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Sedentarization and Landscape Change among the Mlabri in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The process of landscape change that the hunter-gatherer Mlabri community at HY village in Nan Province, Thailand, has experienced since the start of settlement in 1998 is described in this article by referring to the results of intermittent field research divided, and is into three periods: (1) pre-Royal Project period (1998–2007), (2) first Royal Project period (2007–2010), and (3) second Royal Project period (2010–2012). In summarizing these three periods, the following characteristics can be highlighted. First, regarding occupation, animal husbandry and plant cultivation have had difficulty in being accepted. Water buffalo, chickens, pigs, frogs, mushrooms, and vegetables have been tried, but failure has been frequent. Second, the community has been monitored constantly by the police since the Royal Project started. It is not a general situation of the villages in Thailand. Finally, the community's development context is extremely complicated. The number of actors involved, such as in the Royal Project, have been increasing, especially since 2007.

INTRODUCTION

Livelihoods of the hunter-gatherer Mlabri in Thailand were well described since 1930s (cf. Bernatzik 1938, Boeles 1963, Trier 1981, 2008, Pookajorn 1992, Na Nan 2005, 2012). Then, recent Mlabri studies were discussed about community formation and settlement which have been promoted rapidly, especially since around 2000 (cf. Buramitara 2003; Na Nan 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2016; Ikeya and Nakai 2009; Nakai and Ikeya 2016; Nimonjiya 2014, 2016, 2017). To complicate the situation many actors have participated in the “development” of the Mlabri. In previous studies, Na Nan (2012) examined the conditions of the Mlabri until about 2010, showing that about 350 Mlabri lived at five sites in Nan and Phrae provinces in northern Thailand. Among the five, two main sites are Huai Yuak (HY) village, in Nan, and HH village, in Phrae province. This study investigates closely the situation of HY village in which a Mlabri community and

a Hmong community are 500 m apart (Figure 1).

Using the case of HY village in particular, authors examined relations between the Mlabri and the Hmong, who subsist around Mlabri using slash-burn agriculture, and constructed a model to simplify the changes in their relationship (Figure 2; Ikeya and Nakai, 2009). Using this model, authors divided the relationship between Mlabri and Hmong into three periods: (1) that in which both

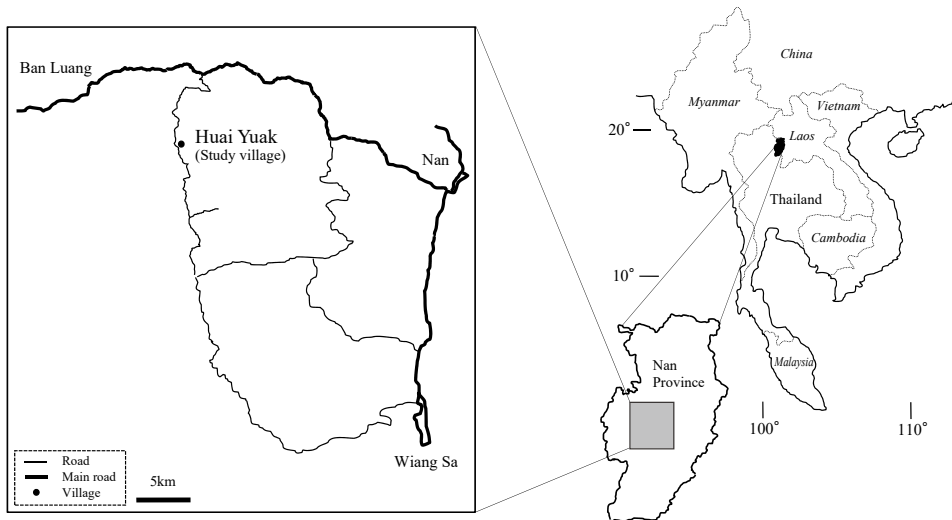


Figure 1 Study Area
Source: Author's field study

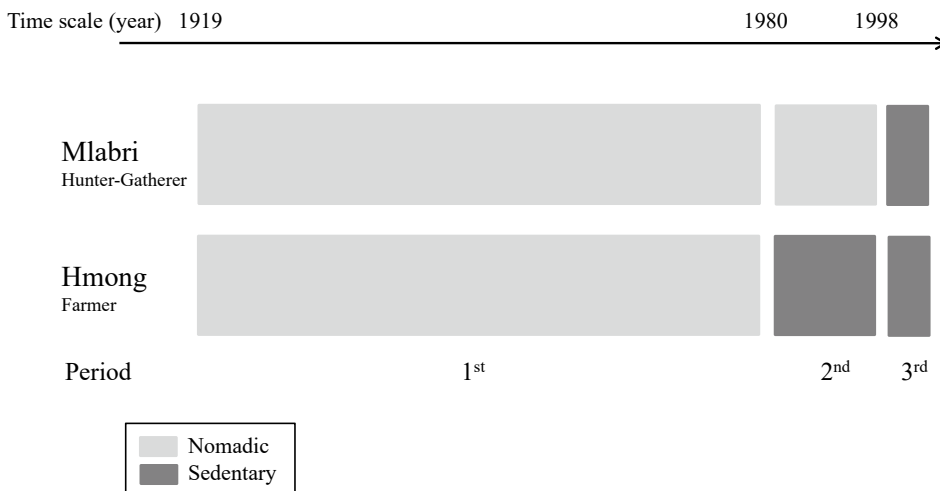


Figure 2 Changing historical relationships between Mlabri hunter-gatherers and Hmong farmers in northern Thailand.
Source: Modified by Ikeya and Nakai (2009). Author's field study

Mlabri and Hmong were nomadic (to 1980); (2) that when the Hmong settled, but the Mlabri remained nomadic (1980–1998); and (3) that when both the Hmong and Mlabri settled (from 1998 onward). Na Nan (2013) pointed that this model simplified the circumstances, and that the effect of “the nation of Thailand” on the change process should be analyzed and emphasized further.

The authors consider that the degree of simplification depends on the use of the model. For example, Na Nan’s (2013) comments would be valid in presenting the Mlabri situation in a more complicated model featuring the many different roles of the various actors. In this article, considering the increasingly complex situation of Mlabri in HY village the authors describe the settlement process since 1998 to 2012 from the perspective of landscape change in the community (Photo 1-1, Photo 1-2).

The process of landscape change that the Mlabri community at HY village has experienced since the start of settlement in 1998 is described later in this article. Here, based on the results of intermittent field research, the authors divide landscape change into three periods convenient for explanation: (1) pre-Royal Project period (until 2007), (2) first Royal Project period (2007–2010), and (3) second Royal Project period (from 2010).

PRE-ROYAL PROJECT PERIOD (1998–2007)

Until 2007, slow-paced development had been enforced within the framework of local administration in Nan Province, combined with assistance, repeated non-systematically and sporadically, from various NGO/NPO groups, both domestic and foreign (Table 1, Table 2).

During this period, rabbit hutches were constructed. Rabbits were introduced as pets by a foreign NGO, which also built dwelling houses for the Mlabri (Figure 3a, October 2005). Although government-led livestock rearing had not been introduced, small-scale activities had already begun there being six pig huts in the community. However, during the period of the authors’ investigation most pig huts lacked pigs and only two pigs were confirmed to exist in the entire community.

Because the Mlabri wanted to have a electric power supply, a solar panel had been set up beside each house, at 15 locations within the community. Further, in those days, a single motorcycle was owned by the male leader of this community. This was donated by an outside group, although the details remain unknown. Probably, the owner found it difficult to earn enough money to buy gasoline, so he used his motorcycle only infrequently.

By about one year later, during which many kinds of livestock husbandry had been introduced by local governments, the community landscape had changed dramatically (Figure 3b, September, 2006). The governor of Nan Province and district level chiefs participated in the “development” policy efforts. Most were ethnically Thai and paddy-rice farming people, so their policy making was based on the development patterns of paddy-rice farming (Photo 2). For example, it was



A: June, 2005



B: April, 2006

Photo 1-1 Landscape transition of Mlabri settlement from 2005 to 2007
Source: Author's field study



C: July, 2006



D: October, 2007



E: September, 2009



F: September, 2010

Photo 1-2 Landscape transition of Mlabri settlement from 2009 to 2014
Source: Author's field study



G: February, 2012



H: February, 2014

Table 1 Sedentarizing process and activities of each actors

Year	Actors	Events
1980		Construction of Hmong settlement in Huai Yuak
1998	HT with Nan Provincial Office	Construction of Mlabri settlement in Huai Yuak
2000	Thai Government	Mlabri got National ID
2001	HT with Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers	Promotion of bathing and soy milk drinking custom to Mlabri children
2001	HT with Japanese NGO "The People"	Construction of kindergarten house
2004	HT with European NGO	Construction of solar power electric system and rabbit hut
2004	HT with Japanese NGO "The People"	Construction of dormitory house for Mlabri children in Hmong settlement
2004	Christian mission	Activating of christian missionary in Huai Yuak
2004	HT with Dutch NGO	
2006	HT with the group of district level chiefs in Nan	Introduction of buffalo husbandry
		Total 25 buffalos were given to Mlabri, one buffalo per household

HT: Hill Tribes development center, Nan Province

Source: Author's filed study

Table 2 Activities of Japanese NGO "The People"

Year	Events
2001	Acted another project in Surin Province
2002	Started activities in Mlabri settlement
	Offered chicken to Mlabri. But they consumed before they got eggs
2004	Paid 200 thousand-Yen for constructing dormitory house
2004	Paid 450 thousand-Yen for constructing multipurpose house
	HT paid 60% and "The People" paid 40 % of the budget
2004, Nov.	Two member of "The People" visited Mlabri settlement
	Denmark TV film crew and Mr. Rischel visited Mlabri settlement

1) HT: Hill Tribes development center, Nan Province

Source: Author's filed study

said that each district level chiefs donated one water buffalo to the community. Officers of Nan Province Hill Tribes Centers and Wiang Sa district especially Mae Khaning sub-district, were in charge of introducing business practices.

Here, the conditions of rearing livestock in the community in 2006, when large livestock like water buffaloes had already been introduced (Photo 3), are provided from field notes:

July 3, 2006: Evening. An official in charge of the Sirindhorn Project (a former governor of Nan Province) makes an inspection visit of the Mlabri community.

July 21, 2006: Three water buffaloes, eight sheep (one a male lamb), and 16 white pigs (two male) are present in the camp. There are also 12 black pigs (two adults, 10 piglets).

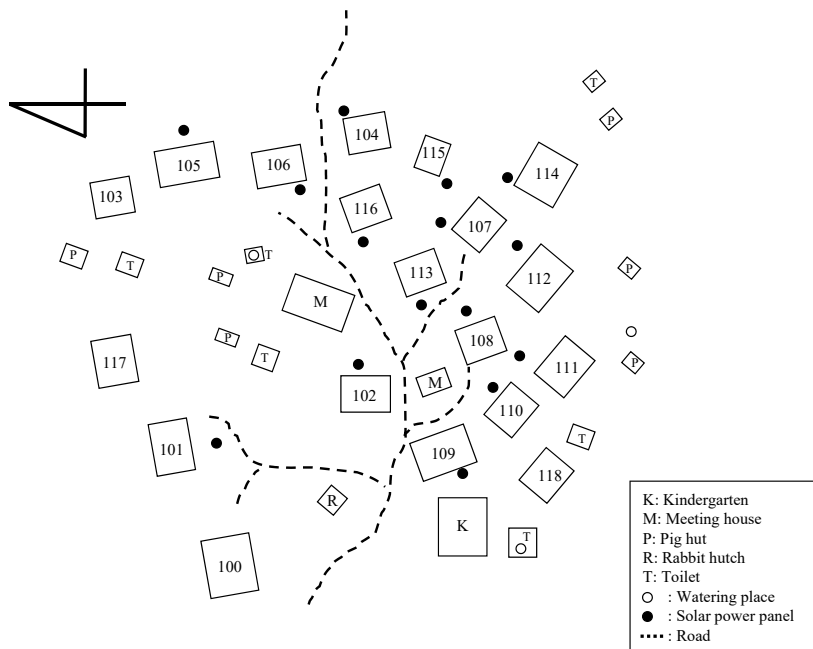


Figure 3a Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, October 2005
 Source: Modified by Ikeya and Nakai (2009). Author's field study



Photo 2 Local officer interview with Mlabri (Photograph by the author, July, 2006)



Photo 3 Water Buffalo husbandry of Mlabri (Photograph by the author, September, 2006)

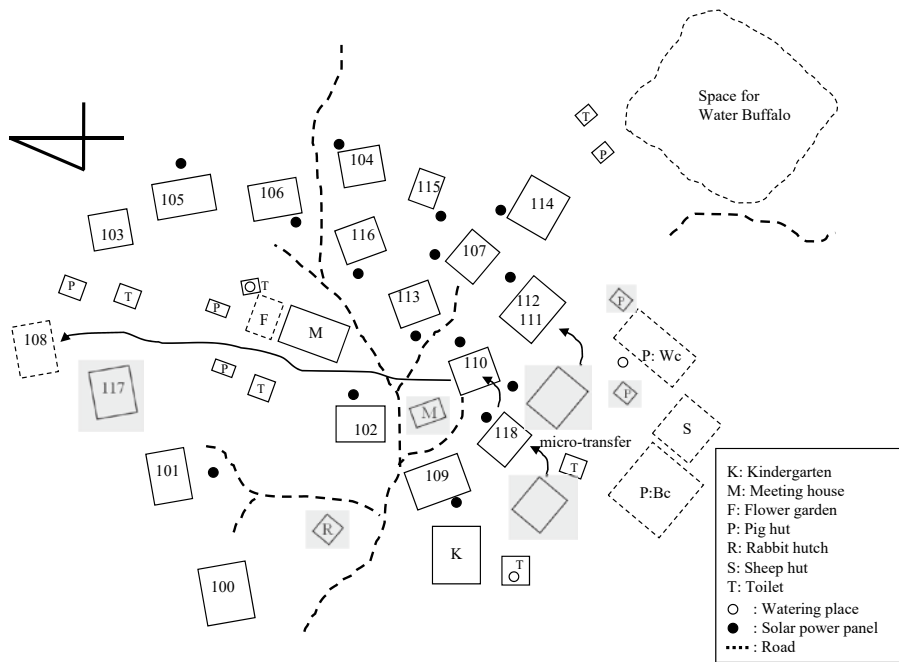


Figure 3b Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, September 2006

Source: Author's field study

Note: House No.108 was built in 2006. Wc indicate white colored, Bc indicate black colored.

July 24, 2006: Water buffaloes have increased to 12. They are reared in a bamboo forest.

September 11, 2006: After three white pigs died of disease, two pigs were added in early September. A few days ago, a kindergarten teacher reported that one ewe was eaten.

October 11, 2006: Five water buffaloes added to early-October, increasing their total to 17.

In this period, the bamboo forest southeast of the Mlabri community was removed to make an enclosure for water buffaloes. The authors sometimes saw Mlabri grazing water buffalo alongside the road in the morning and evening. The sites were within 2 km of the community. Several adults, men and women, and several youths often accompanied the grazing herd, which children followed while playing. Thereafter, pasturage gradually became rare. In turn, Mlabri developed areas for pasture. They were sometimes seen to carry baskets of grass on their backs. Eventually, to save their labor, they sold all the buffalo to avoid the bother of rearing them.

Details of small changes seen for housing distribution within the community are described next. First, family 108 built a new home north of the community (Figure 3b). Residents moved there. Then family 110 moved into a house, vacated by family 108. Later, family 118 moved into the house vacated by family 110. Then the house in which family 118 had vacated was destroyed. When families 112 and 111 started to live in a house, the house in which family 111 had lived until then was also destroyed. In a manner similar to this, new houses were built. Existing homes were reused or dismantled. Some relationship with local government activities can be inferred behind the micro-level movements of the Mlabri. In other words, the local government instructed them to vacate the southern part of the community in order to set up a shed for housing sheep and pigs and a site for mushroom cultivation. This can also be considered a small-scale creation of a public space. Livestock was bought as common property and raised cooperatively. A new meeting place at the center of the community was built in 2005. However, by then (September, 2006), the old building used for meetings had already been removed. Outside the context described above, the house of family 117 was demolished because of the owner's death.

The situation until 2006, as described above, can be summarized as follows: The pre-Royal Project period saw the effects of development activity within the framework of provincial-level local governments as well as conventional development support activities by private groups, such as NGOs. As to the effects on landscape change within the Mlabri community, although the introduction of large livestock had a dramatic effect, others were confirmed at a minor level. They can be summarized as three landscape changes: (1) *energy* (elementary electrification by setting up solar panels), (2) *occupation* (trial of rearing pigs, sheep, or water buffaloes, the last having an especially large impact), and (3) *space*

(creation of public spaces including a meeting house and the site for rearing livestock cooperatively).

FIRST ROYAL PROJECT PERIOD (2007–2010)

During this period, large-scale development led by a Royal Project had been advanced beyond the framework of local governments within Nan Province, as a result of Princess Sirindhorn's visit to the Mlabri community in February, 2007 (Table 3). Thailand's Royal Family has a strong political impact based on the people's tremendous support for King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Further, the Royal budget accounts for a substantial portion of the national budget.

At the Mlabri community in HY village, a hut without walls was built in the northern area to house a statue of Buddha for the visit of the princess (Figure 3c, October, 2007). The statue was confirmed in research conducted in October. However, it was only emplaced, and Mlabri devoted no special attention to it. No Mlabri was confirmed worshipping it. The officials in charge of the Royal Project for development might have wished to show physically that Mlabri were interested in Buddhism. In other words, this Buddha statue might be nothing more than an ornament brought in and which was displayed there to persuade outsiders of the faith of the Mlabri. In contrast, some Mlabri participate actively in Christian services held at a Hmong community in the vicinity. They are motivated strongly because they receive free lunches there. Thus in terms of practical interest, the Mlabri are more interested in Christianity than in Buddhism.

Additionally, in time for the princess' visit, an adult educational facility for Mlabri was built west of the kindergarten, located nearest the community entrance. In the southern part of the community, the site of a demolished water buffalo shed

Table 3 Activities of Princess Sirindhorn Royal Project

Year	Events
2007, Feb.	Royal Princess Sirindhorn visited Mlabri settlement in Huai Yuak
2007, Feb.	Setting of buddha statues in Mlabri settlement
2007, Oct.	Construction of new house building site in Mlabri settlement
2008	Construction of adult education house for reading and writing Thai language
2008	Construction of police station
2008	Construction of pig hut
2009	Mlabri sold out all buffalos
2010	Mlabri got one track car for shared use
2011	They setted electric cables and introduced electric power to Mlabri settlement
2011	Some Mlabri went away to work for tree plantation
2012	Some Mlabri migrated to Huai Lu settlement in the Nanthaburi National Park area

Source: Author's filed study

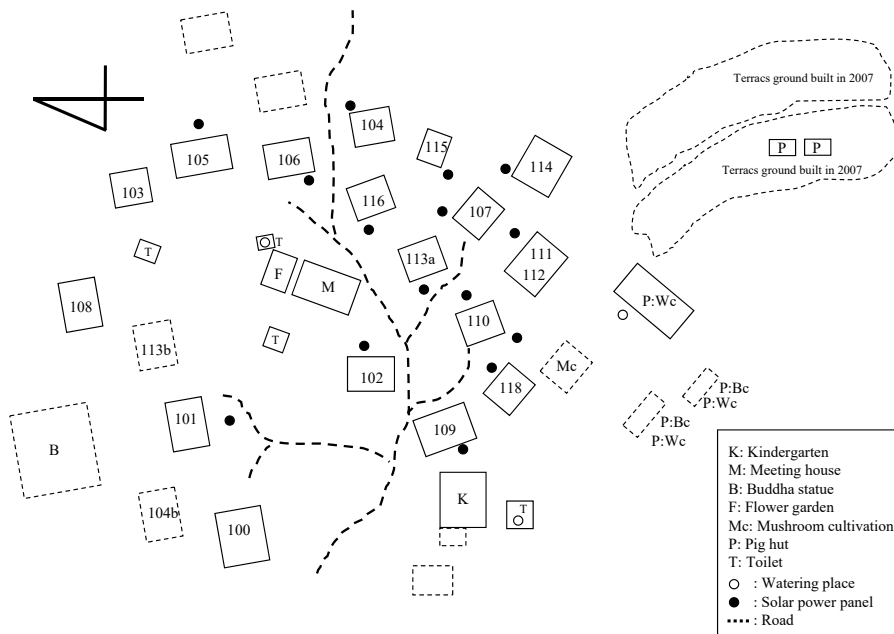


Figure 3c Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, October 2007

Source: Author's field study

Note: House No.113b, 104b were built in 2007. Wc indicate white colored, Bc indicate black colored.

was largely developed as a new residential area. For development, large construction machines, such as power shovel, were used. The development site was divided into two terraces. Pig huts were placed on the lower terrace, for keeping about 20 pigs. The hut in which sheep had been raised during the previous year was demolished, and replaced by a pig hut. The situation in the wake of rearing sheep was unclear. Nothing remained as of October, 2007. After they stopped raising water buffaloes, the policymakers seemingly intended to have the Mlabri rear livestock, specializing in pigs. The mushroom cultivation facility was also set up. It appears to have ended in failure.

The authors did not visit the research site in 2008. Consequently, changes during two years were apparent from the research conducted in September, 2009. Six families resided at the site that had been newly developed in the southern part of the community. Additionally, houses increased in the eastern part in the direction of a nearby mountain (Figure 3d, September, 2009). In the interim the Royal Project led by Princess Sirindhorn had attained full scale. The change by settlers from Mlabri communities of Phrae Province can be pointed out specifically. In addition since the police became located permanently at villages, teachers from the Thai ethnic group have conducted Thai language education for adults. Water supply facilities were set up for newly built rectangular pig huts with concrete floors.

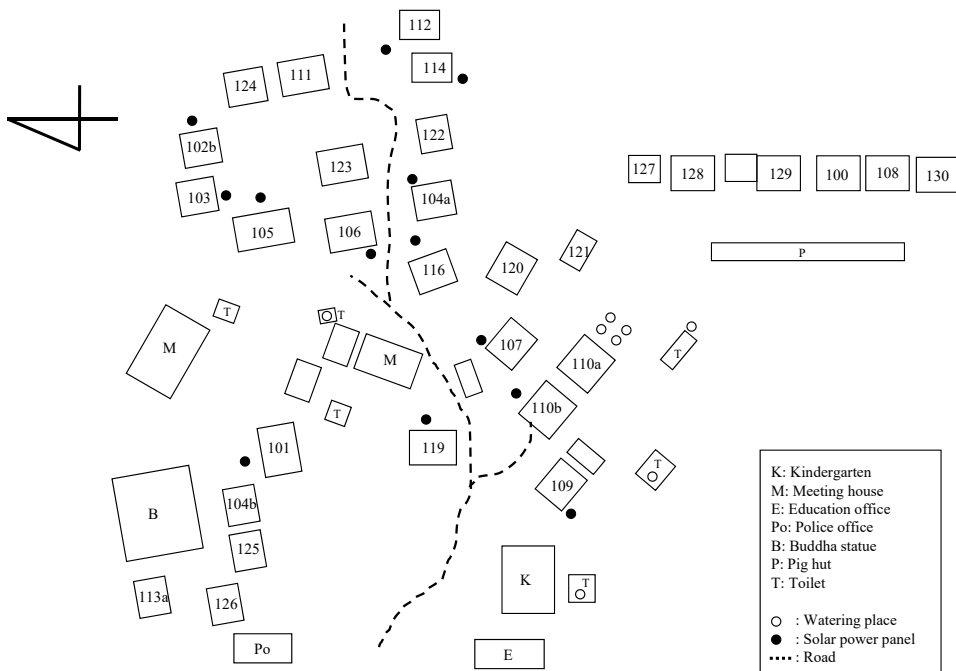


Figure 3d Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, September 2009
Source: Author's field study

The Mlabri community then owned more than five motorcycles. During the time of the study Mlabri were sometimes seen to ride a motorcycle to their fields, partly because of the Royal Project, but mainly because the purchase price of maize had increased from 2007. That improvement increased the cash revenue of Hmong in the neighborhood, enough to lend motorcycles to the Mlabri who helped them to grow maize. Alternatively, the Mlabri themselves started to buy motorcycles with money earned by growing and selling maize.

From the above, it can be inferred that the involvement of the Thai Royal Family rapidly and dramatically boosted the development of the Mlabri community during this period, which is summarized into the following six extremely multifaceted changes: (1) *religion* (symbolic change by placing a Buddha statue), (2) *education* (Thai language education for adults by teachers from Thai ethnic groups), (3) *management* (monitored by the police permanently assigned to the Mlabri community), (4) *land* (large-scale development of residential areas using construction machines), (5) *population* (increased by settlers from HH village in Phrae Province), and (6) *transport* (some Mlabri able to move faster through the introduction of motorcycles). Each change has increased the difference from the conventional Mlabri lifestyle. Landscape changes are also brought about by many outside actors and do not occur spontaneously.

SECOND ROYAL PROJECT PERIOD (2010–2012)

During this period, three years following the development led by the Royal Project, some results have appeared. Above all, in terms of raising livestock and frogs, and growing mushrooms, introductions and failures have been repeated cyclically. Although the appearance of development has stabilized, some changes have had a strong effect on the lifestyle of the Mlabri, such as the introduction of cars in 2010 and full-scale electrification in 2012, and differ from those in the first period.

The authors also investigated the Mlabri community in September, 2010. Then, the road to the entrance of the community had been straightened and widened (around October, 2009). In addition, the Buddha statue was moved to the meeting house. The shed at which it had been before was largely converted into a lodging house for police (Figure 3e, February, 2011). Further, a 2-ton Toyota truck was left beside a house near the community entrance. It can be regarded as the first car owned by a Mlabri. It was offered free of charge by an American Christian group (related to those Hmong who live in the USA). Although it is parked by the house of a man who appears to be a leader, it is not owned by any particular individual. Since they cannot afford to buy gasoline for it, the truck is

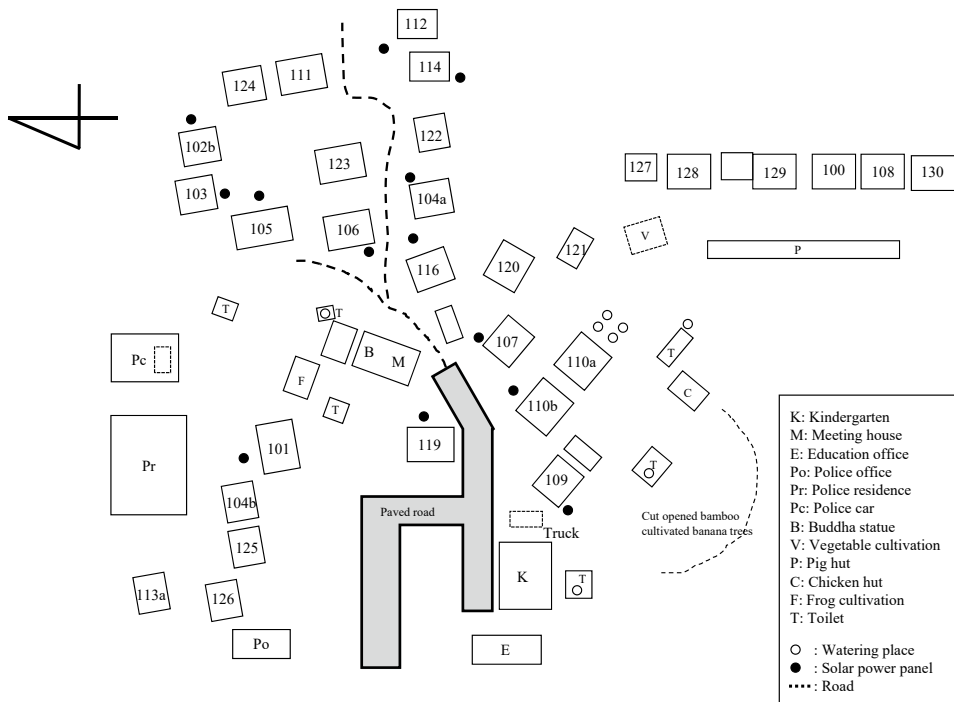


Figure 3e Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, February 2011
 Source: Author’s field study

not used often.

According to the bulletin board of the village's educational facility, the population of Mlabri as of 2010 was 172, including 73 males and 99 females. Thirty-five families lived in 31 houses as of May 19, 2010. The road to the entrance had been paved with concrete when the authors conducted their investigation in February, 2011. The road was steeply sloping. Therefore, its concrete pavement enabled people to drive into the community during the rainy season (which also means that it was convenient for the people in charge of development). The pig huts were again used for keeping pigs: 18 black pigs (about six-months old, and middle sized) were observed. At the space formerly used for livestock in the south of the community, which was a vacant lot in 2009, a chicken house made of concrete blocks was erected (with 9 hens in total, including seven in it and two outside). In addition, frog cultivation was tried behind the meeting house at the center of the community (while the site in which frog cultivation had been failed was found in September, 2011). In this way, in terms of rearing animals, even after once having been introduced, a cycle of introduction and failure was apparently repeated because of difficulty in continuing their care. In addition, vegetables were grown in somewhat wide and fenced areas. The bamboo forest south of the community had been cut down to plant bananas. Such gardening culture was also found to have been tried in the community.

During research in September, 2011, a portrait of the king was placed at the right side of the community entrance (Figure 3f, September, 2011). The portrait might convey a direct impression that the development project led by the Royal Family has been conducted (Photo 4). But, such a portrait was not displayed at the Hmong community in HY village. However, during the same period, the portrait was also displayed at the Hmong community in PP village, located 5 km before HY village. When the portrait was placed there, the Mlabri community was probably selected. In September, 2011, two buildings were built using concrete blocks, a little distance from the entrance and in the north of the community. One was a grocery store. The other was also used as a meeting house.

Research conducted in February, 2012 revealed that electric power lines had been set up in the community (Figure 3g, February, 2012). Unlike the earlier solar panels, they signaled the start of full-scale electrification in the Mlabri community. The electrical cables were strung to four locations: (1) a meeting house, (2) a kindergarten, (3) an educational facility, and (4) the leader's house. TV sets were in the meeting house and the leader's house. Considering that the only car in the community and this TV set are shared communally, special things placed near the leader, might confirm a materially uneven distribution of goods, or inequality. In this period, the rectangular concrete pig hut located at the site developed in the south of the community had been long completely disused and deserted. Although rearing pigs had been promoted rather enthusiastically in the first Royal Project period, the officials in charge of development might have deselected it during the second Royal Project period.

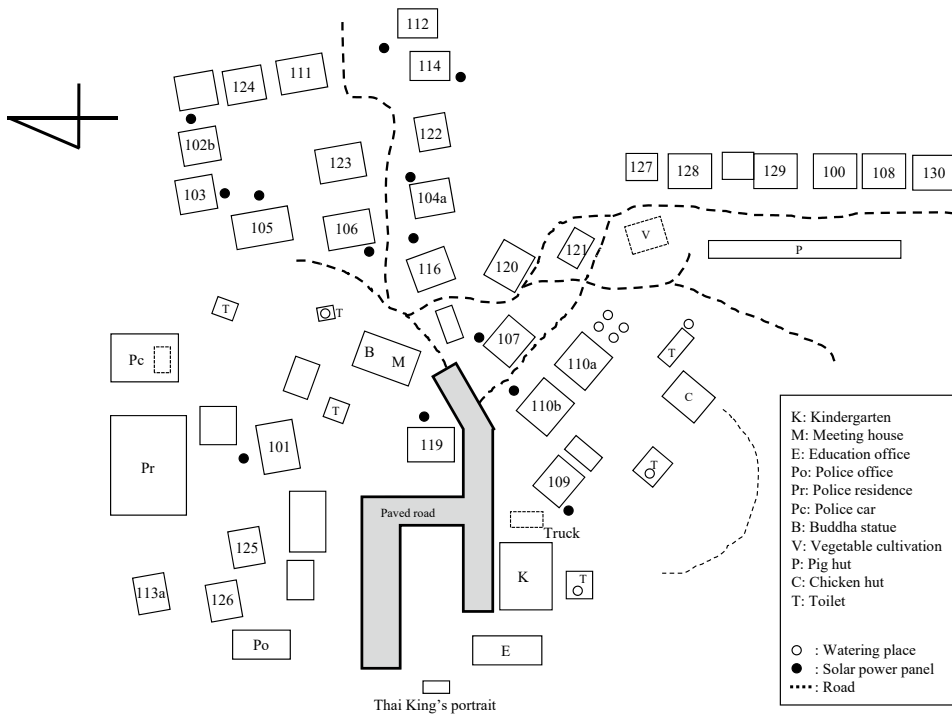


Figure 3f Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, September 2011
Source: Author's field study

After the research in February, 2012, during which the large change of electrification was confirmed, the authors conducted another study in December, 2012. In this period, the concrete pavement of the road in the community was lengthened further (Figure 3h, December, 2012). A house that had been near the meeting house was reconstructed in a different area, so a kind of common space was created there. The space is approached directly from the entrance and also is located at the center of the community. This case can be regarded as easy-to-understand creation of a public space. Around that time, the educational facility was used rarely. Educational staff members from the Thai ethnic group were absent.

From the above, probably in the second Royal Project period, the development led by the Thai Royal Family had been completed for the time being. Further, in terms of (1) *education*, adult education was abandoned but conventional kindergarten education continued; and (2) *occupation* (pig rearing was abandoned, but raising of chickens continued), the development has been conducted by concentrating on selected targets.

On the other hand, a large-scale landscape change has been confirmed by the following points: (3) *energy* (full-scale electrification by laying electric poles and



Photo 4 Thai King's portrait monument built in front of Mlabri settlement
(Photograph by the author, September, 2011)

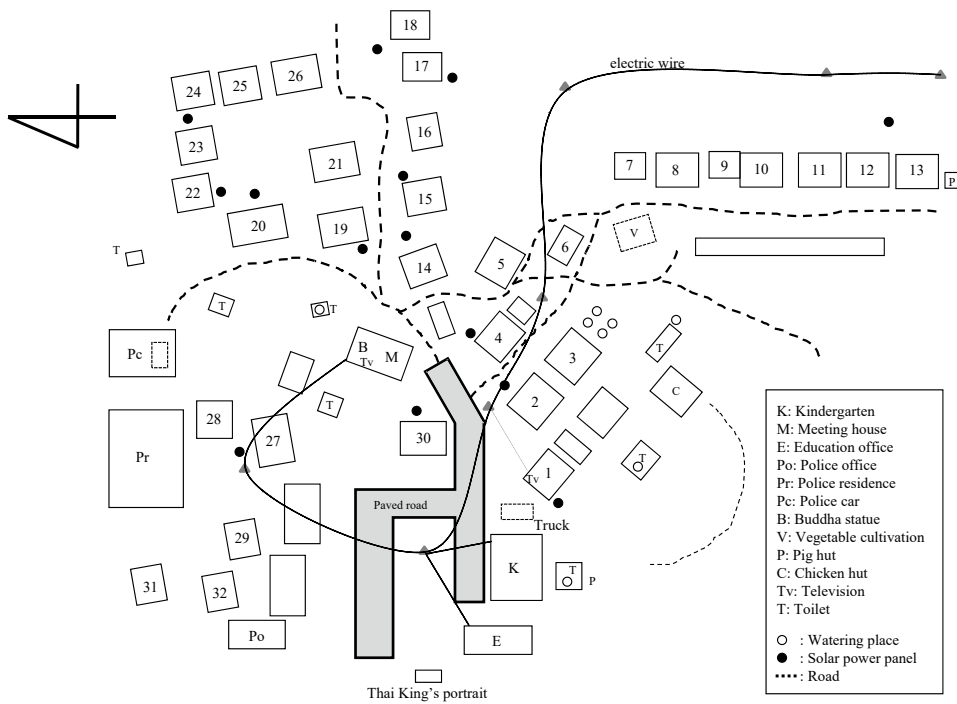


Figure 3g Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, February 2012
Source: Author's field study

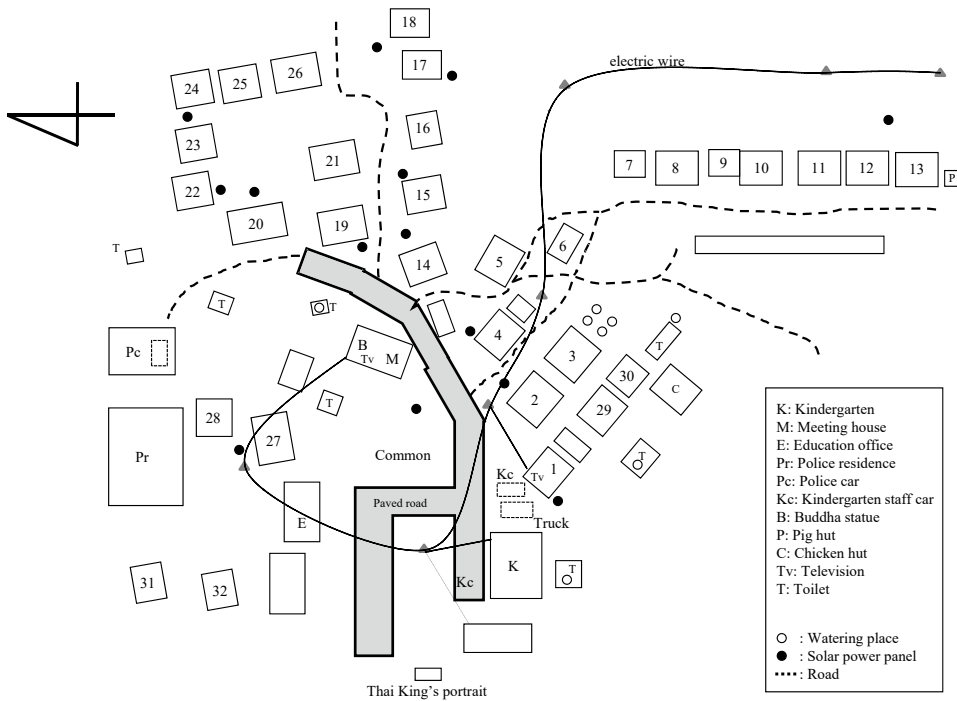


Figure 3h Household distribution in Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, December 2012
Source: Author's field study

wires), (4) *media* (introduction of TV sets; radio already had been introduced), (5) *transfer* (introduction of cars and diffusion of motorcycles), and (6) *symbol* (the King's portrait placed at the community entrance).

The point of symbolism is a phenomenon special to Thailand, governed by the King, who is greatly esteemed by the citizens. However, other points are generally seen in village development in developing countries, which suggests that the Mlabri community is being integrated into the targets, even though distal, of modernization by the greater organization of the Royal Project in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

Many actors have been involved in development for the past 25 years, particularly addressing the Mlabri community. Therefore, dividing the overall development into three periods makes it possible to sort out the progress of development and the change of the community landscape for considering development comprehensively. Reviewing these three periods, the following characteristics can be pointed out.

1. Regarding occupation, rearing of animals and cultivation of plants have not been well accepted, such that failure has occurred frequently. In particular,

water buffaloes, chickens, pigs, frogs, mushrooms, and vegetables have been tried.

2. Since the Royal Project started, the community has been monitored constantly by the police, which is not a normal situation.

3. The community's development context is extremely complicated. The actors involved, such as the Royal Project, have been increasing, especially since 2007.

Na Nan (2013) is of the opinion that the settlement of the Mlabri community is an ongoing project that will continue. They can be expected never to return to a nomadic life, which had been dominant until the 1980s, as reported by Pookajorn (1992) and Trier (1992). As the authors have confirmed in this article, based on the case of the HY village, the context in which the Mlabri are being developed will become increasingly complicated regarding the following points: (1) *energy* (electrification), (2) *space* (creation of public spaces), (3) *religion* (setting up a Buddha statue), (4) *education* (Thai language education for adults), (5) *transfer* (introduction of motorcycles and cars), and (6) *media* (introduction of TV sets).

It is expected that the more complex the situation becomes, the more difficult it will be to confirm the results. However, examination of the process by which the Mlabri community will increase their level of settlement (or give up the nomadic lifestyle) will provide information and evidence of the irreversibility of change, as Na Nan (2013; 2016) pointed out.

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