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Ethnology and Linguistics : Resource Contestation between Hunter-Gatherer and Farmer Societies : Revisiting the Mlabri and the Hmong Communities in Northern Thailand

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Resource Contestation between Hunter-Gatherer and Farmer Societies: Revisiting the Mlabri and the Hmong Communities in Northern Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

Based on historical records written by western ethnographer Erick Seidenfaden (1919), it was believed that the Mlabri were first discovered as a hunter-gatherer group existing within the boundaries of the Thai nation-state in 1919 (Surin and staff 1992), although indigenous Thai documentary sources relating to them date back to 1886 (Thongchai 2000). Until recently, the Mlabri have officially been thought of as a hunter-gatherer group that migrated from Laos into present-day Thailand about a century ago; around the time, in other words, of their first appearance in the written record.

However, recently published genetic research suggests that the Mlabri may once have practised farming (Oota *et al.* 2005), which if true implies that they at least – and perhaps other contemporary hunter-gatherer groups – may not be appropriate sources of analogy for pre-agricultural lifestyles. Using DNA samples taken from 58 Mlabri, as well as evidence from Mlabri linguistics and oral traditions, Oota *et al.* (2005) concluded that the Mlabri appear to have originated from a very small number of people from an agricultural group who then adopted a hunting-gathering mode of subsistence. If this was indeed so, then the “reversion” of the Mlabri from farming to hunting and gathering must have taken place before they were first reported by the Thai elite and western ethnographers in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. But why would they have lost their agricultural skills? Is it sufficient to postulate, as do Oota *et al.* (2005), that this was because their group size was too small to support an agricultural lifestyle?

It is for reasons such as this that I prefer to use here the term “myths of origin” when discussing the enigmatic origins of the Mlabri, since many Mlabri narratives have, in fact, repeatedly been constructed by outsiders rather than by the Mlabri themselves. As described by Chazée (2001), the history of the Mlabri contains many uncertainties and riddles combined with contradictions, unverifiable facts and rumours. Richel (1995) has also questioned the official account of Mlabri origins, which indicates that they originated from outside Thailand. From my point of view,

whether or not the Mlabri once originated from a farmer group, what is important is that they have still been rearranged in the order prescribed by conventional cultural evolutionist models.

At present, some of the narratives influenced by cultural evolutionism (Bernatzi 1951; Surin and staff 1992) are accepted and popularly used in the economic sector in Thailand. Many tourist groups come into the Mlabri community because of their hunter-gatherer image, with all that this may be taken to imply by way of a “low level” of cultural evolution. Consequently, instead of considering it in terms of a structural imbalance in resource access, the struggle of the present-day Mlabri is misleadingly focused on a linear evolutionary adaptation from a hunting and gathering to a farming lifestyle set against recent and ongoing deforestation in northern Thailand.

In fieldwork undertaken for my MA thesis (Nan 2005) between 2003 and 2005, I employed political ecology as my main conceptual framework. The debate over the Mlabri struggle for access to resources within a degraded environment is thus shifted from a neo-Malthusian framework toward one that emphasises structural contradictions in resource access. Focusing on the power relations that this involves makes it possible to gain clarification about the struggle of the Mlabri with their farming neighbours.

Currently, I estimate that the total Mlabri population in northern Thailand is around 500, split between three sites. Two of these are located in Phrea Province, while the third is located in Nan province, where I studied the Mlabri in Huay Ywak community for my own field research (Figure 1). The reason why I chose to work



Figure 1 The study area.

with this particular group is because it is facing more complex conditions than the others, not only forest degradation and the development of wage labour relations with upland farmers, but also ethnotourism, assimilation of mainstream Thai culture, Christianisation, and involvement with areas protected by the Thai state.

In this paper, I aim to examine patterns of resource contestation between the Mlabri and the Hmong farmer community in the west of Nan Province. First, I clarify the context of enclosures toward the Mlabri and show how the Mlabri are enclosed in both physical and symbolic spaces. Secondly, as the marginalised group is trying to negotiate with the dominant outsiders in the enclosed terrain, I explore competition over resources in order to understand the diverse interactions between the Mlabri and the Hmong community. Finally, I discuss the form that co-existence takes between the Mlabri and the Hmong farmer community.

THE MLABRI IN THE SPACE OF ENCLOSURES

The Mlabri have been loosely enclosed for centuries by traditional farmer states, with contact between them and farmer communities in the jungle being based on the exchange of forest and domesticated products (Bernatzik 1951; Seidenfaden 1919). However, a much more intensive process of encapsulation took place with the formation of the modern Thai nation state in 1932 and the severe politico-economic changes that have taken hold in Southeast Asia countries since the middle of the twentieth century. During the Cold War, many Southeast Asian states, including Thailand, saw extended periods of armed confrontation between government forces and communist guerrillas. In northern Thailand, many Mlabri were killed and injured as a result of such warfare. They were also forced to migrate away from many forest areas, especially those close to state boundaries, and then became stuck in such areas of relatively low conflict as more and more farmer groups relocated their own communities in both lowland and upland regions (Surin and staff 1992; Trier 1986).

Since 1959 many ethnic groups in northern Thailand, including the Mlabri, have officially been classified by the Thai nation state as *Choa Khoa* or hill tribe people, although this category masks several important differences in modes of subsistence. Moreover, within the context of suppressing communist insurgencies, this term also held a hidden negative meaning as being non-Thai and thus a potential security risk to the Thai state (Pinkaw 2001). Consequently, the state tried hard to launch upland development projects in many *Choa Khoa* communities. One of the goals of such projects was to relocate communities within territories securely under government control through the creation of permanent settlements based on cash crop cultivation. For the Mlabri, such state endeavours started in 1985, three years after the end of the insurgency. Their success is manifested in by the inclusion of the Mlabri community in tourist guidebooks and Web sites and by the Mlabri's adoption of a farming lifestyle.

As a result of this process of settling down permanently in one place, today's

Mlabri communities have not only relocated within a more degraded forest environment, but have also found themselves tightly encapsulated within enclosures that are both physical and symbolic. Discussing these, I first reflect on the forest and on spatial exclusion from access to key resources. Having done this, I then consider the “body” of the Mlabri as an example of the spatial domination of social identities by dominant outsiders.

1) The physical enclosure: forest and land

Though set up in a remote forest area, the Mlabri community is enclosed by three dominant groups, namely the Thai state, lowland farmers, and upland farmers. Each group has expressed its own power over the forest and land differently. For the Mlabri this has resulted in a struggle within layers of exclusion under the territorialisation of both the state and the farmer communities. In order to understand this process, I illustrate the fragmented power over the forest of the three dominant groups.

The state: forest reserves and national parks

Thailand's Department of Forestry was first set up in 1896, as teak wood became an important commodity exported from Thailand to Europe. While in 1910 forest still covered about 70% of the national territory, by 2000 this figure had shrunk to no more than 25%. In 1989, after disastrous flooding in the south of the country, the Thai government banned all timber harvesting from natural forests in an attempt to protect what is left (Thailand Forestry Department 2001). However, such banning of timber concessions is not a new measure taken by the state to protect the natural forest, but was preceded *inter alia* by the 1947 Forest Act, the 1961 National Parks Act, the 1964 Forest Reserve Act and the 1964 Wildlife Sanctuary Act. Although many indigenous people, including the Mlabri, were living in forest areas before the enactment of such legislation, “forest” was – and is – nevertheless defined by the state as areas that are not legally occupied by any one and that thus belong uniquely to the state. In this way, forest conservation has become one of the processes whereby the state has extended its power to cover all resources within Thailand's borders.

Within their own locality the Mlabri are excluded by four Acts of Parliament and, in the case of the Haui Ywak community, find themselves enclosed by three locally protected areas. Resettled by the Nan Hill tribe Development and Welfare Office in 1999, this community finds itself within an area defined as a part of the Num Ngoa-Numsued Forest Reserve, while immediately to the north are the Doi Pha Chang Wildlife Sanctuary and the Nunthaburi National Park. At one time the Mlabri lived in both areas (Young 1961), but they were forced to leave them as they became battlefields between communist guerrillas and the Thai army. Indeed, some Mlabri who subsequently went back there were killed by landmines left after the end of the war. In addition, local forestry offices now monitor access to the forest by people who cannot claim any legal rights to forest land.

Lowland farmers and community forests

Before the Mlabri were resettled at their present location, the Thai government attempted in 1994 to gather many Mlabri together and establish a reservation for them in the Banluang district of western Nan Province. However, the mountain where the project was set up was claimed by lowland farmers, a claim that in 1997 led to the outbreak of a conflict between them and the government as several hundred farmers from many communities protested that the Mlabri were responsible for causing environmental degradation by forest clearance, hunting, and gathering. As a result, in 1999 the Mlabri reservation project in Banluang District was terminated and the Mlabri concerned were moved to their present location at Huay Ywak.

Negotiating with the Thai government over this issue, the lowland farmers used the vernacular history of forest conservation in 1975–1976 when hundreds of farmers tried hard to protect the watershed forest area in question from a local timber company. They finally won this struggle, even though the company concerned had already secured a legal concession to the area. The Banluang farmers organisation has as a result become very well known as a model of local community forest protection in Thailand, but in the case of the Mlabri it was able to use concerns about forest conservation to exclude other groups from accessing the forest. Ironically, the lowland farmers themselves were taking advantage of the forest's resources for their own hunting and gathering activities, while some were also obtaining forest products and agricultural labour from their Mlabri neighbours.

Upland farmers and their agricultural lands

Before the state resettled the Mlabri in the Huay Ywak community area in 1999 the mountainous forested land there was occupied by several Hmong communities. Thus, when we refer to the Huay Ywak area now we mean the locality where two ethnic groups – the Mlabri and the Hmong – have set up their communities in the same valley. Why are many Hmong communities found in this upland area? Some of the Hmong at Huay Ywak say that their community once lived near the Thailand-Laos boundary, but that they had to migrate from there because of the outbreak of guerrilla warfare after 1947. They found this small valley and also the Mlabri, who were already foraging in the area. Thereafter many Mlabri became familiar with the Hmong through the exchange of forest products for domesticated products, and since 1976 many have also worked for the farmers because of ongoing degradation of the forest (Trier 1986).

The Hmong mode of production was both semi-commercial and subsistence-based, focused on opium trading and dry rice cultivation. When, in the face of global pressure, the Thai government banned opium cultivation and trading in 1958, the Hmong gradually changed their cash crop from opium to other crops, especially maize. As a result, the Hmong had to expand their cultivated lands in order to maintain their subsistence level because the exchange value of the new crop was lower than that of opium. However, the Hmong were unable to control the market in

maize and many farmers became indebted as a result of this. One way of attempting to resolve this problem was by expanding their plots to increase the amount of maize produced, and this in turn led them to make greater use of Mlabri labour (Surin and staff 1992).

But it was not only upland cultivation that impacted the forest. In 1976–1977 the forest in this particular valley suffered significant destruction (through both logging and road construction) at the hands of a local timber company. Once the timber concession had come to an end, the degraded forest area was occupied by Hmong plantations, and later still when the government resettled the Mlabri in the valley their community found itself completely enclosed by Hmong cultivated lands and communities. Despite having the necessary skills to carry out cultivation themselves, the Mlabri thus became the landless group that they are today.

This situation is currently being exacerbated because valley bottom lands are of greater importance for the upland Hmong farmers, not only because of pressure from the change in cultivation pattern but also because of pressure from local forestry offices that aim to expand the reserved area. Consequently, the Hmong have to protect their lands from state forest conservation efforts, while at the same time such land protection efforts also reshape the Hmong land use pattern.

The traditional pattern of Hmong cultivation relies on a process of ecological succession that sees abandoned plots gradually develop into secondary forest. At one time, such plots were left for between four and seven years before reuse, but the length of the fallow period is now becoming shorter and shorter as the Hmong have to make their lands look like a cultivated area, not like forest. While the valley of the Huay Ywak area is now legally claimed by the state as reserved forest, what is actually found there are, without doubt, just bamboo secondary forest and the cultivated lands of the Hmong.

What about the new settlers, the Mlabri? While the state absolutely excluded them from having any legal rights over the forest as a matter of policy, in practice different exclusions apply to them and the Hmong. The state seems to accept the *de facto* rights of the Hmong farmer communities to their cultivated lands. For example, in 2002 the local national park office gathered data about Hmong land use patterns in order to limit the expansion of their farmlands towards the nearby forest. Indirectly, this indicated acceptance by the state of the traditional right of the Hmong to the cultivated lands then under their management. Thus, the property rights of the Hmong over upland forest areas are constructed through the practice of cultivation at the local level.

Caught between the forest reserve of the state and the cultivated lands of the Hmong, the Mlabri are alienated from both the natural forest and the cultivated lands in the valley. Even though the Mlabri had their own traditional property system in usufruct rights over the forest, their property rights as a form of community power cannot be significantly practised in this context of resource enclosure and exclusion. The Mlabri have little alternative but to accept the definitions of the state and the Hmong property. The accessible forest, once known in their own language as *Bri*,



Photo 1 Mlabri men in the present-day settlement, Nan Province.

has been redefined, with the state forest reserve called *Pha Anurag* and the lands cultivated by the Hmong termed *Ra Mab*.

2) The symbolic enclosure: the dominated Mlabri “body” and social identities

The enclosures enforced on the Mlabri by outsiders are not only expressed through their exclusion from the forest and from land in general, but also through the symbolic use and construction of space, something that includes both the body and the social identities of the Mlabri. I clarify this by considering two aspects of the problem: their ethno-spatial arrangement and the commoditisation of ethnicity.

The ethno-spatial arrangement

The shifting representation of the Mlabri within the Thai nation state was influenced by the state’s interest in the production of knowledge to classify its subjects, and more specifically the state’s arrangement of its subjects’ position in the space of control.

In the territorialisation of the Thai traditional state, a key narrative written from the perspective of the Thai elite was produced by Khun Prachakhadikit in 1886 (Thongchai 2000). Like others, this narrative was constructed to convince its readers that the Thai elite represented the apex of civilisation while “savage” forest peoples, especially the Phi Pha (“ghosts in the forest” in Thai) and Mlabri, were left firmly at the bottom of the ladder. Undoubtedly, the Mlabri were excluded from being

acknowledged as subjects of the Thai nation-state because of their status as a non-Thai group. Compounding this was the fact that the state claimed that they originated from outside Thailand's boundary as well from Thai ethnicity. Official histories still claim that they are a hunter-gatherer group who migrated into Thailand from Laos about a century ago (Surin and staff 1992).

The Mlabri were, as I have already mentioned, also classified as a hill tribe group or *Choa Koa*, a term carrying negative meanings that extended to the implication of a potentially subversive status. However, long before this term was officially employed, one result of the establishment of the Siam Society (a learned organisation founded in 1904 and comprising members of the Thai elite as well as western ethnographers) had been the construction of a dichotomy in official and scholarly thought between the backward forest and the modernised city (Seidenfaden 1919). Given this dichotomy, the forest was positioned as a place long ago left behind by the city on its way to modernity, and forest people were consequently arranged at the bottom of the evolutionary order (Thongchai 2000).

Even today, representations of the Mlabri tend to remain fixed and to refer back to a lost "Stone Age" past. The marketing of the Mlabri to visiting tourists underlines this, as the following quotation from a Thai tourist guidebook published no earlier than 1997 shows:

It can be mentioned that they (the Mlabri) are an alive Stone Age people... Travelling to see them will be a chance for us to learn about human evolution. (Anurat and Sirisak 2001)

But it is not only travel agencies specialising in ethno-tourism that willingly purvey this image of the Mlabri as a "Stone Age" people to the rest of the world. The state, too, reproduces such an image through its own development projects. In 2002, for example, the official cultural centre of Nan Province set up a project to attempt to secure World Heritage status for the region. As part of this, the Mlabri were selected to stand as an imagined (and imaginary!) Stone Age community in order to make clear the long historical continuity of the Nan area. More than this, however, different ethno-spatial arrangements prevail between the Mlabri and other farmer groups. Though, the Mlabri are classified by the state as a hill tribe group like the Hmong, the Mlabri occupy a far more fixed position in the evolutionary order constructed by the state than do the other ethnic groups. Indeed, they provide a necessary fit for the state-led development of the world heritage project in the Nan area, and no matter how many more Mlabri adopt farming skills or convert to Christianity their bodies and social identities continue to be captured and inscribed within such imagined spaces and times.

The commoditisation of ethnicity

Given the representation of hunter-gatherers at the "bottom" of the human cultural evolutionary ladder since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century



Photo 2 Tourists taken to see the Mlabri in the jungle in 2004, Nan Province.

(cf. Goodenough 2002; Ingold 1986) and paralleling the widely shown film about the “innocent” Kalahari Bushmen, “The Gods Must Be Crazy”, produced in the late 1980s, the Mlabri of northern Thailand also became of interest to local Thai film makers. The result, “*The Tha Wan Yim Cheng*” (“The Smiling Sun”) was produced in 1984 and represented the innocent Mlabri living in the jungle of Nan Province.

Subsequently, from the late 1980s these “mysterious” hunter-gatherers became a must-see ethnic group for visiting tourists. In both the provinces (Nan and Phrae) in which the Mlabri live the state’s hill tribe development projects, which had once aimed at settling the Mlabri down permanently and establishing them as cash crop cultivators, were reshaped according to the requirements of ethnotourism as Thailand’s tourism industry began to boom from the late 1980s. Some Mlabri were even exhibited in a zoo in a Bangkok shopping mall alongside various rare animals (Baffie 1989).

What will be found from the body of the Mlabri when their existence becomes important for the ethnotourism industry? The answer is the garment known to the Mlabri as *Tha Yet*, which is the small piece of cloth covering the male genitals. Although today most Mlabri dress in modern clothes, when confronted by visiting tourists the tour company will ask the Mlabri to wear *Tha Yet* instead. While changes in forest definitions reflect the physical enclosure of the Mlabri by both state and farmer communities, *Tha Yet* has thus become a powerful symbol representing the commoditisation of ethnicity and the symbolic enclosure of the Mlabri by outsiders.

RESOURCE CONTESTATION BETWEEN THE MLABRI AND THE HMONG

Although the Mlabri are marginalised within a context of enclosure by both the Thai state and neighbouring farming communities, this does not mean that they accept such domination without attempting to contest their position. In order to understand the diverse interaction between the Mlabri and the Hmong, the negotiation of resource access becomes an important topic for analysis. Here, I examine four aspects of the contestation of resources between the Mlabri and their Hmong neighbours.

1) The adoption of cultivation

The Hmong need increased labour when they change their pattern of production to one of cash crop cultivation. This need is aggravated by the migration of better-educated Hmong to the cities in search of employment opportunities there, rather than within their own communities. Moreover, in the attempt to maintain their own level of subsistence production the Hmong have to clear many plots for cultivating dry rice, as well as those required for cash crops. With hunting and gathering having become a part-time lifestyle and the Mlabri mainly dependent now on waged labour (Rischel 1995), negotiation between Mlabri and Hmong is largely centred on the area of cultivation.

Mlabri work on Hmong farms throughout the year, but the hardest work involves slash-and-burn clearance and harvesting. Hmong farmers must manage many variables, including seasonally changing demands for Mlabri labour, in order to obtain the best yields for their own consumption and for market sales. When competition for labour is at its height, how do Hmong farmers cope with this condition? Many learn to take *Thid Kha*¹⁾ for handling their Mlabri labourers. This term refers to the practice of providing the Mlabri with help with many things, including food and money, but for the Hmong such behaviour counts as hospitality because it is not necessary for the Mlabri to reciprocate immediately. This has, for the Hmong, the advantage of keeping the Mlabri in a position of dependency and obligation that facilitates their access to Mlabri labour whenever it is needed. Correspondingly, the Mlabri understand such relationships as *Kha Plem* or indebtedness, something absent from their own society because of their strong moral focus on resource sharing.

Normally, while working for the Hmong as waged labour, a Mlabri individual is paid 50–80 baht a day, as well as food that must be enough for everyone in his or her family. For example, if Family A consists of seven people, five of whom are children, the Hmong have to prepare enough food for all until the work is finished, even though the children are not themselves working on the farm.

However, if the Mlabri have to work for the Hmong because of *Kha Plem*, then they are paid only in food, not in money as well. As a result, the Hmong find a difference in the length of time that work may take compared with the use of other

Hmong or lowland labourers, with projects that might otherwise be completed in a few days occupying the Mlabri for one or even two weeks. In this way Mlabri use their labour (or lack thereof!) against the *Kha Plem* relationship. Indeed, I found that some Mlabri who get into high debt with Hmong farmers may choose to do so and do not want to find land on which to cultivate rice for themselves. Such individuals told me that it was not necessary to cultivate rice for their own consumption because it involved them in additional hard work while they were already working for Hmong, who themselves prepared enough food for their family's consumption.

Most of the Mlabri families nevertheless face food shortages and have to struggle with these conditions while relying on waged labour. While families unable to find cultivated rice fields for their own consumption may be particularly burdened by *Kha Plem*, others succeed in obtaining a plot on which to cultivate rice so that they can reduce their dependency on the Hmong and on the *Kha Plem* relationship. How is it possible for them to acquire such land, given their level of encapsulation? The answer lies in the situation of waged labour itself, which opens up the chance of acquiring cultivated land in return for exchanging labour with the Hmong. Thus, land access by the Mlabri for their own rice production can be interpreted as both domination by, and liberation from, the Hmong.

Rice production based on access to cultivated land can enhance the status of the families concerned because they can collect some money from their wages and reduce their *Kha Plem* obligations, which force them to labour on Hmong farms. Consequently, they can have more time to work on their own plot of land. As one Mlabri explained to me,

The Hmong villagers get enough food while we do not so we have to work endlessly. I told my people to cultivate rice so that we will not get too much *Kha Plem*. But they don't believe me.

Rice cultivation is just one of the ways selected for maintaining life security by the Mlabri. While some Mlabri try to go against the exploitation of their labour institutionalised in *Kha Plem* relations, others choose to undergo such relations. For those Mlabri able to obtain land for themselves, their experiences of learning many cultivation skills while working for Hmong farmers and of having been dominated by lowland and upland farmers through systems of labour exploitation encourage them to realise their increasing self-subsistence within this new context. Thus, more and more Mlabri families in the Huay Ywak community are now attempting to access Hmong lands for rice cultivation.

At the present time, the Mlabri can do this in two ways. In the Mlabri language, a plantation is called *Ra Mab*. The first mode is called *Ra Mab Kua Ra*, or the plantation owned by the domesticated or outside people (*Kua Ra*), and the second *Ra Mab Mla*, or the plantation owned by the Mlabri. The different definitions of the plantation indicate the understanding of the Mlabri toward who has power over the land concerned. Each belongs to a different system of management. For the first,



Photo 3 A Mlabri man harvesting rice.

after one year, the land access of the Mlabri is terminated and returned to the Hmong landowner, who leaves it fallow according to the typical Hmong pattern of rotational land use. Thus, if the Mlabri want to cultivate rice, they have to commit themselves to an ongoing relationship that provides the Hmong with labour in return for land access to the next crop.

In contrast, the *Ra Mab Mla* is owned by the Mlabri the entire time, as it was given to the Mlabri community by a Hmong man who set up the Christian church of Huay Ywak. Although the Mlabri can thus gain access to cultivated land in two ways, the small size of the plots in question means that neither can produce enough rice for the annual consumption of the total Mlabri population. No wonder, then, that waged labour and the *Kha Plem* relationship are still at the centre of the interaction between the Mlabri and the Hmong.

2) The contested body

If the body is counted as a resource for which the Mlabri can find uses while other resources, including the forest and cultivable land, are enclosed, then it, like these other resources, is also a space contested by both of its potential owners, the Mlabri and the Hmong.

In Huay Ywak, there is a Hmong Christian church.²⁾ With the aim of helping the Mlabri to reduce their dependency on the Hmong, as well as with the goal of winning converts, the head of the church gave the Mlabri a 0.8 ha plot for rice cultivation. In contrast with the lands obtained by them from other Hmong farmers,

he did not ask for any payment from the Mlabri, except that they convert to Christianity, but to a form of Christianity that the Hmong themselves control!

The 0.8 ha plot is, of course, far too small for rice production sufficient to feed all 125 Mlabri in the community. However, the Mlabri define this small plot as *Ra Mab Doo Ma Bon*, or the communal plot, a term that refers to their practice here of collective rice cultivation and harvesting. The term *Doo Ma Bon* refers to property belonging to all people, just like large game (*Ja Due Thru Nab*) acquired through collective hunting. After the harvest, every Mlabri family is therefore able to access the rice produced from this communal plot, however small it may be.

As already discussed, the Mlabri body is also commoditised by the tourism agency with the cooperation of the Hmong community. But this time, it is not the land that is the centre of interest. Instead, it is money and pigs given as a return for changing the body of common hunter-gatherers to that of supposed Stone Age people. When only a few tourists are taken to the Mlabri community, the houses of a few of the older men are selected as the show stage: these men wear *Tha Yet* and perform activities such as making fire, smoking from a bamboo pipe, and cooking pig fat in the bamboo pipe. However, if a big group of 30 or so tourists arrives, then more than half of all the Mlabri in the community will go with the Hmong village head man to a special place in the forest where the tour company takes tourists to see a group of huts that “represents” the Mlabri way of life. Unsurprisingly, the income from such visits is split unequally, with most going to the tour company, some 2,000 baht to the Hmong community, and just one small pig to the Mlabri.

Tourist visits usually take place from the end of the rainy season into the cold season. As a result, the Hmong are frequently upset by this arrangement because this is precisely the time when they need the Mlabri to be working on their farms. They therefore feel that the tour company should compensate them for this, but what about the Mlabri? Some Mlabri, especially teenagers, told me that they felt ashamed wearing the *Tha Yet* to perform their way of life for the benefit of city people. However, their nearly naked commoditised body is never absolutely dominated by the others and it retains a range of hidden meanings.

After the tourists depart, the meaning of body is rebuilt as the resource (the pig) obtained from presenting the commoditised body is cut up and shared among the Mlabri. Pork is given to every family in the community. By doing this, Mlabri men are able to maintain their social identities, since they are expected to hunt wild game for their family that can be shared more widely across the community. Given today’s degraded forest ecology it is scarcely possible to find bear or deer any more, and as a result the pigs “hunted” from tourism have become more important for the Mlabri, especially for the social life of men and elders. As a Mlabri man told me,

In my community, the Mlabri women like *Ja Bud* (pork) very much. Money belongs to *Due Moi* (one person) and is not shared among us, but pork is.

Without any *Kha Plem*, pork accessed from engagement with tourism is cut up

and taken to be shared even with families unable to come to the community because they are working on remote plantations. In this way, pork sharing becomes important for the Mlabri's sense of community because it seems to be the one social event that still maintains this now that the rituals such as *Moe Lone Pei Due* (held to pay respect to the forest spirit *Pok Ka Ruay*, who looks after the wild animals) have lost their meaning. Instead of game, it is the sharing of pork that now reproduces a sense of community and maintains close relationships among Mlabri who may otherwise be separated from one another while working on Hmong farms.

3) The counter narrative: the ancestral domain

Before the present settlement, the Mlabri community consisted of just one band. However, there are now at least identifiable seven kin groups, each related to the others through social practices such as marriage, sharing, hunting, and gathering. But how do these different kin groups perceive their origin? Some stories emphasise that all have a common origin. While the official narrative about the Mlabri states that they once emigrated from Laos into Thailand, the Mlabri have their own views about their past. If story telling is a means through which to construct the past in the present and express expectations about the future, then some of the past events told in the present can reflect how such social memory is important for people. Talking about the first inhabitants of the area, a Mlabri elder, Tha Thong, told me that

I told my relatives that this area doesn't belong to the Hmong. It is ours before they (The Hmong) come...I don't know where they came from but it belongs to us.

And the head of the Mlabri community, Tha Sri, said about the past that the Mlabri were the first group to stay here and should therefore have the right to claim access to it. He said,

How this world belongs to whom, I don't know. But this part of the world belongs to the Mlabri because we lived here before the other groups such as the Hmong, the Mien or the Khon Muang (lowland people). At that time, there were only foot tracks, no roads. Moving from place to place made the other people not know this area belonged to us.

If such accounts are examples of the construction of the past in the present, stories told about the area's first inhabitants reflect the experience of intensive enclosure from many outside groups on the present existence of the Mlabri. Such storytelling becomes a means of constructing an imagined Mlabri community that is shared among different kin groups who were excluded from the area in question, even though it cannot legitimise resource access by the Mlabri in the present. Furthermore, such stories can reflect the nostalgic feeling of the present-day hunter-gatherer Mlabri who have lost their access to, or power over, forest resources and became no more than labourers for other farmer communities.

4) The practice of hunting–gathering in the degraded forest

As well as benefiting from their privileged position within a system of patron-client relations, some Hmong farmers also ask for labour or money as a return when Mlabri take natural products from Hmong lands. However, although the valley area is covered by the cultivated fields of the Hmong, Mlabri try to challenge such exclusion by deconstructing the land's significance. They do this by claiming access to natural products called in their language *Long Lue*, which refers to their wild origin and includes wild plants, such as yams, as well as animals, although it excludes wild products needed by the Hmong themselves, such as bananas, firewood, bamboo shoots, and grasses used to make brooms. In practice, then, the Mlabri are not absolutely excluded from resources on Hmong-owned lands, allowing people to negotiate for access to them.

Access to forest resources by the Mlabri is also related to the changing situations of production. For example, when during the rainy season there is no heavy farm work to demand their labour for the Hmong, Mlabri have more leisure time. Many men and women take advantage of this to hunt and gather forest products. Interactions between Mlabri and Hmong at this time are both competitive and cooperative. To the west of the community, for example, there is a forest reserve where the Hmong compete with the Mlabri in gathering forest products like bamboo shoots; at the same time, however, some Mlabri hunt squirrels there that they then sell to the Hmong. By doing this the Mlabri can reduce their dependency on the Hmong.

When the rainy season turns to the dry season, the forest in this area is no longer suitable for gathering and hunting. Ecological degradation means that the Mlabri are unable to maintain their subsistence level because of an insufficiency of wild resources. As a result, most must rely on patron-client relations with the Hmong, while some secure food for themselves by combining income derived from selling gathered forest products with that obtained by wage labour for the Hmong.

Even though large game is now scarce, hunting and gathering are still important for the Mlabri. Whenever they have time free from farm work, many choose to go hunting and gathering in the degraded forest. I was told by a Mlabri man, Tha Sri, that foraging and learning about things in the forest could reflect the sense of the real Mlabri. He said that

If we do not go into the forest, in the future, about one or two decades from now, our children cannot learn to know the forest. There may be many persons who can speak Mlabri but the Mlabri who do not learn about the forest is counted as the unreal Mlabri.

While the hunting and gathering mode is not the main mode of production for the present-day Mlabri, it is still important in terms of expressing their identity as “real” Mlabri and retains a significance not purely as an economic choice in the context of enclosure, but also used as a way of representing the self-reliance of the

Mlabri among the upland farmer communities around them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In its consideration of resource contestation between the Mlabri and the Hmong, this paper does not reveal anything new about the dynamic adaptation of human societies to their changing environment. Mlabri knowledge of resource management could be termed dynamic and incomplete, including the learning and practice of agricultural skills after degradation of their forest environment had taken place. It also involves mixed modes of production, in part because of the incorporation of the Mlabri into the Thai nation-state and the global market. Many Mlabri learn to grow not just rice for their own family's consumption, but also cash crops for the market, while sometimes still practising elements of a hunting and gathering mode of subsistence.

However, if there ever was an egalitarian pattern to the coexistence between the Mlabri and the farmer communities in the forest, such a model has been turned upside down under the distorted structures of resource management enforced by the Thai state. The Mlabri are excluded both physically and symbolically from accessing key resources, while their Hmong neighbours seem able to succeed in protecting their cultivated lands from state forest conservation initiatives.

At present, both competitive and cooperative elements can be identified in the relations between the Mlabri and the Hmong, something that might perhaps hold out hope of a return to a more equal pattern of interaction as the Mlabri attempt to negotiate with the Hmong in diverse ways. As they do this, we see them using many approaches from sources both internal and external to Mlabri culture to reshape their relations with the Hmong, including rice cultivation, the persistence of traditional patterns of sharing applied to new resources (pork derived from the tourism industry), a Mlabri counter-narrative to dominant discourses about their origins and, of course, the very practice of hunting and gathering. Nevertheless, the Mlabri continue their struggle under a situation of pronounced imbalance in access to key resources. Since 2007 in particular, the author believes more studies are required, as the situation of the Mlabri community in Nan province is changing as the result of a development project supported by the Thai government that aims to preserve the Mlabri culture in the development context.³⁾

To understand better the attempts by the Mlabri to become more self-reliant and to return to a more equal pattern of coexistence with their neighbours, it will be useful to analyse the power relations involved in resource access by both hunter-gatherers and farmers. However, we must recall that the way in which the term "hunter-gatherers" is constructed and understood by different scholars can itself help to support or oppose the existence of the Mlabri. I am not an ethnoarchaeologist and do not for one moment deny that my paper is also constructed to explain the ways in which hunter-gatherers are represented and represent themselves. However, it is clear from my own research that all scholars hold a responsibility for the impacts

that their work may have on the very hunter-gatherer groups who negotiate with us to produce knowledge about them.

NOTES

- 1) This term is based on the language of the Tai-Yuan ethnic group, which the author used for communicating with both the Mlabri and the Hmong in the area. The term can be translated as “stuck with a precious thing”.
- 2) In 2007, the Christian church bought a 12.8-ha plot from the Hmong for the Mlabri. This plot was distributed to five Mlabri households.
- 3) Since 2007, a governmental project has been set up with the aim of preserving and developing the Mlabri community in Nan province. Since the visit of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirinthorn in February 2007, the project has provided not only infrastructure such as water tanks, a kindergarten building, a new community meeting hall, and a Buddhist temple, but also supporting the Mlabri with 12 buffaloes, 15 large-white hybrid pigs, 11 boar-hybrid pigs, six sheep, and 300 indigenous chickens. Its aims also included the search for new land for community relocation. In 2008, eight Mlabri teenagers and three adults made the decision to move to a royal development project named *Phu Fa Pattana*, which is surrounded by huge forest areas located in the north of Nan province near the border between Thailand and Laos.

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