primordialist,” “commitment to Karen culture as an intrinsic property of a definable group of people” [Walker 2001: 160]. As the contributions to this volume *Living at the Edge of Thai Society* [Delang 2003] clearly

demonstrate, no such “Karen consensus” exists.

I support both of the two academics opposed to Walker, that no such “Karen consensus” exists. Not only is the actual situation within the Karen movement far more complex than the “Karen consensus” makes it out to be, Walker does not appear to be fully aware of what the eco-political struggle in the mountainous regions are since his comments seem to refer more to lowland Pgaz K’Nyau villages. Thus, Walker misses a large part of the dynamism and diversity inherent in this struggle.

### VIII Conclusion

The basic finding from my research is that the Northern Ecological Movement is a new social movement; the new movements are social-cultural movements that seek to assert the identities of groups across the globe. Indigenous people’s movements are a very clear example of this new type of social movement because they are not seeking power nor are they in competition with the power of the state. They seek only the recognition of their identity and equal rights from the state [Chairat Charernsin-olan 2002: 25-32].

Another finding is that Pgaz K’Nyau leaders as cultural producers have been able to strategically promote certain selected currents of ethnicity and environmentalism by turning their cultural resources (*hta*, *taj leplez*, rituals, and so on) into symbolic power for the creation of a space of resistance in their struggle for control not only over forest but also over the right to define the meaning of the forests and the use of this meaning in the construction of the collective Pgaz K’Nyau identity. In so doing, the Pgaz K’Nyau image resulting from the accumulation of cultural capital (selected elements from the cultural resources which are translated into other cultural idioms) and its transformation into symbolic power and a space of resistance became an instrument of struggle against the various forms of symbolic violence instigated by state agencies [compare Yos 2004: 5].

The Pgaz K’Nyau leaders created a discourse for translating environmentalism and eco-politics into an idiom comprehensible by ordinary Pgaz K’Nyau villagers. They did so by drawing on Pgaz K’Nyau oral traditions as well as their experiences in the eco-political struggle. Specifically, the cultural leaders were able to reinterpret selected *hta* to explain actual events that were taking place during the eco-political struggle, and through this to motivate action. In this way, the cultural leaders transformed oral traditions into symbolic power to create a space of resistance in the sphere of eco-politics.

The Pgaz K’Nyau leaders know how to select and use appropriate knowledge, content, and linguistic registers for specific audiences in order to communicate to the best effect, with the maximum degree of persuasiveness. Pgaz K’Nyau leaders did not only use *hta*, but used different strategies, methods of communication, and modern scientific knowledge and artifacts (e.g. maps for communication with academics, the RFD, Thai middle class people, Thai NGOs and the international movement) in different situations and contexts (e.g. in different locations and with people from differing social backgrounds).

Rituals, legends, story telling, and *hta* poems come alive by bringing the past to the present.

The Pgaz K'Nyau past is enshrined in the oral traditions that have been passed down through the centuries to the current generation. The power of *hta* to express and specify certain meanings and emotions, and through this to mobilize people for action, lies in the link between *hta* and the remainder of the body of Pgaz K'Nyau oral traditions. The ability of cultural leaders to select appropriate *hta* quickly and influence the feelings and behaviour of people through their "habitus" is the hidden mechanism of the power of *hta* as they were used in the eco-political struggle in Mae Lan Kham river basin and throughout Northern Thailand.

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#### Appendix: Timeline of the Eco-Political Struggle in Northern Thailand

- 1953 The Border Patrol Police established primary schools and taught the Thai language to ethnic group children.
- 1959 Invention of the term “*Chao khao*” by the newly-established Tribal Research Institute (TRI) and the “Committee of Tribal Welfare.”
- 1961 The first National Economic Development Plan (1961–65), policy on tribal people included in the National Security section of the Plan.
- 1967 Bilateral projects promote cash crops through the Opium Replacement Project (Thai-Australia, Thai-Norway, Thai-German and UNDCP and UNDP, and so on).
- 1985 Forest policy to increase forest area to 40% of the whole country. Tree plantations (Pine trees, eucalyptus, etc). Replacement as the main strategy by the Royal Forest Department and the private sectors.
- 1986 The first resettlement of tribal peoples. Around 5,000 people moved out of Mae Wong National Park, Klong Lan District, Kamphaeng Phet Province.
- 1989 A further wave of resettlement of tribal people. Around 154 people moved out of Doi Luang National Park, Lampang Province.
- 1992–96 Thailand, First Master Plan for Hill Tribes.
- 1994 The establishment of the Northern Farmers Network (NFN) and the first rally to oppose resettlement policy and claim rights to settle in the forest at Chiang Mai. Many participants walk to Lamphun.
- 1995 The establishment of Mae Khan River Basin, Samoeng District, Chiang Mai.
- 1997 A second rally in front of the parliament building in Bangkok, jointly conducted by the Assembly of the Poor and other groups lasts for 99 days.
- 1998 New cabinet resolution on forest conservation classification announced June 30, 1998. This was a strict resolution for control of the people in the forest, and was supported by the RFD and dark green NGOs.
- 1999 Third rally, in front of Chiang Mai City Hall (25 April–22 May 1999) forced the Cabinet resolution on land registration at the district level and established the temporary committee for solution of the problem of citizenship for highland communities.
- 2001 A further rally held in Bangkok between February and April 2001 together with The Assembly of the Poor to follow up on all agreements of the government to the movement to push towards implementation and the reformation of the new follow-up committee.