

# Structure and Social Composition of Hunter Gatherer Camps : Have the Mlabri Settled Permanently?

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## **Structure and Social Composition of Hunter-Gatherer Camps: Have the Mlabri Settled Permanently?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study is to ascertain the conditions of daily life of the hunter-gatherers known as the Mlabri in Laos, and to examine the changes that have occurred over the past 15 years in Mlabri society. In particular, the article describes the case of the Mlabri community inhabiting Phiang District, Sainyabuli Province. Sainyabuli is a basin created by tributaries of the Mekong River. It is surrounded by mountains, used primarily for slash-and-burn farming and inhabited by ethnic groups that include the Lao, Khamu and Hmong. The study confirmed the existence of a camp inhabited by only Mlabri residents is located near Na Kong Village, inhabited by Lao people. Previous studies of the Mlabri in Laos have reported on their nomadic life, around the year 2000. Field surveys conducted in 2014 for the present study identified for the first time the status of a new Mlabri settlement. At that time, new relations between the Mlabri and their external society were observed, exemplified by their participation in the large Elephant Festival, held in Sainyabuli Province in February, 2014. At present, a Lao village exists near the Mlabri dwellings. For that reason, rather than moving around, Mlabri might have opted to settle there, so as to retain assist by these Lao people. The Mlabri group, which numbers just 15 people, is likely to be living with the support of Lao people. Since the Lao are devotees of Theravada Buddhism, such a virtuous act as feeding the poor would provide a support system the Mlabri require. Changes in Mlabri society have occurred during their transition from a nomadic to a settled lifestyle. However, the authors' findings suggest that the Mlabri have changed lifestyles from nomadic to settled, and then back to nomadic again. Therefore it is unlikely that they would readily opt to settle permanently in one place.

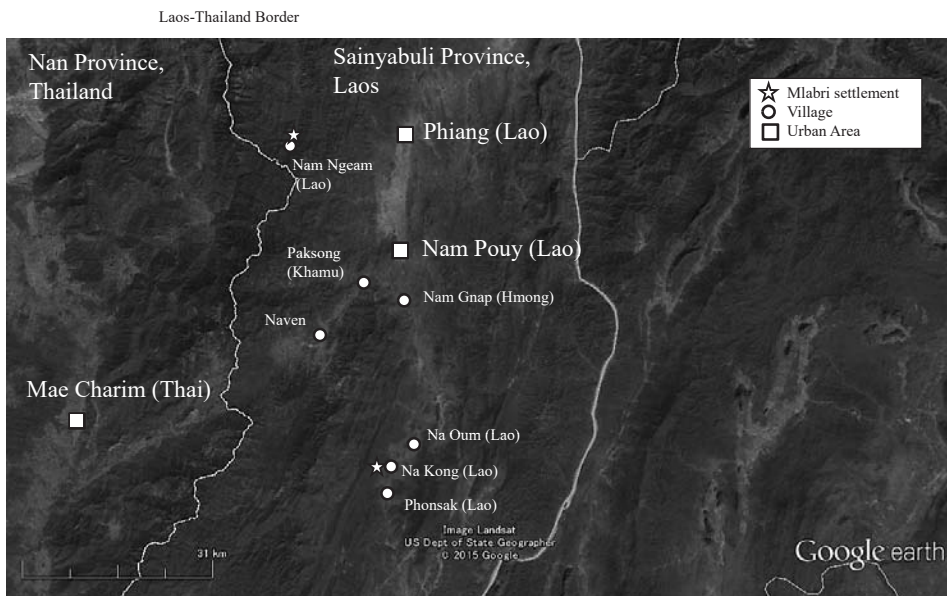
### **INTRODUCTION**

To date, few anthropological studies have been conducted on hunter-gatherers

in Laos. While on the other hand, many studies were done in Thailand since 1930s (cf. Bernatzik 1938, Boeles 1963, Trier 1981, 2008, Pookajorn 1992, Richel 1995, Na Nan 2005, 2012) and well described their sedentarizing process (cf. Trier 1992, 2008, Pookajorn 1992, Na Nan 2005, 2012, 2013, 2016, Ikeya and Nakai 2009). Then, sedentarized hunter-gatherers' livelihoods were discussed mainly from the perspectives of the Thailand's national development (cf. Cohen 1996, Herda 2002, 2007, Na Nan 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012, Nimonjiya 2014, 2016).

In Laos, a previous study of Chazée (2001) identified the population of hunter-gatherers known as Mlabri<sup>1)</sup>, locations of their camps, their nomadic range, conditions of their resource use, and other facts about them, based on several short-term field projects conducted in Sainyabuli Province between 1998 and 2000 (Chazée 2001). Through them it confirmed that a total Mlabri population numbers 28 persons consisting of 22 nomads and six settlers (Chazée 2001: 15), whose camps are located on the west side of the central communities of Na Oum and Pontong villages during the dry season, and that the nomadic range of the Mlabri is the mountainous area behind the villages (Chazée 2001: 62–63).

The objective of the present study is to ascertain the daily living conditions of the hunter-gatherers, or Mlabri, in Laos, and to examine the changes in their society that have occurred over the last 15 years. The study focuses in particular on Mlabri camp structure, such as the housing arrangement and social composition affecting their daily life. The authors conducted two field surveys<sup>2)</sup> in Laos, in



**Figure 1** Study area and location of Mlabri settlement  
Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2014 and Feb. 2015)

February, 2014 and February, 2015. First, for five days (February 20–24) Mlabri dwellings were sought in a wide area of Sainyabuli Province (Figure 1). Then an intensive search was conducted in the Mlabri community at Nam Ngeam village, and the names and kin relationships of all members were obtained<sup>3</sup>). In Nam Pouy, Nam Phong, and Paksong, information was collected regarding whether the Mlabri had recently visited these villages.

Mlabri camps were also sought in Phiang District, Sainyabuli Province, during February, 2015. As a result, a camp consisting only of Mlabri, located near Na Kong village, was confirmed. This camp was visited and investigated, and participant observation and interviews were conducted with Mlabri visiting Phon Sak village and neighboring Na Kong village, to collect information on their lifestyle.

Sainyabuli Province, where this study was done, is located in northwestern Laos, where it borders Nan Province of Thailand. The eastern border of Sainyabuli Province is formed by the Mekong River. There is a basin in Sainyabuli Province that was created by the tributaries of the Mekong flowing north to south. It is used mostly for paddy rice fields, whereas the surrounding mountains are used primarily for slash-and-burn farming. Ethnic groups living in Sainyabuli Province include the Lao, Khamu and Hmong.

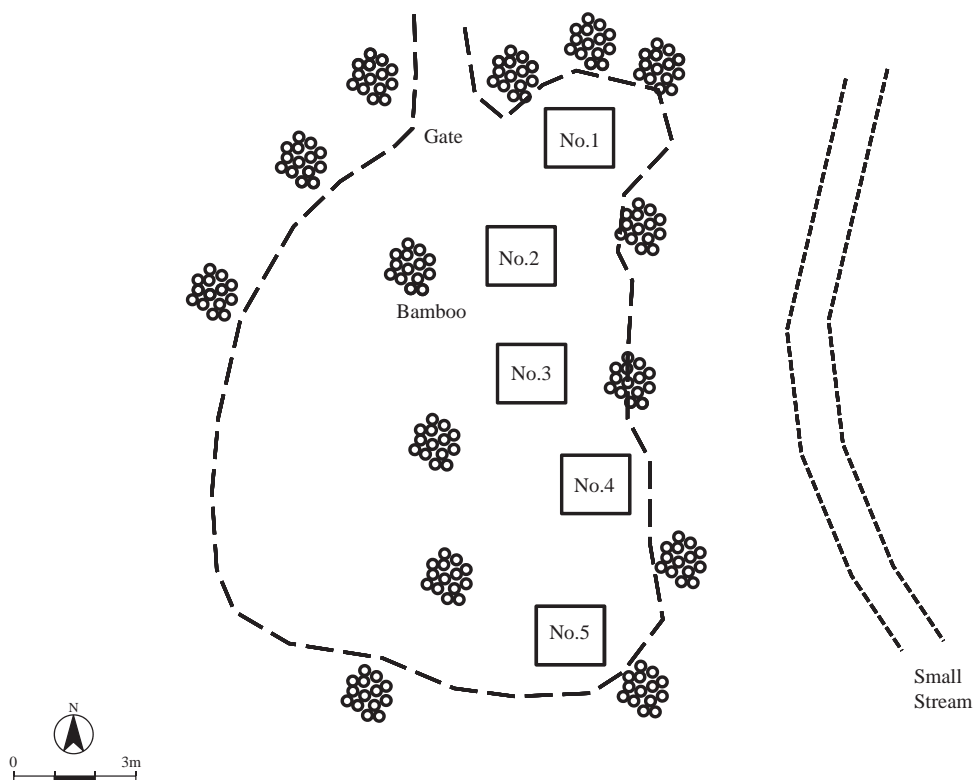
## THE MLABRI CAMP IN FEBRUARY, 2014

### 1) Overview of the research sites

The authors were unable to visit all areas of Sainyabuli Province during the survey of February, 2014. Nevertheless Mlabri settlements were located in two regions. One was the village of Nam Ngeam, described in detail below. All members of the Mlabri community in this village reside in five households (Figure 2). The other village was studied through information related to the Mlabri obtained in Nam Phong and Paksong villages. Nam Phong village had been visited by a few Mlabri, whose names were unknown, during the previous three years or so<sup>4</sup>). It was confirmed that many Mlabri had been in Nam Ngeam village. A resident of Paksong village noted that, although they had not seen the Mlabri in 2014, during the dry season of 2013 a few Mlabri men had come from the direction of the former Nam Song village to purchase cigarettes, rice and snacks. They were wearing ordinary clothes at that time and selling *Lakring* (long, stick-like edible plants) to purchase rice and other goods<sup>5</sup>). Purportedly, Mlabri frequently visited Naven village.

These findings suggest that the Mlabri resided temporarily in the mountains west of Paksong village, in addition to Nam Ngeam village. They followed a nomadic life, moving from one camp to another. At present, some might still be travelling in the mountains near Paksong and Naven villages.

Nam Ngeam village is located approximately 30 km from the main north-south road in Sainyabuli Province near the Thailand border (Figure 1). The village



**Figure 2** Mlabri settlement in Nam Ngeam  
Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2014)

is located 680 m above sea level (measured using an altimeter). The road from the main road to the village is unpaved, the trip therefore takes approximately two hours, including the crossing of a 1,000 m high ridge. This road becomes unusable during the rainy season.

A river runs south to north through Nam Ngeam village and the plain area is covered with wet rice fields. The village settlement consists of situated houses, built by the government in 2006. At the time of the survey it included 68 homes occupied by 128 residents. The residents were Lao who had migrated from near the Phiang District of Sainyabuli Province. The Mlabri settlement is located approximately km to the north of this Lao village. There is an elementary school in the settlement, but it has no Mlabri students.

## 2) Population and food, clothing, and shelter

The Mlabri settlement in Nam Ngeam village, located in a riverside bamboo grove, comprises five houses (Figure 2). Although the background of this settlement is unknown, it had been established by 2010. The five houses had,

**Table 1** Members of the Mlabri settlement in Nam Ngeam village

House No.	Member					Total (n)
	Husband	Wife	Son	Daughter	Housemate	
1	Mr. Bun Nyai	Mrs. Nan Nyai	Mr. Lun			3
2	Mr. Kham Dii	Mrs But				2
3	Mr. Cyan		Mr. Swan			2
4	Mr. Lec	Mrs. Mai		Mrs. Nan		3
5	Mr. Kham Noi	Mrs. Lee			Mr. Kham Nyai	3
Other	Mr. Iric (Surit)					1
Total (n)						14

Note: Mr. Iric stayed in the School house of Nam Ngeam village.

Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2014)

respectively, three, two, two, three, and three residents (Table 1). The total population was 13. Another Mlabri stayed and slept at an elementary school making the total population 14, five of whom were women.

No Mlabri men wore a loincloth; women were naked above the waist; residents wore standard Laotian clothing. Based on interviews, their staple diet was found to be wild potatoes, although during the two-day survey only Mr. Cyan (House No.3) was observed to simmer the meat of a small bird, the details of which were not learned. The Mlabri also ate rice that they had managed to obtain. Dwelling house frames were made of bamboo and houses had a slanted roof covered with palm fronds.

### 3) Economic activities

A preliminary assessment of the Mlabri economy was made during the 2014 survey. The economy of this settlement was based on providing labor to the farmers of Nam Ngeam village. Mr. Bun Nyai (House No.1) “mowed” before firing in slash-and-burn clearings of the Lao, but his compensation for doing this work was not known. Mr. Lec (House No.4) was given two piglets in return for his labor service.

Other basic activities performed by the Mlabri included hunting, gathering, fishing, animal raising, and agriculture. Some trapping tools were observed in House No.4. People allegedly collected wild potatoes, but this was not observed for verification. From interviews it was known that river crabs were collected and a fishing net was observed. A pig rearing shed had been built at House No.4, and a resident was observed making pig feed and feeding the pigs, in the afternoon of February 23, 2014. The feed consisted of *kudzu* leaves and banana stems that were chopped and simmered in a pot. After cooling, the mixture was fed to two pigs.

### 4) Social relationships

A settlement is based on kin relationships. Although not all relationships were identified, those of House Nos.1, 4, and 5 had family relationships. Their

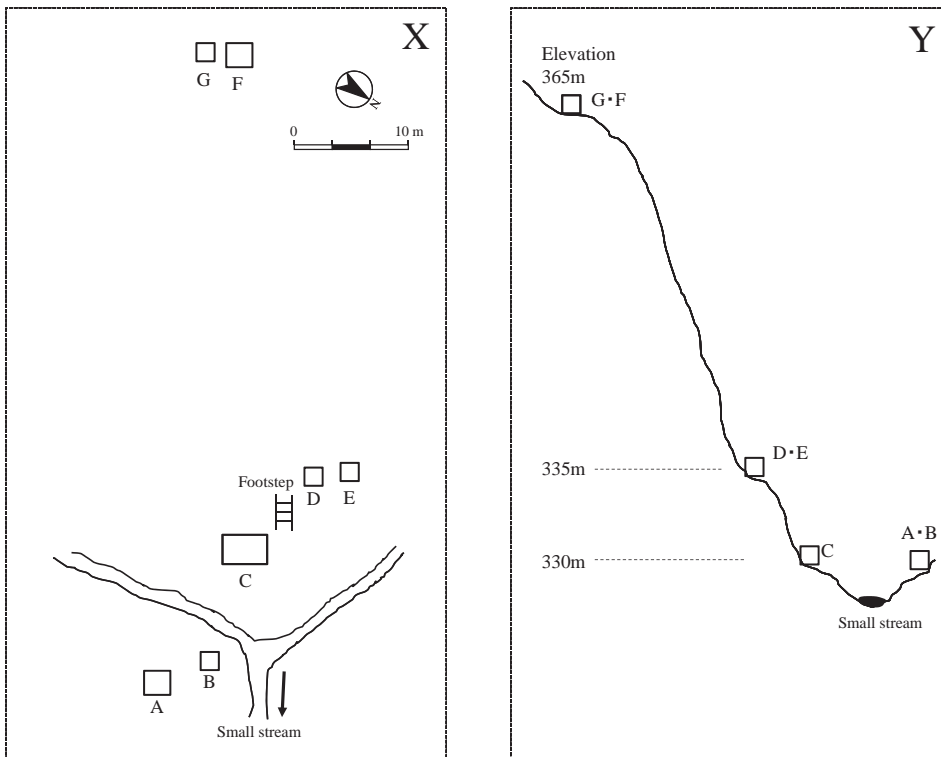
relationships with House No.2 are unknown.

Around the year 2000, when the Mlabri lived as nomads, they had few relations with either the central government or general Laotian society. However, 16 Mlabri were invited to the Elephant Festival<sup>6)</sup>, held in February, 2014. The event demonstrates that all the Mlabri resided in Nam Ngeam. As a reward, the Mlabri were purportedly given one chicken per person. All of the chickens were likely to have been eaten, as none have been seen in the Mlabri camp since then. A comparison of the names of the 16 Mlabri in the settlement and the participants in the Elephant Festival revealed that three Mlabri have not been identified in Nam Ngeam.

## THE MLABRI CAMPS IN FEBRUARY, 2015

### 1) Camp locations and house arrangements

At the time of the February, 2015 survey, Mlabri camps were located in around 3 km from Na Kong village, Phiang District, Sainyabuli Province (Figure 1). They were located at the confluence of two streams (Figure 3). In addition, the



**Figure 3** Living space distribution of Mlabri in Huai Mai Sot camp  
Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2015)

central area of Na Kong village shows 300 m above sea level and at 18° 37' N, 101° 28' E. Lao people comprise most Na Kong village residents. We first headed westward from the village to go to the Mlabri camps. Soon we came to a river which we crossed without a bridge because it was shallow. We then traveled northwestward through areas with scattered fields for a while. Following a road along a narrow stream, we discovered.

In this camp, houses were distributed vertically. The area of the camp is called Huai Mai Sot. It would take approximately 45 minutes on foot from Na Kong Village to the Mlabri camp. An unpaved road was wide enough for a car to pass through mountains and forests. The camp<sup>7)</sup> is approximately a 15-minute walk upstream along the stream after leaving this road.

The huts (i.e., shelters with only a rough roof, designated here as “huts”) in the camp had a simple structure with a roof covered with either banana leaves or palm fronds. This camp is characterized by three-dimensional arrangement of the huts. As shown in Figure 3, the camp has seven huts (designated as A, B, C, D, E, F, and G) spread over an elevation that ranges from 330 m above SL (huts A, B, and C) to 365 m (huts F and G), creating an approximately 35-m difference in elevation above sea level. Therefore, residents must climb a steep slope from the bottom to the top of the camp. Huts D and E are sited 5 m above the lowest huts, A, B, and C. A bamboo stairway had been placed in this 5-m pathway.

## 2) Population and social composition

The seven huts A–G in the camp were occupied respectively by three, one, four, two one, three, and one residents (Table 2, Figure 4, and Table3). The total population is 15. By gender, the population comprised eight men and seven women. It included two infants.

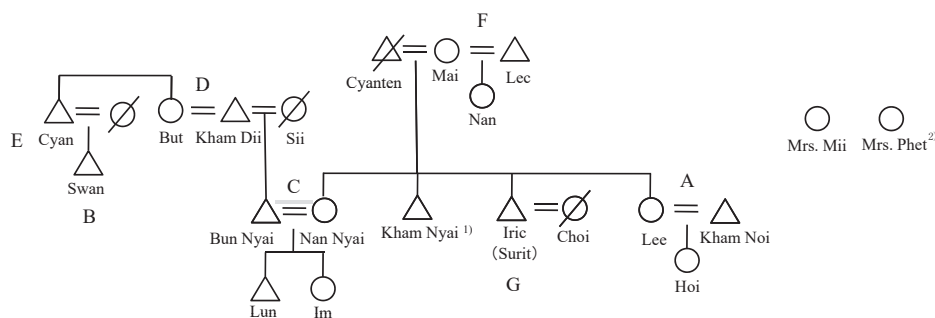
At the time of the 2015 survey, Mr. Kham Nyai, the son of Mrs. Mai in Hut F, lived in Nam Ngeam village that had been studied in 2014, and was absent from the Huai Mai Sot camp. In addition, the presence of women in their 50s was confirmed: Mrs. Mii and Mrs. Phet. These two, however, lived in the forest, and their whereabouts were unknown to the Huai Mai Sot camp residents, with whom

**Table 2** The inhabitants of each Mlabri house in Huai Mai Sot camp

House ID	Male (n)	Female (n)	Total (n)	Note
A	1	2	3	married couple and one infant
B	1		1	middle age male
C	2	2	4	married couple, one boy and one infant
D	1	1	2	old couple
E	1		1	middle age male
F	1	2	3	married couple and one girl
G	1		1	young male
Total	8	7	15	

Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2015)





**Figure 4** Family relationships of Mlabri in Huai Mai Sot camp  
 Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2015)  
 Note 1) Mr. Kham Nyai stayed in Nam Ggeam village  
 2) They do not know where Mrs Mii and Mrs. Phet stayed

they did not eat. The presence of 18 Mlabri individuals, of whom 15 participated in the Huai Mai Sot camp, was not confirmed in the 2015 survey.

The kinship in the group described above had been identified mostly from the 2014 survey. Their relationships are depicted in Figure 4. According to Mr. Bun Nyai of Hut C, Mr. Swan, of Hut B, was the Mlabri leader.

**3) Food, clothing, shelter and engaged activities**

The clothing of the Mlabri comprised commercially available T shirts and trousers, and was not different from that of the Lao people living nearby.

The staple food of the Mlabri was wild edible roots. It was confirmed also that the residents of Hut C possessed rice. Further, leftover food was observed at Hut D, which included instant noodles and duck meat cooked together. At Hut B, there was leftover glutinous rice that had been cooked in a bamboo container. The huts in the camp were arranged three-dimensionally, rather than on a flat surface (Figure 3). Huts A and B were located on the same side of the river; Hut C was on the opposite side. Hut floors were made of bamboo as were the roof frames and pillars supporting the roof. The roofs were made from banana leaves or palm

**Table 3** Each house condition of Mlabri in Huai Mai Sot camp

House ID	Note
A	They owned radio
B	
C	They owned dog and radio
D	They have a space for making rugs
E	
F	They owned radio. Pigs were disappered we saw in Feb. 2014
G	

Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2015)

fronds.

The Mlabri inhabitants were engaged in hunting, gathering and fishing. The only hunting method used was trapping, and, in the previous year they had captured one wild boar in that way. Digging sticks (wooden sticks with an iron tip) were used to gather edible roots. Fish were caught by hand.

## **RELOCATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE CAMP: COMPARISON BETWEEN OF CONDITIONS IN FEBRUARY, 2014 AND FEBRUARY, 2015**

### **1) Location, population and social composition of the camp**

The distribution of houses in the camp was three-dimensional in 2015, as opposed to the two-dimensional placement in 2014. Further, the population of the camp had increased, with two infants born since 2014, but had been reduced by one male adult because, in 2015, Mr. Kham Nyai was staying in Nam Ngeam village, observed in 2014. So the population totaled 15 persons, an addition of one. The houses had increased by two, from five in 2014 to seven in 2015. The addition was attributable to the independent huts of Mr. Swan of Hut B and Mr. Iric of Hut G, having been newly built.

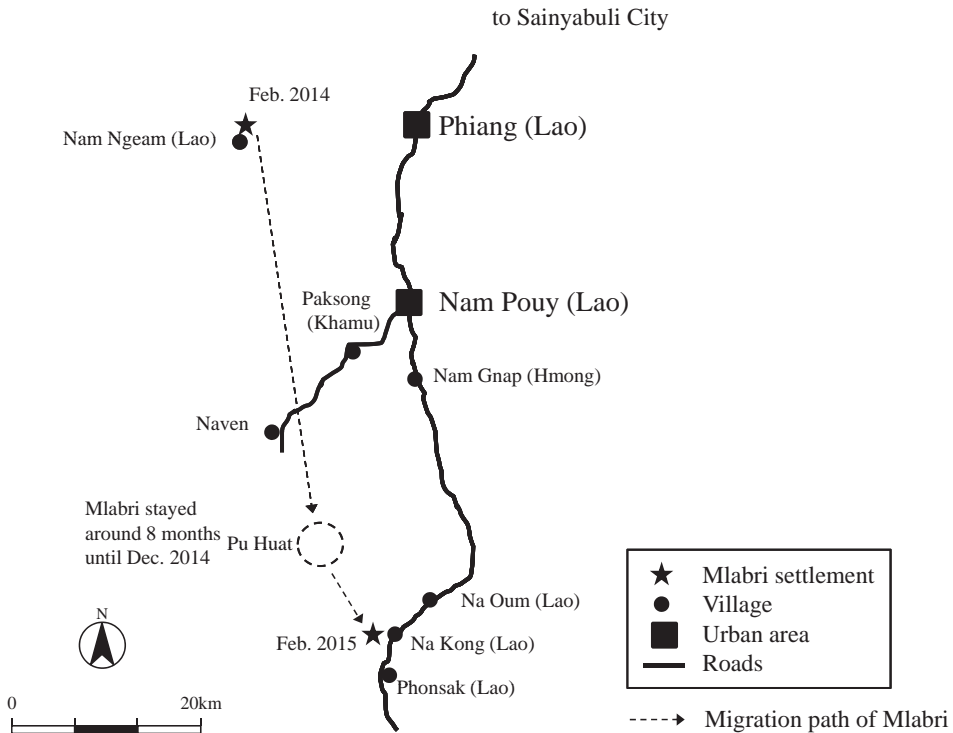
Huts F and G were located approximately 30 m higher than the others, because, according to Mr. Bun Nyai of Hut C, Mrs. Mai (of Hut F) preferred to live higher up.

### **2) Relocation of the camp and causes of the relocation (February 2014–February 2015)**

The Mlabri relocated their camp between the times of the surveys in February, 2014 and February, 2015 (Figure 5). They had remained in the Huai Mai Sot camp for approximately two months before the February, 2015 survey. Prior to that, they had stayed at Pu Huat for approximately eight months. Pu Huat, located on the upper slopes of a mountain, is a half-day walk from Huai Mai Sot. Of the 14 Mlabri individuals identified in Nam Ngeam village in 2014, only Mr. Kham Nyai remained There. The other 13 were found in the Huai Mai Sot camp during the 2015 survey.

According to Mr. Swan, they moved from Nam Ngeam to Na Kong because in the former they had not been given food. The journey from Nam Ngeam to Na Kong takes about four days on foot. Although this relocation is rather mysterious, of the 15 Mlabri individuals in Huai Mai Sot, the four in Huts F and G were allegedly transported by car (according to them, an official from the tourist bureau was involved). Presumably the rest walked between the villages.

Mr. Swan commented about the future of the Huai Mai Sot camp, since they expected to move to another place. He added that they were not certain whether to move to Nam Ngeam or Naven. It would purportedly take two days on foot from Na Kong to Naven, and an additional two days to Nam Ngeam. This group of the Mlabri in the 2015 survey had in the past also lived by nomadic camping



**Figure 5** Migration path of Mlabri from 2014 to 2015  
 Source: Authors' field study (Feb. 2014 and Feb. 2015)

in southern Phiang District, and the Nam Ngeam camp, where they had been staying for about one year at the time of the February, 2014 survey, was likely a temporary settlement. Therefore, after a one-year stay in Nam Ngeam they might have returned to their nomadic life at camps around Na Kong village. This inference is supported by an earlier statement of Mr. Photilen, in Na Kong village, that he had communicated frequently with the Mlabri over the past 4–5 years, and that they had gone to Nam Ngeam two years earlier, then disappeared but recently had begun reappearing.

### 3) Relationship with the Lao in Na Kong village

In the following section the relationship between the Lao in Na Kong village, investigated in 2015, and the Mlabri is discussed. First, it was confirmed that no marital relations existed between the Lao and the Mlabri. According to Mr. Photilen (a 72-year-old native of Na Kong village), who was involved closely with Mlabri in Na Kong village, the Mlabri did not assist in the farm work of Lao in particular. In this connection, Mr. Bun Nyai, a Mlabri living in Hut C, also commented, “we do not work (for them), but we receive food. We have no money,

but we receive money” So the exchange of labor between Lao and Mlabri could not be confirmed. Although the Mlabri primarily consume edible roots they collect, it is likely that they receive rice and other goods from the Lao living in Na Kong and other villages when they need such goods. Mr. Photilen<sup>8)</sup> in particular is taking care of the Mlabri living in the Huai Mai Sot camp, providing them with goods that included salt and spices.

In the region around Na Kong village, in which several Lao villages of about 500 residents have been established along the main road, the mere 15 Mlabri are likely to be living with the support of the Lao as necessary, without providing any particular labor service in return. The Lao follow Theravada Buddhism, for which small temples have been built in Na Kong and other nearby villages. The virtuous act of feeding the poor, based on the beliefs of Theravada Buddhism, appears to be a large part of the system supporting Mlabri needs.

## **DISCUSSION: SETTLEMENT OF THE MLABRI AND ITS CHANGES (1998–2015)**

Whereas previous anthropological studies of the Mlabri of Laos reported the condition of their nomadic life around year 2000, field surveys conducted for this study identified for the first time the status of a new Mlabri settlement. A new relationship was observed between the Mlabri and their external society, such as their participation in the large Elephant Festival<sup>9)</sup> held in Sainyabuli Province during February 17–19, 2014. The following section examines changes in Mlabri society that have occurred during the transition from a nomadic to a settled way of life.

### **1) Settlement and social changes**

By identifying the names of individual Mlabri families, in this section the findings of the present study are compared with conditions in the year 2000. Chazée’s fieldwork, conducted around 2000, revealed the existence of three nomadic groups and 22 Mlabri individuals in Sainyabuli Province (Chazée 2001: 15).

**The first group** consisted of nine members, including Seng Thong, Tchan Oupin, Tchi, Khamsen, May, Air, Khamson, Nyot, and Khamsing (Chazée 2001: 15). Of these, the 2014 survey confirmed the presence of four, including Tchan Oupin and Khamsen (identified as Mr. Bun Nyai of House No.1), May (Mrs. Mai of House No.4), and Nyot (Mrs. Nan Nyai of House No.1).

**The second group** was composed of nine people, including Tchan, Nyai, Mi, Batop, Than, Boun, Khem, and Khamidi. The result of the 2015 survey suggest that “Mi” might be Mrs. Mii, who could not be located, and that Khamidi and Boun might be Mr. Kham Dii and Mrs. But, of Hut D.

**The third group** included Yongyem, Son, Daopet, Wat, Pet, and others. For

this group, the names of Daopet (identified as Mrs. Lee of House No.5) and Wat (Mr. Swan of House No.3) were confirmed. In addition, “Pet” might be Mrs. Phet, who was not located.

Such findings reveal that the Mlabri settlement was developed by the members of the first, second, and some people of the third group around 2012, or about two years before the 2014 survey. Many Mlabri individuals outside these groups still live a nomadic life in the forest. When combined with the results of the 2015 survey, however, the findings suggest that the Mlabri have been changing their lifestyle from nomadic to settled and then back again to nomadic, such that they would not readily settle permanently in one place.

## **2) Changes in the relationships between Mlabri and their neighbors**

This study revealed that the Mlabri settled down in a region approximately 30 km north of their original nomadic range, and that most original group members now reside in the village. Nam Ngeam village has land for slash-and-burn farming, primarily for Job’s tears (that they likely exchange these for cash) on mountain slopes and wet rice fields in the lowlands. However, these are not used by the Mlabri. Between the main road and Nam Ngeam village, people often are encountered collecting and packing palm seeds into bags and transporting them by tractor to sell. However, No Mlabri dealing such forest products was observed.

Considering that in the past the Mlabri engaged in forest product trade by camping near the villages during the dry season, they might have withdrawn from such trade activities. At present, a Lao village exists approximately 1 km from the Mlabri dwellings. For that reason, the Mlabri might have opted to settle there, rather than moving around, so as to maintain assist by these Lao people.

## **3) Survival of the Mlabri in Laos**

The survey by Chazée revealed that the population of the Mlabri then included 22 nomads and six settlers. These six include Mlabri men who married Hmong and Khamu women and were living in Sainyabuli Province (Chazée 2001: 15). As indicated in the present study by the case of Nam Ngeam village, the Mlabri had continued to subsist for more than a decade. Their marital relations suggest, however, that difficulty in finding a marriage partner might have resulted from the small size of this ethnic group. The authors will continue to observe the Mlabri to ascertain whether they will be absorbed into other ethnic groups. Regarding this issue, interaction between the Mlabri in Laos and those on the Thai side of the border can be proposed. Such interaction might help them develop new Mlabri relationships and resolve problems related to marriage.

## **NOTES**

- 1) In this article, we use the “Mlabri” as the ethnic group name of hunter-gatherers. They are

- also known as “Yumbri” or “Kha Tong Luang”. Genetic evidences show their origin is close to the Htin ethnic group of the Austro-Asiatic language family (Oota et al. 2005, Xu et al. 2010).
- 2) The authors conducted two surveys of the Mlabri in Laos; the first in February, 2014 and the second in February, 2015. The latter was done in the period February 15–17 of 2015. For this research, initially we were informed of the Mlabri in Na Oum village, but they were not there. We subsequently obtained information related to the Mlabri camp in Na Kong village, which was visited and investigated on February 16, 2015. On February 17, 2015, we surveyed Mlabri visiting Phon Sak village, in the neighborhood of Na Kong village. Phon Tong village is located between Na Oum and Na Kong.
  - 3) Survey interviews were facilitated through the cooperation of Mr. Joi, a Lao.
  - 4) Interview with a female sundry shopkeeper in the village on February 24, 2014.
  - 5) Interview with a male sundry shopkeeper in the village on February 24, 2014.
  - 6) The Elephant Festival, started in 2007, has since been held annually at different locations in the province. It was held in Sainyabuli, the central city of the province, in 2014.
  - 7) Arrived after travelling on a cultivator for 23 minutes and walking for 18 min, we estimated each way to be approximately 3 km.
  - 8) Mr. Pavon of the neighboring Phon Sak village serves in a role similar to that of Mr. Photilen of Na Kong village.
  - 9) Mlabri participated in the Ninth Elephant Festival, held between February 13 and 15, 2015, in Sainyabuli Province (*Vientiane Times*, Feb 16, 2015, Photo 1). So far as could be confirmed, the Mlabri spent February 12 and 13 at the festival site in Sainyabuli, returning to Na Kong village on February 14. We confirmed five participants, including Mrs. Mai and



Photo 1 A local newspaper reported Mlabri in elephant festival  
Source: *Vientiane Times* 2015 Feb. 16.



**Photo 2** Mlabri people who attended the Elephant Festival  
Source: Photo by local festival participant.

her daughter Miss Nan, of Hut F and the couple Mr. Kham Noi and Mrs. Lee and their daughter Hoi (infant), of Hut A (Photo 2). We also confirmed some residents, including the married couple of Hut C and the old couple of Hut D, who did not participate in the festival.

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