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## The Incomplete Sedentarization of the Mlabri in Northern Thailand

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## The Incomplete Sedentarization of the Mlabri in Northern Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a survey of the so-called “sedentarization” of the Mlabri in Thailand. It is argued that for at least three reasons their sedentarization is not a “normal” transition from a hunter-gatherer to an agricultural society, as would be assumed by an evolutionist perspective. First, it does not relate to a “natural” or inevitable pattern because it has been largely a State-led process initiated through development projects. Second, it does not have the same characteristics everywhere, and depends on social networks as well as on historical and geographical factors. That means sedentarization of the Mlabri cannot be fully understood without considering their relationships with other ethnic groups, especially the Hmong. Finally, sedentarization is an open-ended process with no obvious and predetermined end, because the Mlabri interact with their neighbors and the various development projects and still move from one settlement to another one according to their own agenda.

### INTRODUCTION

The term, “Mlabri”, referring to people living in the forest, consists of two words; “Mla” means “people” and “Bri” is “forest”. Early ethnographic works (e.g. Bernatzik 1951; Young 1961) proposed the term, ‘Yumbri’, which has the same meaning. Thai and Lao people refer to them as “Kha Tong Luang” or “Phi Tong Lueang” (lit. “spirit of the yellow leaves”). The expression was coined to represent the nomadic lifestyle of the Mlabri. According to the Thai perspective, this nomadic group would move to another place whenever the banana leaves (*tong*) covering the roofs of their shelters turned yellow (*lueang*) and it was said that they could move as quickly as if they were spirits (*phi*).

Most studies about the Mlabri prior to the 1970s described them as a nomadic group living in the jungle, with some contact with outsiders such as exchanging forest resources for tools and rice (Bernatzik 1951; Nimmanahaeminda and Hartland-Swan 1962; Seidenfaden 1919; Winit Wanadorn 1926). Studies of the

Mlabri after the 1970s began to mention a transition in the patterns of exchange; not only were goods bartered, but also labor was exchanged for goods, especially for food (Trier 1992; Pookajorn 1992). Later, when the Mlabri started to settle in permanent places and the frequency of their movements tended to decrease, they were becoming even less understood by both their neighbors and the scholarly community.

This paper is based mainly on a survey the author conducted in 2009–2010, to understand the State-led sedentarization process as a part of the socio-economic transition of the Mlabri in Thailand. The author takes as a point of departure the study of Ikeya and Nakai (2009) that proposed to consider the interactions between Mlabri and Hmong as an example of symbiotic relations (the so-called “co-existence model” [Morrison and Junker 2002: 131–166]). Both ethnic groups, although having different patterns of mobility, had a highly nomadic way of life and gradually adopted permanent settlements in Thailand. Ikeya and Nakai (2009) proposed a model that divides the relationship between the Mlabri and Hmong into 3 stages. In the first (1919–1980), the Mlabri were forest hunters and gatherers while the Hmong were highly mobile farmers (as well as occasional hunters and gatherers, but living in permanent villages). In the second stage (1980–1998), the Mlabri remained nomadic hunters whereas the Hmong settled in the areas where they have continued to live until the present. During the third stage (1998–2004) the Mlabri regrouped and began a sedentary lifestyle under Thai government initiative, living in many places near the already settled Hmong communities. It seems that this model is oversimplified, for two main reasons. First, the so-called “sedentarization” of the Mlabri is not as complete as that of the Hmong and requires specific analysis. Second, Ikeya and Nakai do not pay attention to the role played by the Thai State in this process, thereby leading readers to believe that such process is a “natural” one. However, in reality the Mlabri have been under close and constant scrutiny by State-led development projects.

There are four main parts to this paper. The first provides the demographic data and background of 5 surveyed sites in Thailand. The second part adds the time frame of the history of the State-led sedentarization and the efforts of the different actors who make this statecraft possible. The third examines the case of a Mlabri band and their failed settlement in a village near the Laotian border. The final part summarizes and discusses the findings.

## **1. Surveyed sites and demographic background**

For many years Mlabri populations engaged in hunting and gathering in the mountains on the borders of Thailand and Laos. Nowadays they are much more numerous on the Thai side of the border whereas they are reportedly on the verge of extinction in Laos. In the past decades, eight main sites have been identified by Thai officials, journalists and scholars, who recorded the number of Mlabri

populations (Bernatzik 1951; Nimmanahaeminda and Hartland-Swan 1962; Nimmanahaeminda 1963; Pookajorn *et al.* 1992; Trier 1992). At present, however, as revealed by the author’s 2009–10 survey, there are only five Mlabri sites, all located in Nan and Phrae provinces, with an aggregate Mlabri population of 356 persons. The current number of the Mlabri populations and the settlement map are in a figure and a table as followed.

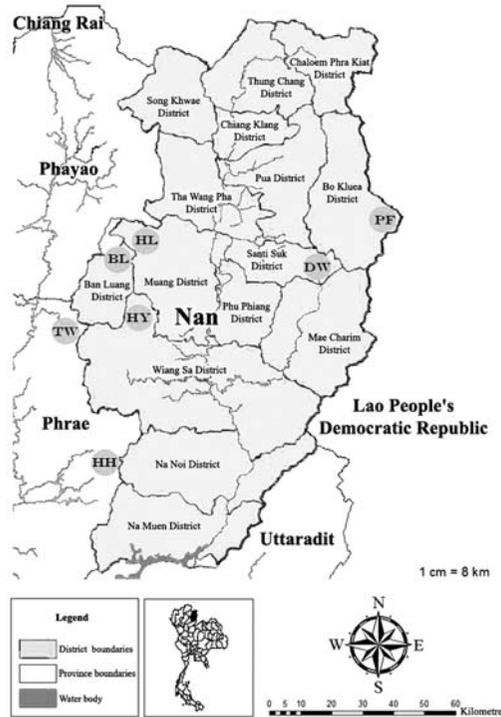


Figure 1 Map of Nan Province and the Mlabri Settlement Project Sites (in the circles)

Table 1 Mlabri population in Nan and Phrea province in 2010

Area	Mlabri population in Nan province year 2010				
	Male	Female	Children	Adults	Total
Haui Yuak village	72	100	100	72	172
Phu Fah development center	27	34	NA	NA	61
Don Priwan village	3	2	0	5	5
Total					238
Area	Mlabri population in Phrea province year 2010				
	Male	Female	Children	Adults	Total
Haui Hom* village	NA	NA	NA	NA	82
Tawa** village	19	17	NA	NA	36
Total					118

\*For Haui hom there are only data for total population. Data were not available. Yet, data in year 2009 indicated that the total Mlabri population is 153; 90 males and 63 females.

\*\*For Tawa village there are no data available on population by age.

### 1.1 Huai Yuak village, Mae Kaning Sub district, Weangsa District, Nan Province

This village was initially inhabited by Hmong who settled there in 1975 after moving from Doi Phukeng Village, located on Mount Phukeng close to the Huai Yuak Valley. However, the Mlabri had inhabited and used the forests around this area long before the Hmong community settled there. In 1999, the government initiated the Mlabri development project and convinced them to live together in a single location near the Hmong. Since then the Mlabri population has gradually increased, as is demonstrated by the population change between 1995 (before the settlement project) and 1998–1999 (beginning of the State-led settlement project). One reason accounting for that increase is that the Mlabri were forced to move from the resettlement project in Ban Luang District after a conflict between the government and local farmers over forest occupation (Na Nan 2009: 233).



Figure 2 The Mlabri settlement in Huai Yuak village in 2009

### 1.2 Don Priwan Village, Pong Sub district, Santisuk District, Nan Province

Don Priwan is a Hmong village, located in eastern Nan Province close to the Thai-Laos. border The few Mlabri living there at present were part of a larger group that moved around 1967 together with the Tin (also known as Lua, Hmal,



Figure 3 The Mlabri settlement in Don Priwan village, a house (right) belongs to Mlabri, located on a foothill

or Pray in Laos) to Pua District to escape war (Trier 2008). The initial Mlabri population was 15 persons, of whom only five remain at present. These are two Mlabri men who live in the village, two Mlabri women who married and moved to other villages, and one man who left the village and now sells his labor in neighboring settlements.

### 1.3 Phu Fah Development Center, Phasuk Village, Phu Fah Sub district, Bo Kluea District, Nan Province

Previously, this area was inhabited by Tin people who were located in eastern Nan Province, close to the Thai-Laos border. The Phu Fah Development Center, founded in 1999, is used as an office for HRH Princess Sirindhorn for demonstrating eco-friendly agricultural practices and sustainable development to improve highlander livelihoods. The Mlabri started to be introduced there in 2008 and were originally living in Huai Hom. In 2008, there were only 15 Mlabri. Then, in 2010, their number increased to 61.



Figure 4 The Mlabri at the Phu Fah development center

### 1.4 Huai Hom Village, Ban Weang Sub district, Rongkwang District, Phrae Province

Huai Hom is one of the Hmong villages that were settled on a development project headed by the “New Tribes Mission”. The Mlabri community is settled at



Figure 5 The Mlabri in Huai Hom village

“Ban Boonyuen” named for the American missionary, Mr. Boonyuen Suksanae or Eugene Robert Long. The development project has been in operation since 1981. During 2008–2009, much of the Mlabri population moved to the Phu Fah Development Center, located in Bo Kluea District, Nan Province.

### 1.5 Tawa Village, Sa Ieab Sub District, Song District, Phrae Province

Tawa is a Tai Yuan village located in northern Phrae Province, near Nan on the edge of Ban Luang District. Topographically, this area is mountainous with only 20 percent of its area being flat. Under the initiative of HRH Princess Sirindhorn, the Mlabri development project, aimed at settling the community in one place, started its operation here in 2007.



Figure 6 The Mlabri in Tawa village

## 2. Periods in the State-led sedentarization of the Mlabri in Thailand

### 2.1 “The Other of the Others within (Before 1970s)”

Before the Thai State decided to sedentarize them, the Mlabri had long been regarded as the most ‘primitive’ of all the ethnic groups living in northern Thailand, according to an essay entitled “*Waduai prophet khon pa rukhafainua*,” written by Khun Pracha Kadikit in 1886 (quoted in Thongchai Winichakul 2000). This essay reflected the attitudes of the Siamese elite in Bangkok toward those they called “khon pa” and whom they considered completely different from the Thai (*khonthai*). The “khon pa” are defined as “early men” or “old humankind” (“*khonderm*”) who are still living in the jungle. Other ethnic groups, such as the Lawa, the Yang (Karen), the Khmu, as well as the Hmong or the Lahu, are sometimes also included in this classification. For the Mlabri, the term *phi pa* (forest spirits) was sometimes used and referred to their lack of permanent settlements. All these people, especially the nomadic Mlabri, were of little interest to the Kingdom of Thailand until the 1970s. In contrast, other lowland subjects were recruited into ‘civilization’ both for their labor supply and to increase tax revenues.

During the Cold War, however, the attitude of the State changed because it needed to monitor, control and resettle many upland ethnic groups, later classified as ‘Chao Kao’ or hill tribes. The official arguments varied according to both the area concerned and the historical periods (opium eradication, forest protection, and anti-communist fighting), but the important point is that the official concerns about highlander “development” did not include the Mlabri, as shown in a short paragraph of a report from the Department of Public Welfare (1966: 10):

Finally, we would like to mention a small hill tribe that makes its living from hunting and collecting food from one place to another. This tribe is ‘Phi Thongluang’ or ‘Yumbri’. Some reports mentioned that this group was found occasionally in the deep forests, where access is difficult. However, following the objective of this report this ethnic group has no significant importance and is not worth being mentioned.

From the government point of view exemplified above, at that time the Mlabri did not need to be closely watched, controlled or even permanently settled. However, this did not mean that they could move freely around the forest. Warfare and bombings caused death and injuries in many upland areas, so many Mlabri were forced to migrate to forest areas where there was little conflict. However, they found the forest already populated by many ethnic groups that also re-settled their villages in the hinterland (Pookajorn 1992; Trier 2008).

## **2.2 The Beginning of the State-led Sedentarization Project (since the 1970s)**

In the earlier period, the government was not interested in forcing the Mlabri to settle, but allowed them to continue their nomadic life. The change in government attitude was partly a result of a better understanding of the Mlabri, through intensive surveys, that the government conducted, often in collaboration with scholars. One example is the survey conducted by Thai archaeologist Surin Pookajorn together with Jesper Trier, a Western anthropologist (Pookajorn *et al.* 1983: Preface). Such academics played a key role in the birth of a development policy toward the Mlabri. Surin Pookajorn, for instance, indicated that “the findings from the study of the minority “Phi Tong Luang” will be used for developing a settlement project for the welfare of “Phi Tong Luang” that will be implemented by the Department of Social Development and Welfare, Ministry of Interior in the near future” (Pookajorn *et al.* 1983: 12).

In 1984, not surprisingly, the governor of Nan Province released an official announcement, endorsed on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984, entitled “Defining a protected area for conservation purpose of forest and the minority Phi Tong Luang in an area of Nan Province”. According to this announcement, three areas of evergreen forest, totalling 21,563 *rai* (3,450.08 ha) would be used for forest conservation, Mlabri archaeology and culture (Naksiri and Yusabai 1984). However, the project was not successful, either for the conservation of the forest or the preservation of Mlabri

culture, as logging concessions in the area continued their activities.

Although the establishment of the conservation area was not successful, the cooperation between scholars and government officials continued in an effort to change the Mlabri nomadic way of life to a sedentary one. Such cooperation is clear from a large research and development project entitled “A development project for the pre-agricultural society of the Mlabri minority”. This project was scheduled to run for 8 years, from August, 1985 to September, 1992, after its endorsement by the Nan Hill Tribe Committee on 4 June, 1985. Following the project in Nan Province, the development was expected to have an impact on 150 Mlabri living in the area of Khunstan, Huai Bohoi, and Phu Keng villages. The ultimate aim was to build self-development capacities, leading the Mlabri to change themselves from nomadic hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmers, based on the steps of the social evolutionist model.

A justification for this eight year project is provided in a document obtained from the Hill Tribe Development Center in Nan Province, in 2003, when the author was involved in an earlier research project on the Mlabri. The document highlighted the need to “change” Mlabri society owing to the development of “slave” relationships whereby neighboring ethnic groups or outside entrepreneurs took advantage of the Mlabri. The project’s designers believed “the social evolution had gone off course” and they had to correct it. Underlying this statement was the belief that a hunting-gathering society should evolve into an agriculture society and then later into an urban society. In other words, this project viewed the transition of the Mlabri society as an example of linear evolution.

This development project did not succeed in radically changing the Mlabri way of life, and in the following decades, new initiatives were taken by both the State and the private sector. This demonstrates the complicated context of Mlabri sedentarization in recent decades.

### **2.3 Sedentarization since the 1980s: Missionaries, State officials and Tourism Agencies**

In the 1980s, among other factors two movies contributed to a shift in the image of the Mlabri from a ‘mysterious’ hunter-gather group to an ‘innocent’ population appealing to tourists (Na Nan 2009). One film features the Kalahari Bushmen, and was ‘The Gods Must Be Crazy’, and another is the Thai film about the Mlabri in Nan Province, ‘Tha Wan Yim Chaeng (The Smiling Sun)’. In the years following this latter movie, a group of local people from Ban Luang District, in western Nan Province, together with a group of tourism entrepreneurs, included a visit to the Mlabri in their guided tours for foreigners. Similar initiatives were taken in Phrae, and both provinces competed to become a center for Mlabri tourism (Na Nan 2005).

Here the two provincial cases are used to clarify the competition and compromises among the state officials, the missionaries and the tourism agencies.

### 2.3.1 Nan Province and the mix between public and private sector

In Nan Province, both public and private actors launched their own projects to include the Mlabri, particularly in 1994 in Ban Luang District. The government started a project aimed at establishing a 'Yellow Leaves Development and Preservation Center' on an area of degraded forest covering about 50 *rai* (8 ha). The family of the American missionary, Boonyuen, had moved from Phrae to join the project, with the approval of the governor of Nan Province. The project developed temporary shelters for 13 Mlabri families. The total Mlabri population at that time was 67, comprised of 33 males and 34 females. Land was allocated to each Mlabri family "in order to keep them busy", as it was said in the project report. Examples of activities included weeding, vegetable gardening and tree planting. The Mlabri children had to attend Thai language classes (Na Nan 2005). However, three years after the project started, a conflict emerged in 1997 between the government and the neighboring lowland farmers. Several hundred farmers from many villages protested that the Mlabri were responsible for causing environmental degradation by forest clearance, hunting and gathering. Consequently, the project ended in 1999, and the Mlabri of Ban Luang District were forced to relocate. Some returned to Phrae Province with the Boonyuen family, while others chose to leave the group and sell their labor in neighboring Hmong villages, such as Ban Huai Yuak, or Tai Yuan villages, like Ban Tawa.

### 2.3.2 Phrae Province and the relations between officials and missionaries

In 1993, it was found that Phrae Province tried to provide a settlement area for the Mlabri using provincial surveys that indicated the area where the Mlabri had been long been living. These areas included Huai Hom village in Ban Weang Sub district, Rongkwang District, and Krok Nanh Tha Village in Huairong Sub district, Rongkwang District. Based on the information, Phrae Province allocated the area of Krok Nanh Tha Village as a first settlement location of the Mlabri before further developing this area as a future tourist attraction.

The Phrae Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Center then applied for a budget from the National Security Council and used it for the conservation of the Mlabri. To achieve that, the project planned to hire the Mlabri under the Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Center (*Bangkok Business News* 1993). However, this project was cancelled because the Mlabri failed to live permanently as a sedentarized group in this resettlement. The government later gave the missionary group a leading role in the area.

In contrast to the failure of the government in Phrae Province, the initiative for a Mlabri settlement was also developed by an American missionary. The leader of a group of missionaries called the 'New Tribes Mission' is an American missionary named Eugene Robert Long, or Mr. Boonyuen Suksanae, who had moved with his family to Thailand at end of 1978. The family travelled to Nan, with the intention creating a Christian mission to the Mlabri. At that time, Nan

was suffering still from many problems related to the war between the Thai Army and the Communist Party of Thailand. The family was therefore unable to enter the intended area. Later, the family learned about the existence of the Mlabri in Pak Huaiooi Village, Phrae Province, and moved to live in the forest with them. The missionary development project for the Mlabri in Phrae then started in 1981. Although the project continued until 1987, the missionary group faced many difficulties owing to the Mlabri moving around and some doing wage labor in other Hmong villages.

The missionary group encountered many difficulties in carrying out their religious work. This eventually forced them to also emphasize development for the Mlabri, who by 1988 had gradually begun to trust the project. Nevertheless, they moved to other areas many times and then came back again to live together (Sriwisan 1995).

In the beginning of the project, the missionary family bought 500 *rai* (80 hectare) from the Hmong village at Haui Hom, to establish their mission and bring development to the Mlabri. Later, this area attracted more Mlabri. A list of highland communities in 1995 reported the existence of a village *Moo 5, Ban Phamung*, also called *Ban Boonyuen*, but the official name of the village was *Ban Pakhuai*. It was located close to Haui Hom Village. And the name of *Ban Boonyuen* continues to be used today, as does the development project of the missionary group. In other words, this settlement is seen as an effective site where the State accepted the role of the missionary family in upgrading the Mlabri to live a more sedentary livelihood.

Although there is at present some relocation of Mlabri households at Huai Hom Village, the moves have become relatively limited. The move occurs often because a family wishes to live with their kin or to find a job at Huai Yuak or Tawa village. Relocation of houses is uncommon because nowadays they are built of brick, and therefore difficult to take apart and reconstruct. This is clearly not only a government initiative; the missionaries with their goal of shepherding the villagers to Christianity became key actors in achieving the sedentarization of the nomadic Mlabri. As can be seen, the missionary families had participated in such statecraft in both Nan and Phrae.

#### **2.4 The Latest Move of the Mlabri? The royal family and the hunter-gatherers (since 2000s)**

After the project in Ban Lang District ended in 1999, the only development initiative affecting the Mlabri was in the hands of the missionary family group, who were running the Mlabri development project in Phrae Province directly. Then, the government tried to open a new area to operate another Mlabri development project. Several areas were listed as potential sites, and Huai Yuak Village was eventually selected in 1999. The area was chosen according to a survey which reported the existence of many Mlabri families who had moved to this area and did wage labor for the Hmong. The government therefore tried to

bring them together in a small unit inside the village. This project has continued until the present (Na Nan 2005; Buramitara 2003).

The Hmong living in Huai Yuak Village had established their community in 1957. These Hmong escaped the war along the Thailand-Laos border and had moved to live in the area of Doi Phu Keng, later moving downhill, in 1975. Huai Yuak Village was recognized officially in 1991.

In the first stage of the Mlabri settlement, Nan Province mobilized its staff to build houses for them in an area located about 800 m from Huai Yuak Village. The 15 *rai* (2.4 ha) allocated to the Mlabri was fallow land donated by the Hmong in Huai Yuak Village. Other adjacent areas of about 150 *rai* (24 ha) on the hills were used as forest for the Mlabri. Houses constructed from bamboo with thatched roofs were developed inside the community area. These single storey houses had no windows. In addition, a piped water system was developed, drawing water from a local stream. Water storage tanks and toilets were built separately from the houses, and are located around the village.

As the number of Mlabri gradually increased, some wage laborers moved out and stayed in shelters alongside the Hmong fields when hired to work there. The Mlabri would return to the community only if working in fields nearby. However, some Mlabri continued moving to live with their kin and look for work in other villages, such as Huai Hom and Tawa. Some of those living in the new community tore down their houses to build new ones inside the community area. According to Mlabri tradition, they move to other places when a member of their groups dies. In the new context of sedentarization, as in 2003 in Huai Yuak when two Mlabri died, the author saw the remaining members of the deceased individuals' families move to build new houses in a new location in the community area.

In 2006, the Mlabri development project became more intensive. Many sectors, led by the Governor of Nan Province, pushed to expand the settlement area, in order to support the development of basic infrastructure as well as to create working space for government officials who provided extension service for crop cultivation, livestock keeping and other supplementary occupations, as well as maintaining order in the community. In 2007 HRH Princess Sirindhorn made an official visit to Huai Yuak. This led to guidelines from various sectors for the development of the Mlabri community. Many agencies came in and organized major improvements for the community area. This was considered a major transition point after the Mlabri community at Huai Yuak Village was established; there were 26 households in 2003 and the number of households increased to 30 in 2010.

Moreover, two other new initiatives took place for the Mlabri settlement after the official 2007 visit of HRH Princess Sirindhorn to the project in the area of Tawa village in Phrae Province and the Phu Fah Development Center in the northern borderland between Nan Province and Lao PDR.

Settlement of Mlabri at Tawa Village began in 2007, following a recently

introduced development project under the initiative of HRH Princess Sirindhorn. In this area, Mlabri had been hunting and visiting the village area, which belonged to the *Taiyuan*. Mlabri brought forest products to exchange for household goods, and also they began to engage in agricultural wage labor in Tawa Village, which became officially recognized in 1979.

Prior to the 2007 visit of HRH Princess Sirindhorn to Tawa Village, government officials attempted to stop the constant movement of the Mlabri and, and gather them to live in a hilly area near a school. However, this project failed because of a diarrhoea epidemic. The Tai Yuan villagers suspected that the Mlabri were the source of the infection owing to officials moving them to live close by, thereby exposing an ethnic bias of the Tai Yuan villagers, who viewed the Mlabri as a source of germs. The author observed that in a prior period, for example in 2003, each Mlabri family that was working for the villagers lived in the agricultural fields of their employers.

In 2007, a project to build houses for the Mlabri group in Tawa Village was moved from the hill behind the village school to an area further away. An official arranged an area about 2 km from the village for a new community. This area was initially a tamarind orchard belonging to the Tawa Village headman. The Sa Ieab Tambon Administration Office built a concrete house for the Mlabri to live in. At present, two Mlabri families are living there, while seven others live in single storey wooden houses.

For the Mlabri at the Phu Fah Development Center, in Nan Province, settlement began around 2008–2009 in response to an effort to assemble them inside the project area. The Phu Fah Development Center, on the other hand, was founded in 1999 as a development project for military security. Now it has become a demonstration center under the initiative of HRH Princess Sirindhorn. Although many ethnic groups have been living in this area since the start of the project, none interacts directly with this Mlabri group. The Mlabri and other ethnic groups still regard each other as strangers because their relationships have developed only recently following the move into the area of the Phu Fah Development Center, in 2008.

Prior to that move, a group of about 10 Mlabri youths participated in vocational training at the Office of Skills Development, in Nan Province. There, this group was initially under the care of the German missionary family of Mr. Kham Namprasert or Mr. Friedhard Lipsius, who started his work for the Mlabri in Huai Hom Village, Phrae Province, together with the American missionary, Long. This Mlabri youth group later came under the care of the Phu Fah Development Center. In a major shift, the Mlabri moved from Huai Hom Village to the Phu Fah Development Center after the 2008 visit of HRH Princess Sirindhorn. Forest officials helped to arrange the move. The Mlabri population has grown constantly, which caused concern about the center's "carrying capacity". Later, the center prohibited Mlabri not related to the initial group of 10 youths from moving into the center. Therefore, some of the Mlabri families that moved

away from Huai Hom Village relocated instead to Huai Yuak Village.

During the first year after moving to the Phu Fah Development Center, the Mlabri were living in bamboo shelters on the hill behind the project office. From 2009 onwards, they were relocated to the present area in the forest. To reach it, the Mang River has to be crossed. The condition of the houses there is different; the floor is elevated above the ground, the walls are made of bamboo, and the roof is covered mainly with *Imperata* grass. Opposite the community, there is a nursery. A building for the Phu Fah Cultural Center is under construction, in which it is planned to exhibit the history of the Mlabri. In that way tourists would not need to cross the Mang River to visit them.

Although the living area is far from the other Mlabri, the author observed that some Mlabri travelled by motorcycle from the Phu Fah Development Centre to visit their relatives at Huai Yuak Village and to meet the German missionary who is renting three houses in Pang Ka Village, in Nan Province. Some Mlabri use a cell phone to contact their relatives.

Based on what participants said, the author's surveys showed that the settlement of the Mlabri is consistent with State-led development projects. Nevertheless, this does not mean that every Mlabri community was created by the government. The roles of missionaries, for example, the Boonyuen family in the case of the Mlabri at Huai Hom Village, were also observed, as was the role of the powerful local group that tried to assemble the Mlabri in a specific forest area, in order to manage them as a tourist attraction. All the above-mentioned cases took place in the area where the Mlabri development projects were consistent with the plans of the government sectors. However, the case of Don Priwan Village, presented immediately below might be different.

### **3. The Mlabri at Don Priwan Village: A Settlement by outside ethnic group?**

The history of the Mlabri in this village is difficult to assess precisely<sup>1)</sup>. So the Mlabri in Don Priwan Village might not be suitable for consideration as a settlement of this ethnic group. Nevertheless, data from the academic literature (Trier 2008) and interviews of the Hmong at Don Priwan Village revealed that the Mlabri stayed at houses built at Don Priwan by the Hmong villagers. Therefore, the pattern is mostly different from the settlement of the Mlabri in other areas arranged by the government. The Mlabri at Don Priwan are living in one-storey houses built five years ago as a replacement for their original houses that were burnt down.

Prior to the move to Don Priwan, this group of Mlabri consisted of 15 persons who had escaped the war in Laos and who had stayed in 1976 at a refugee camp in Pua District, in Nan Province. The Mlabri later moved out and built shelters in the forest, where they made a living from hunting and wage labor in Hmong villages. Later, they relocated to live with the Hmong at Don Priwan. However, the number of 15 Mlabri recorded in 1975 had been reduced to five

persons in 2010. These five survivors are relatives from the same group (Trier 2008). One Hmong said why the Mlabri visited this place more often than other areas. At first the Mlabri came to ask for food, but later visited more frequently as some of them had become addicted to opium provided by the Hmong. Therefore, this Mlabri family did not move far away. The officials took them once to a drug rehabilitation center.

A recent survey, conducted in May, 2010 and 2011, revealed only two Mlabri men who were living at Don Priwan where they performed wage labor for the Hmong. Another Mlabri man had moved out to do wage labor in other villages. The two Mlabri women married and moved out to live with their husbands in a village close to Santisuk District. At present, they have children with their husbands. However, the likelihood of the two Mlabri men at Don Priwan marrying is slight, as other Mlabri did not want to contact the Mlabri at Don Priwan<sup>2)</sup>. Hope of seeing these two Mlabri men marry women from another ethnic group, such as Hmong at Don Priwan village, is also small because the Mlabri are disdained for being poor and landless, and for still having to earn a living by doing wage labor<sup>3)</sup>.

The case of Don Priwan may reflect only a settlement at the household level and the just two people might not be considered a settlement pattern of a community for this ethnic group. However, this case is a tragedy for a family that became war refugees and belongs to a people and culture deemed close to disappearing by the end of this decade.<sup>4)</sup> Thai society knows nothing about the fate of this group. In the author's view when compared to the Mlabri in other areas, a settlement of this Mlabri group did not happen according to the evolutionary concept. On the contrary, this situation, clearly demonstrates that the Mlabri settlement at Don Priwan relates to the violent formation of nation-states and to the increasing pressure put on Mlabri society by political and economic change in this region.

#### **4. Conclusion and Discussion: the incomplete sedentarization and the ongoing nomadic image?**

The author wishes to add a further point to the work of Ikeya and Nakai (2009), to reflect on the five cases presented here. This is because the Mlabri settlement goes beyond the work of Ikeya and Nakai in proposing a symbiotic view through their past interaction between hunter-gatherers and farmers. That is, in addition to the views proposed, the moving and settlement of the Mlabri has changed from one condition to another in a context where the State tried to promote Mlabri sedentarization as well as undertaking development projects.

That the transition to a sedentary way of life is an unfinished process can be seen from the State-led development projects that have been operated in many areas at different periods. Owing to their failure, in some areas projects had to be closed. But, within the same timeframe projects in other areas continued, while in

still other areas projects have started only recently.

During this period, the Mlabri were assembled to live together in a specific settlement area arranged by the government. These people received extension assistance for cultivating crops and keeping livestock. But when the project was closed the Mlabri moved to live again in the forest outside the project area. They made a living from the forest by hunting and gathering its products, and performed agricultural wage labor for other peoples. This type of relationship between the Mlabri and other ethnic groups also occurred in the period prior to government operation of the Mlabri development projects.

The sedentarization of the Mlabri became more effective when the government established and continued development projects from the 1990s onwards. At present, Mlabri settlement might not occur completely in every area, but it can be observed that the Mlabri now spend longer periods in one place before their next move. However, nomadic life retains its importance for them. An example of this is that from 2007 onwards the Mlabri moved from Huai Hom Village to the Phu Fah Development Center and then again to Huai Yuak Village.

There were also many minor cases of moving at the household and individual levels. At present, it might be possible to say that the moving of the Mlabri happened in a more specific direction and area. The area available for relocation is not confined just to Thailand, although these areas are still limited to a few places. Meanwhile, the villages where the Mlabri have been moving in and out during the study period of Surin Pookajorn and Jesper Trier in the 1970s and 1980s are no longer visited by them.

## NOTES

- 1) The author did not find the Mlabri during the three field surveys at Don Priwan Village, and therefore lacks historical information from the Mlabri themselves. The data presented here relies on interviews of the Hmong.
- 2) This was because they understood that the Mlabri at Don Priwan belong to the Mlabri group which is called "*Thalae*"—"the bad and fierce Mlabri" (Trier 2008).
- 3) Information from an interview with the village headman of the Don Priwan Village about the possibility of a Mlabri man finding a Hmong marriage partner there.
- 4) Richel (1995) called this group of Mlabri 'Minor Mlabri', and expected that their language and culture will become extinct. This outcome is also expected too with the Mlabri in Xayaburi Region of Laos. As Herda (2007) revealed in 2003, the group living in Laos has a very small population of just 19 people.

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