

## Ethnology and Linguistics : Historical and Contemporary Relations between Mlabri and Hmong in Northern Thailand

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## Historical and Contemporary Relations between Mlabri and Hmong in Northern Thailand

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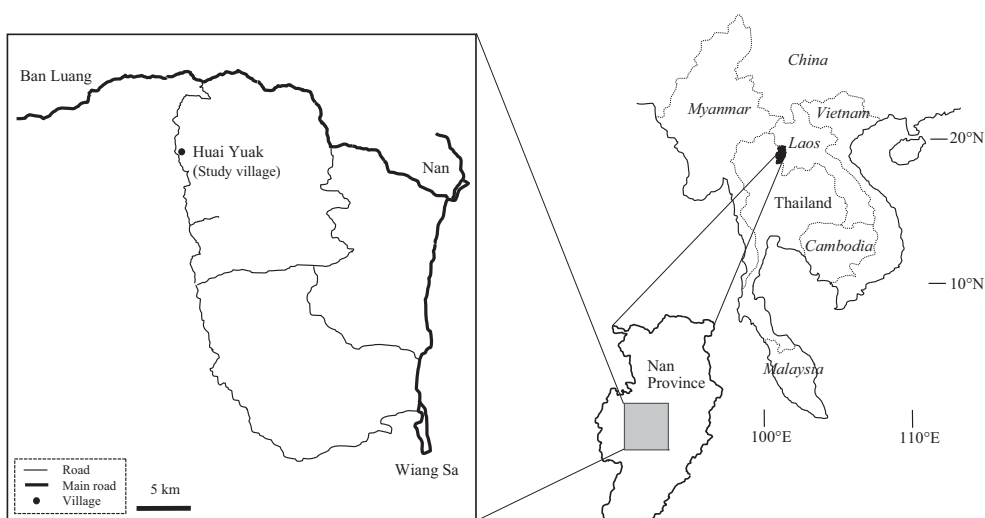
*National Museum of Ethnology*

### INTRODUCTION

Previous cultural anthropological studies of hunter-farmer relations have specifically addressed the socioeconomic relations of both sides: agricultural products acquired by work on a farmer's cultivated area, with hunted meat from the bush sold to the farmer. However, because of the lack of a historical record, few studies have described a historical transition in terms of hunter-farmer relations. Rare examples include instances where such relations have been investigated in tropical rainforest areas, such as between Pygmy hunters and Bantu-speaking farmers in Central Africa or between Agta hunters and nearby farmers in the Philippines.

In this study, we therefore attempt to describe the historical transition of relations between hunters and farmers in a tropical monsoon area. Cultural anthropological and ethno-archaeological studies of Mlabri hunters in northern Thailand have been conducted by Seidenfaden (1926), Bernatzik (1938), Velder (1963), Pookajorn (1985), Trier (1986), Vongvipak (1992) and Nan (2007). These studies pointed out that the Mlabri are an important tribe, one of the few remaining cases of mongoloid hunters who hunt using spears, rather than bows and arrows or blowpipes (Oobayashi 1968). They also showed that the Mlabri have a trading relation with the region's other hill tribes, among them the Hmong (Miao), Yao (Mien), and Khamu. They traded forest products, rice, tobacco, salt, clothes, knives, and so forth (Tanabe 1987: 763). DNA analyses indicate that some Mlabri groups originated from farmers around 800–500 years ago (Oota *et al.* 2005).

We have undertaken intensive fieldwork five times in neighbouring Mlabri hunter-gatherer and Hmong farmer settlements in northern Thailand, in October 2003, November 2004, May 2005, October 2006, and October 2007 (Figure 1).<sup>1)</sup> The framework of the present study incorporates two approaches examining the history of subsistence and social relations, as well as contemporary relations. It examines the manner in which hunters have established and maintained relationships with members of neighbouring groups and their own constituent groups over the past 90



**Figure 1** The study area.

years.

The name *Mlabri* means “the forest people”, but they are also called by various other names, including Phi Tong Luang,<sup>2)</sup> Khon Pa, and Yumbri (Trier 1981; Walker 1992). At one time, they lived nomadically in the forests of the Nan and Phrae provinces of northern Thailand and in Laos’ Xaignabouri province. However, the Mlabri who lived in Thailand have now settled down as a result of decisions and policies adopted by the Thai government. The Mlabri population in Thailand comprised eight bands of 25 families in 1976, and around 140 people formed bands of 15 people per band in 1982 (Trier 1986: 7). There were around 200 people in 1990 (Rischel 1995), and around 270 in 2003 (Ikeya 2004: 25).

As the Mlabri’s neighbours Hmong are also known to have migrated from one place to another, where they made village houses and cultivated upland rice, maize, and opium poppies in swidden cultivation (Geddes 1976). Hmong (Miao) farmers have lived in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Their population was reported by China as 7,350,000 in 1993, by Vietnam as 788,000 in 1999, by Laos as 315,000 in 1995, and by Thailand as 124,000 in 1995 (Culas and Michaud 2004: 71). It is generally thought that they reached Thailand at the end of the nineteenth century (Geddes 1976: 29).

As part of our study we consider forest ecology, because the Mlabri and Hmong both live in the forests. Swidden cultivation has a long-term impact on the forest. People clear the forest and burn it. These areas are mainly covered with bamboo forest. In the study area, bamboo forest vegetation was visible in many places (Photo 1), and because of its abundant plant roots and fruits Mlabri perceive the bamboo forest as a *benevolent* habitat.



**Photo 1** Mlabri settlement in the study village (June 2005).

## **HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MLABRI AND HMONG**

First, we present the symbiotic relationship shared by Mlabri hunters and Hmong farmers, a relationship that has prevailed for more than 90 years. The three stages of this relationship can be described as follows: 1) nomadic hunters and nomadic farmers; 2) nomadic hunters and sedentary farmers; 3) sedentary hunters and sedentary farmers.

### **1) First period (1919–1980): nomadic Mlabri hunters and nomadic Hmong farmers**

Until the early twentieth century the area inhabited by the Mlabri formed part of the Nan kingdom and the Mlabri were subjects of the Nan kings. Documentary records made by local Buddhist priests record that Mlabri offered honey, rattan, wax, and other forest products to the kings as tribute every year (Bernatzik 1938).

In the early twentieth century the Mlabri formed relations with other hill tribes such as the Khamu, H'tin, and Lafu. However, Hmong migration to northern Thailand led to the Mlabri developing more frequent relations with them than with the other hill tribes (Seidenfaden 1926). According to Bernatzik (1938), the Mlabri were living in both northern Thailand and the French Indochina in 1936 and 1937, but no clear evidence indicates that they had moved from present-day Laos to Thailand beyond the Mekong River before World War Two.

Living in the bamboo forests, the Mlabri obtained whatever rice they wanted through exchange with their neighbours and were also able to acquire tobacco

through exchange with the Hmong. Sometimes, too, the Hmong used them as additional labour for harvesting crops, remunerating them with food (Bernatzik 1938).

In the early 1970s the Mlabri were still forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers (Trier 1986). Their menfolk (not, we note, women or children) exchanged honey and plant roots for medicinal use for clothes, salts, tobacco, and iron products with other hill tribes. However, a new phase in this relationship started Around 1976 as the Mlabri began working constantly for Hmong farmers, cutting down forest trees to clear the land for upland rice cultivation.

## **2) Second period (1980–1998): nomadic Mlabri hunters and sedentary**

### **Hmong farmers**

After the settlement in the Sa area of 11 Hmong families around 1969–1970, timber companies secured logging rights there in 1973. These logging activities affected the Mlabri living area. The Hmong taught Mlabri the mode of cultivation as practised in Huai and Bow Huai villages.<sup>3)</sup> In addition, the Hmong gave the Mlabri clothes and medicines in exchange for their work for cultivation, and lent them aluminium containers to carry river water (Vongvipak 1992: 99).

During this period, the Hmong themselves became increasingly sedentary and the Mlabri, too, stayed near the Hmong villages for a long time, for 30 days in the case of Doi Phu Keng village and for 18 days in the case of Doi Luang village (both observations made in 1982; Pookajorn 1985). Almost all Mlabri families worked as agricultural labourers for the Hmong at all seasons of the year. When there was no such work available, they lived by moving into the forest. However, it was increasingly evident that this latter option was becoming difficult to sustain because forest resources were disappearing, and the Mlabri gradually became dependent upon rice as their main foodstuff. The Mlabri themselves understood the decline in the availability of forest resources in terms of their being punished by the spirits, with some apparently migrating from the Doi Pha Chik mountain area, which was known to have had abundant wild animals, to the area around Ban Luang during the 1980s (cf. Figure 1).

## **3) Third period (1998–2004): sedentary Mlabri hunters and sedentary**

### **Hmong farmers**

During this period many discussions were held concerning the establishment of a new village for the Mlabri. This was built in the western area of Nan Province in 1998 and was located in the Hmong village of Huai Yuak. This was followed in 2000 by the Thai government formally acknowledging them as Thai citizens. Immediately thereafter, two Japanese aid organisations began work with the Mlabri, who also now began to become an attraction for sightseeing tourists, a process involving the transformation of hunting and gathering subsistence activities into performances for tourists mediated by the Hmong through a company based in Nan City (Sakamoto 2007). At the same time, staff of the Japan Overseas Cooperation

Volunteers (JOCV) offered advice on health issues and soybean milk manufacture at the Mlabri site of Huai Yuak village between May 2001 and April 2003, while a second Japanese non-governmental organisation (NGO), “The Peace”, began work in June 2001. This NGO donated chickens to the Mlabri (though these were eaten before they could produce any eggs) and also made a substantial (450,000 yen) contribution to the cost of building a multi-purpose house within the Mlabri settlement. As of 2004, the Hmong were typically paying Mlabri some 50 baht (150 yen) per day, accompanied by food, in return for a day’s labour in their fields.

## CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MLABRI AND HMONG

### 1) Overview of the study area

In October 2003 there were three Mlabri villages in northern Thailand, one in Nan Province and two in Phrae Province. The first two of these settlements had Mlabri populations of around 120 and 150 respectively, but the population of the third was unknown.<sup>4)</sup> A Christian mission station had been active in one of the two Phrae Province villages for nearly 20 years and was engaged in a project to prepare the hillside land to the north of Ban Luang village in Nan Province to provide land for the exclusive use of the Mlabri.

We describe the case of the Mlabri village called Huai Yuak in Nan province, which was selected as the focus of our study (Figure 1). To access the village, we needed to use a four-wheel-drive car because the roads were unpaved. Huai Yuak village had assigned Mlabri and Hmong their own settlement sites in one village. The Mlabri site was founded in 1998, located on a hillside slope about 500 m distant from the Hmong site (Photo 1). The Hmong site of Huai Yuak village, founded in around 1980, comprised 80 households, with a population of 632 in 2005. The Mlabri spoke both Mlabri and the Thai language of their northern Thailand locale. Some Mlabri were also able to speak the Hmong language.

Figure 2 depicts the distribution of houses in the Mlabri settlement in October 2005. They not only had 19 houses, but also a meeting house, a kindergarten building, six pig huts, and one rabbit hut (Photo 2). We were able to identify only one pig hut left when we visited the settlement again in October 2006. We observed that they had scrapped houses for some reason and built others in different places, within gaps between existing houses in the village. Their houses are made of wood and bamboo with roofs of palm leaves and grass (Photo 3). They had beds with bamboo within their houses; two households had a radio-cassette player. It was said that the Mlabri had tried to request electric power supply facilities from the Thai government in July 2003, but that the government would not provide them because they instead wanted to encourage tourism in the area, using both Mlabri and Hmong as tour guides. Because the Mlabri village area is located in the south of Pusan National Park, not only the central government but also NGOs, Christian mission stations and the Mlabri themselves planned to include the Mlabri village area within

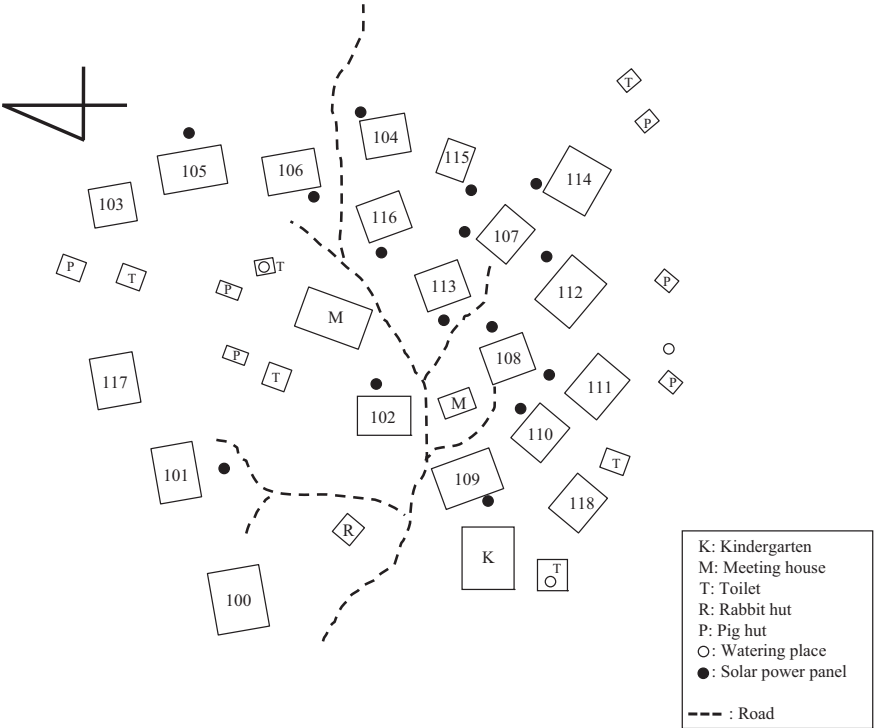




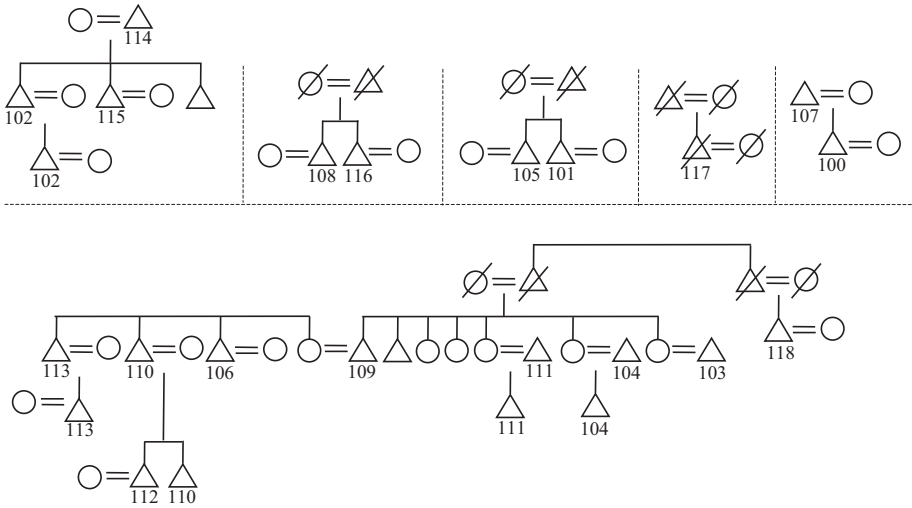
**Photo 2** Pig hut in Mlabri settlement (November 2004).



**Photo 3** Mlabri's house.



**Figure 2** Distribution of houses in the Mlabri settlement.  
Source: Authors' field study (October 2005)



**Figure 3** Family relationships of Mlabri in the study village.  
Source: Authors' field study (October 2005)



the National Park. Solar panels were eventually made available to each household in 2005.

Figure 3 portrays the family relationships of the Mlabri in the study village. We found that a Mlabri family fundamentally comprises a nuclear family of a husband and wife with their children. For example, household No. 114 had two sons, who were married and had their own houses (Nos. 102 and 115) in the settlement; household No. 102 resided with their son's family.

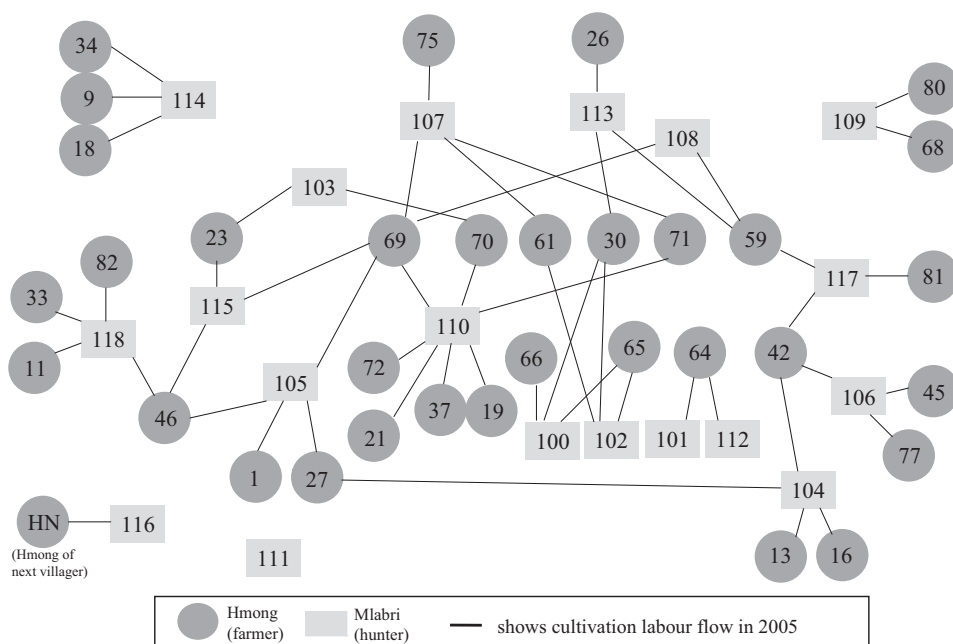
## 2) Economic activities in the study area

During our research, the Mlabri subsisted by performing for tourists. For example, when a tourist visited, middle-aged Mlabri men wearing loincloths acted out the hunting of small animals in the forest and the making of shelters, while women demonstrated the collection of plant roots. After the Mlabri conducted these performances for the tourist, they received pork and money from the Hmong, who mediated between them and the tour company. We observed them sharing the pork they had received in the village (Photo 4). The two men wearing loincloths in the photograph, taken in October 2003, changed back into their usual lower garments a few hours after the performance.

Apart from these tourism-related endeavours, the Mlabri subsisted from work undertaken for their Hmong neighbours, mostly in farming-related activities.<sup>5)</sup> Figure 4 and Table 1 present the relationship between Mlabri hunter-gatherers and Hmong farmers in terms of cultivation labour in 2005. Each line of Figure 4 shows the Mlabri cultivation labour flow in 2005. For example, Mlabri individual No. 114 worked for three Hmong farmers. We were able to record 34 Hmong farmers who had such relationships with Mlabri hunter-gatherers, each of whom maintained such



**Photo 4** Sharing pork in the Mlabri settlement (October 2003).



**Figure 4** Relationships among Mlabri sedentary hunters and Hmong sedentary farmers from January to October 2005.

Note: Study of 19 Mlabri households and 77 Hmong households.

Source: Authors' field study (October 2005)

ties with between one and seven Hmong. There were Hmong who positively had relations with Mlabri, but those relations were limited to members of Hmong who had relations with the Mlabri (Table 1). For example, family group B2 shows a high relation rate of around 70%, but family group B3 a low rate of around 30%. We assume these differences in relations depended mainly on the Hmong farmers' policies on family groups, as some Hmong farmers mentioned that they could and did cultivate their land by themselves without recourse to relations with Mlabri hunter-gatherers.

Our informants indicated that Mlabri were able to acquire 2–3 kg of pork,<sup>6)</sup> 6–10 kg of rice, or an equivalent amount of money per day by working in Hmong maize fields. Attempts by NGOs and the Thai government to introduce the husbandry of chickens and pigs or mushroom cultivation as alternative sources of income had not been successful.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that some Mlabri had started to create small farms, with two families following this strategy in October 2003, five in November 2004 and as many as 15 by October 2005 (Figure 5, Photo 5). Neither the Mlabri nor the Hmong had any official right to own the land they used, but rights to use the land do exist, depending on local rules among Hmong farmers. Mlabri hunter-gatherers could rent cultivated fields for one or more years, as a result of negotiation with Hmong farmers.

**Table 1** Relationships between Mlabri and Hmong in which Mlabri served as laborers in the Hmong's cultivating activities in 2005.

No.	Hmong family group I.D. no.	Household	Mlabri household no.																Total number of households having relations		
			100	101	102	103	104	105	106	107	108	109	110	111	112	113	114	115		116	117
1	B1	13																			1
2	B1	16																			1
3	B2	23																			2
4	B2	26																			1
5	B2	27																			2
6	B2	30																			3
7	B2	59																			3
8	B2	61																			2
9	B2	64																			2
10	B2	65																			2
11	B2	69																			5
12	B2	70																			2
13	B2	71																			2
14	B2	82																			1
15	B3	1																			1
16	B3	9																			1
17	B3	10																			1
18	B3	11																			1
19	B4	18																			1
20	B4	19																			1
21	B4	66																			1
22	B4	75																			1
23	B4	77																			1
24	B5	21																			1
25	B5	46																			3
26	B5	68																			1
27	B5	72																			1
28	B5	81																			1
29	B6	42																			3
30	B7	33																			1
31	B7	37																			1
32	D	34																			1
33	E	80																			1
34	HN																				1
Total number of households having relations			3	1	3	2	3	4	3	4	2	2	7	0	1	3	3	3	1	3	4

1 Sign (○) indicates Mlabri had a relation with Hmong by which they worked as laborers in Hmong cultivation activities from January to October, 2005.

2 Hmong in Huai Yuak village had 82 households, but 5 households did not stay during the study period.

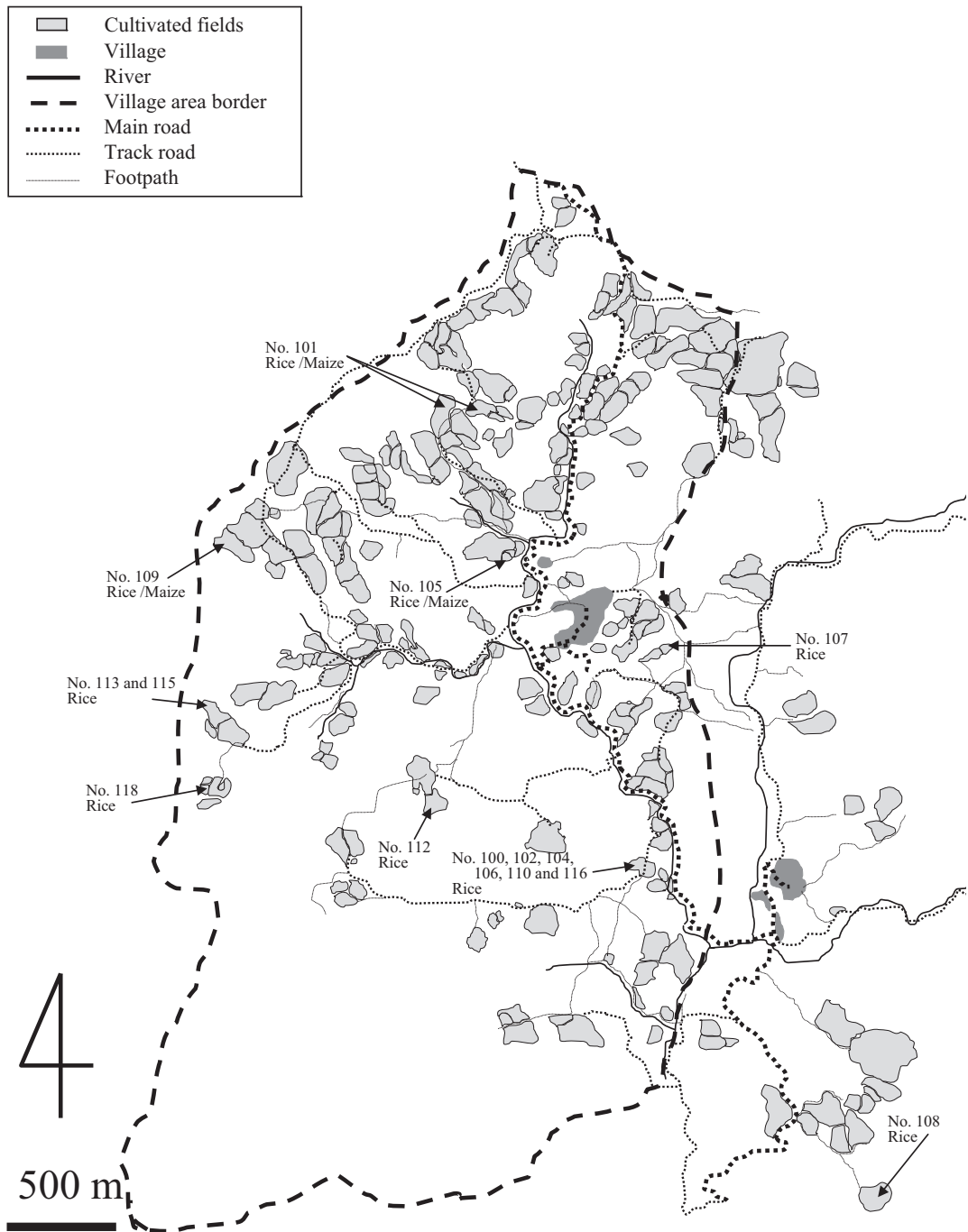
3 Hmong in Huai Yuak village of 77 households had 5 different family groups, with 2 of A, 60 of B, 4 of C, 7 of D, and 4 of E.

4 Households of family group B had 7 sub-groups: 7 of B1, 17 of B2, 12 of B3, 10 of B4, 7 of B5, 5 of B6, and 2 of B7.

5 Household ratio of Hmong in each family group that had a relation with Mlabri were as follows: 0% in A, 29% in B1, 71% in B2, 33% in B3, 50% in B4, 71% in B5, 20% in B6, 100% in B7, 0% in C, 14% in D, and 25% in E.

6 HN indicates a Huai Nan Nyu villager. Huai Nan Nyu village was located near the Huai Yuak village 4 km to the south.

Source: Authors' field study (Oct. 2005)



**Figure 5** Locations of fields cultivated by Mlabri in the village area in 2005.  
Source: Authors' field study (October 2005)



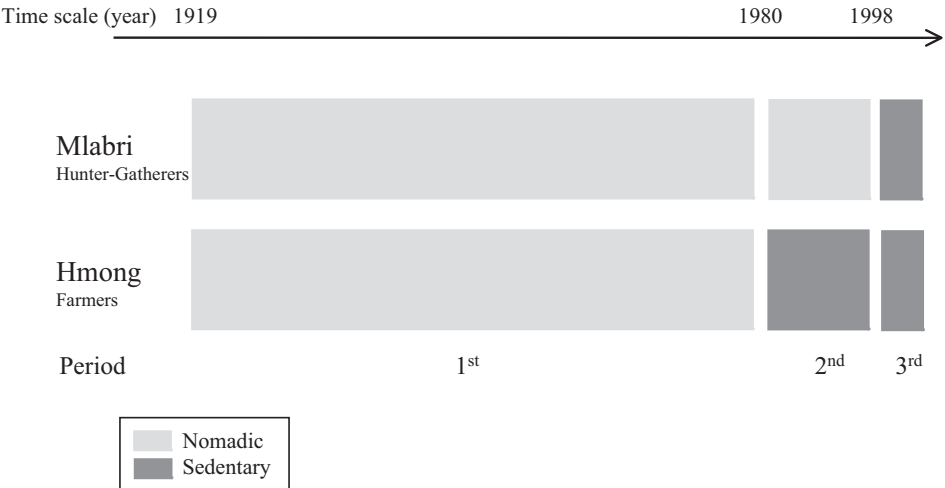
**Photo 5** Fields cultivated by the Mlabri. The Mlabri were cultivating upland rice as a food staple (October 2005).

## **CHANGING RELATIONS BETWEEN MLABRI AND HMONG OVER THE PAST 90 YEARS**

In this chapter we have attempted to describe the changing historical relationship between Mlabri hunter-gatherers and Hmong farmers by collating and assessing the results of both previous studies and our own fieldwork. We have been able to describe three distinct phases of their 90-year-long relationship, from an initial period when both societies were still nomadic, through a second period when the Mlabri remained mobile but the Hmong had become sedentary, to the most recent period when both societies have settled down (Figure 6).

During the first period, the Mlabri's relationship with the Hmong focused on their exchange of honey and plant roots for the Hmong's tobacco and salt. Individual relationships remained relatively non-specific and both societies remained mobile. Bernatzik (1938) noted that the Mlabri were able to live in the bamboo forest because there was abundant food in the form of plant roots and fruits. We assume that the Mlabri were able to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the Hmong because they were able to rely heavily on forest resources.

In the second period the Mlabri's relationship with the Hmong had changed to involve their working in the Hmong's fields. During this time the forest environment was undergoing significant change because of commercial logging activities that reduced the availability of, and access to, wild forest plants. By working at various jobs such as slashing, weeding, and harvesting for the Hmong, the Mlabri were able



**Figure 6** Changing historical relationships between Mlabri hunter-gatherers and Hmong farmers during the past 90 years in northern Thailand.

Note: In terms of nomadic condition of the Hmong, they migrated from one place to another, as they subsisted in swidden cultivation (Geddes 1976: 41).

Source: Authors' study.

to compensate for this decrease in forest foodstuffs by obtaining rice from the Hmong, but the price of this was that they became unable to live without a continuing relationship with their farming neighbours.

More recently still, in the third period that we have identified, the Mlabri have not only continued to work for the Hmong, being paid for this on a daily basis in money and food, but have also begun to subsist through cultivation of their own fields. At the same time, they have begun to engage with the wider tourism business in northern Thailand, albeit via Hmong intermediaries.

By examining the case of the Mlabri and the Hmong, we have been able to describe various relationships of exchange between employers and labourers engaged in cultivation, as well as between mediators and performers in the tourism industry, that have arisen from the historical connections between these tropical monsoon forest hunter-gatherer and farmer societies. When seeing Hmong people burning cultivated fields, it is said that young Mlabri told them that they were dealing roughly with the mountains (Sakamoto 2007). What were the Hmong's feelings when they witnessed the Mlabri's lifestyle? That question remains a subject for further study, together with not only their socioeconomic relations but also changes over time in their mutual recognition of each other.

**NOTES**

1) Ikeya has repeatedly done his fieldwork at the Mlabri settlement for the short period since 2003 (Ikeya 2004). Nakai conducted field studies in environmental anthropology related to the



- pig husbandry of Hmong farmers from May 2005 to January 2007, 13 months in all (Nakai 2009).
- 2) Phi Tong Luang might be translated as “The Spirits of the Yellow Leaves”.
  - 3) We use the spelling “Huai”, which means “valley” in the Thai language; previous studies noted it as “Huay” or “Hoy”.
  - 4) In January 2001, the population of the Mlabri village of Huai Hom in Phrae Province was 117 (Sakamoto 2007).
  - 5) Mlabri in Phrae Province also engaged in such relationships with local Hmong (Vongvipaku 1992: 98).
  - 6) The Mlabri in Phrae Province request 8–9 kg of pork from the Hmong for two days of agricultural labour (Vongvipaku 1992).

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