

## **Mobility and the Continuity of the Relationship between Hunter-gatherers and Farmers in Thailand**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the continuity of relationships between hunter-gatherers and neighbouring farmers by organising past findings and the results of our field research obtained for the Mlabri, the rare hunter-gatherers who have lived in continental Southeast Asia (particularly Thailand and Laos) until recent years. As study methods, we conducted ethno-archaeological field surveys in Thailand starting in 2003. We then discussed and presented a model of century-scale continuity and change in hunter-gatherer and farmer relationships in Thailand. This study reveals how the relationship between Mlabri hunter-gatherers and Hmong farmers has been maintained for about 100 years. After the Hmong moved to the mountains of northern Thailand in the 1880s, a new relationship was gradually established between Mlabri nomadic hunter-gatherers and Hmong farmers. Later, in the 1990s, the Mlabri started living a sedentarised life near the Hmong villages; nonetheless, they maintained their relationship with the Hmong farmers.

### **INTRODUCTION**

What types of cases and knowledge does Southeast Asia provide when considering the emergence and spread of farmers in human history, their relationships with hunter-gatherers, and their continuity? Archaeological findings suggest broad images of the spread and subsequent development of early farmers who grew rice, which had begun by 6500 BC in the Yangtze River basin (Bellwood 1978, 2005; Higham 1989, 2014). Research reports have indicated, for instance, prehistoric hunter-gatherers called the Hoabinhian (until approximately 2000 BC) and later farmers up to those who spoke Austro-Asiatic languages on the continent, a process involving farmers who spoke Austronesian languages after 2000 BC on islands spread from Taiwan and Philippines to Indonesia and then to Oceania.

Ethnographic data about modern hunter-gatherers have accumulated since the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fortier 2014). Whereas some groups of hunter-gatherers have existed on islands such as Luzon, Palawan, Borneo, Sumatra, and Sulawesi and on the

Malay Peninsula, the Mlabri are perhaps the only people who have been discovered on a continent (Bernatzik 2005[1938]; Boeles 1963; Trier 1981, 2008; Pookajorn et al. 1992; Chazée 2001; Na Nan 2012). Regarding comparative research on modern hunter-gatherers and their neighbours, such as plant and livestock farmers, including those in Southeast Asia, arguments from the perspective of a sedentarisation process in particular have accrued in recent years (Ikeya et al. eds. 2009; Ikeya and Hitchcock ed. 2016; Ikeya ed. 2017a, 2017b).

This paper explores the continuity of relationships between hunter-gatherers and neighbouring farmers by organising past research findings obtained for the Mlabri, the rare hunter-gatherers who lived on the continent in Southeast Asia (particularly Thailand and Laos) until recent years. The study objective is an examination, based on the case of the Mlabri people in Southeast Asia, of the long-term period of century-scale continuity and change among hunter-gatherers' relationships with neighbouring farmers.

As for study methods, we conducted ethno-archaeological field surveys in Thailand starting in 2003. Next, relationships between the Mlabri hunter-gatherers and farmers are presented. After that, long-term relationships based on archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence are examined. The third section explains the short-term relationships between these groups of people based on ethnographic evidence. Finally, the discussion shifts towards century-scale continuity and change.

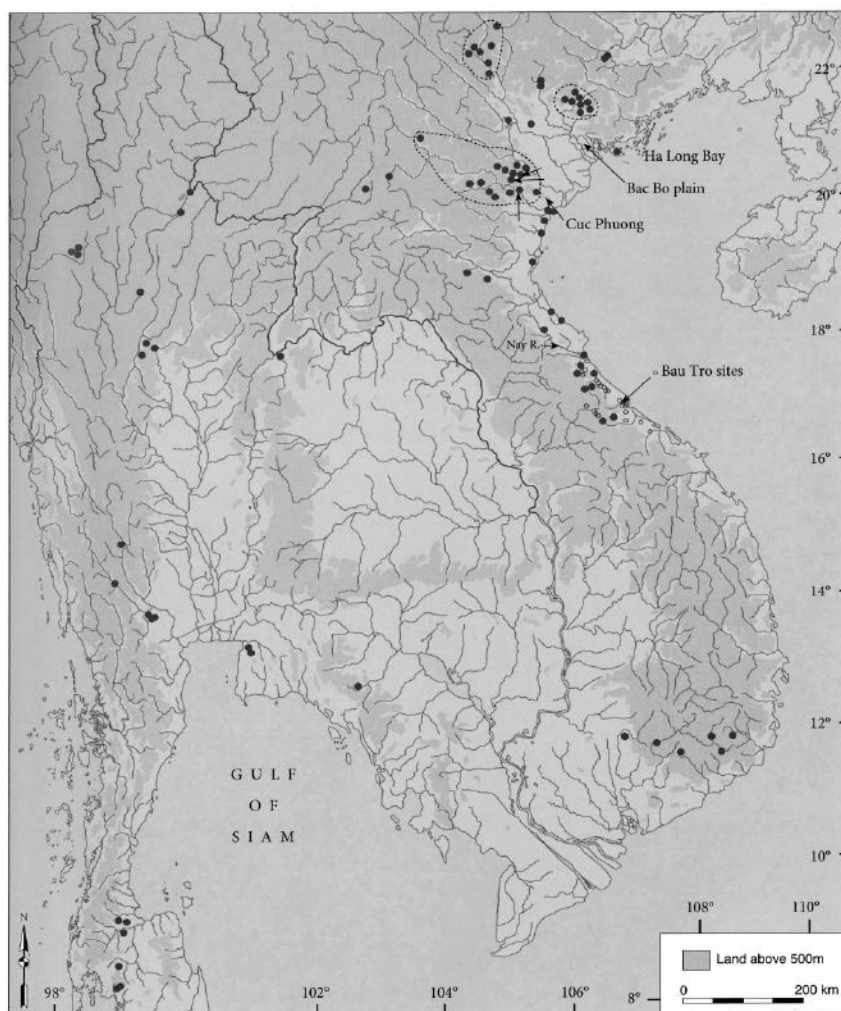
## **LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MLABRI HUNTER-GATHERERS AND FARMERS**

### **1) Archaeological Evidence**

After humans arrived in Southeast Asia, the prehistoric hunter-gatherers residing there before the Holocene, around 11,650 years ago, were called the Hoabinhian. Herein, 11,000–2000 BC is primarily considered the Hoabinhian period. Figure 1 depicts major prehistoric archaeological sites on the continent, as reported by Higham (2014), among which the Hoabinhian sites are included.

Whereas the Hoabinhian people are presumed to have conducted plant management, their achievement of developed agriculture is not clear. Continuity from the Hoabinhian to farmers is a hypothesis that has not been verified to date (Bellwood 2005). For instance, results obtained by the Tham Lod Rockshelter project conducted between 2001 and 2006, as Conrad et al. (2016) noted, yielded no evidence of handcrafted rattan or bamboo tools during the Late Pleistocene. As for evidence for the existence of farmers in the southeastern part of China, for instance, rice excavated at the Shixia Site in Guangdong Province, which is from 3000 BC, is considered the oldest such finding. Bellwood (2005) reported the spread of farmers into Southeast Asia from 3500 BC.

In Thailand, archaeological findings indicate a record of the oldest evidence of rice farming from 2300 BC (Bellwood 2005). An example is the Nong Nor site



**Figure 1** Hunter-gatherer sites of mainland Southeast Asia.  
(Modified from Higham 2014)

● archaeological site

(2300–1500 BC) in the central region of Thailand, which suggests the possibility that dogs and livestock such as pigs and chickens existed. The use of bronzeware by farmers in the continent presumably began around 1500 BC, while the use of ironware might have begun around 500 BC (Higham 2014). Regarding livestock, cattle emerged after the Bronze Age around 1500 BC, and water buffaloes began to appear after the Iron Age around 500 BC.

## 2) Genetic and Linguistic Evidence

Some cases suggest that groups who were originally farmers in peripheral areas opted to become hunter-gatherers for some reason. Groups that linguistically and

genetically support this inference include, on the islands, the Punan on Borneo and the Orang Rimba on Sumatra (Bellwood 2005). The Mlabri constitute one candidate group. Genetic evidence suggests the following chain of events, which are considered to have occurred between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The Mlabri developed 500 to 800 years ago from several individuals. They originated from an agricultural group and then adopted a hunting-gathering subsistence mode (Oota et al. 2005). A close genetic relationship has been reported between the Mlabri and the Htin, a group speaking a Tin language (Xu et al. 2010).

20<sup>th</sup>-century linguistic evidence indicates that the Mlabri language arose from Tin, a Khmuic language, a subgroup of the Mon-Khmer language in the Austro-Asiatic language family (Rischel 1995).

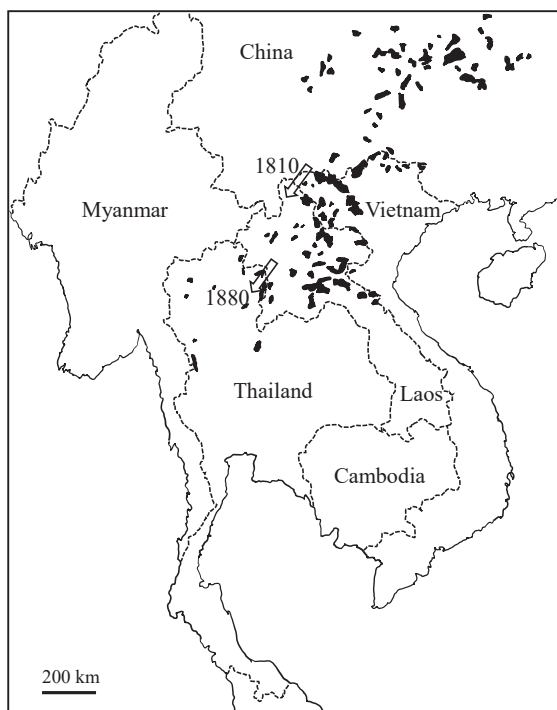
## **SHORT-TERM RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MLABRI HUNTER-GATHERERS AND FARMERS**

### **1) Ethnographic Evidence**

The following clarifies the relationships between the Mlabri and neighbouring farmers in Thailand based on ethnographic records since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Mlabri population was around 350 in Thailand in 2010 (Na Nan 2013) and around 28 in Laos in 2000 (Chazée 2001). According to records of the kingdom at the time, the Mlabri offered honey and rattan to the Nan king every year (Bernatzik 2005[1938]). The Hmong people, farmers who would eventually develop relationships with the Mlabri, expanded south from the southern part of China, as depicted in Figure 2. They arrived in Laos in 1810 and then in Thailand's Nan (1880) and Tak provinces (1929) (Culas and Michaud 2004). The Hmong people were farmers who conducted upland rice farming through slash-and-burn farming methods in the mountains of continental Southeast Asia.

To ascertain the status of the Mlabri at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bernatzik's (1938) ethnographic descriptions, based on fieldwork conducted in the 1930s, are useful as a reference. Bernatzik reported, for instance, that 45 people in seven groups and 30 people in eight groups led a nomadic camp life. The study also indicated that they had established relationships with neighbouring Hmong farmers, and that the Hmong farmers taught the Mlabri how to weave rattan mats and baskets (Photo 1).

After Bernatzik completed his research (2005[1938]), the Mlabri continued their camp life in the woods while maintaining relationships with the Hmong and Thai farmers. The camps were normally made of bamboo frames, with roofs made of banana and palm leaves. These have been observed, for example, in Khun-Sathan village and in Huai Hom village in the southern part of Nan Province (Photo 2 and 3). Although all of these cases were seen near the villages of Hmong farmers, other ethnic groups in this region include Khamu, Thai, and Mien farmers. In general, the Khamu people are regarded as the former occupants. The



**Figure 2** Distribution and migration route of the Hmong language group (Modified from LeBar et al. 1964)



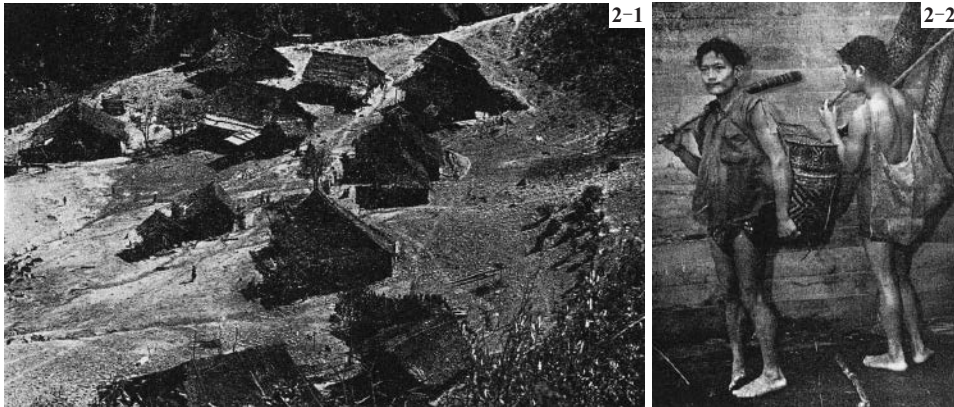
**Photo 1** Mlabri and Hmong in 1930s in Thailand.

Note; photo 1-1 shows Mlabri camp and photo 1-3 shows Hmong village chief *Ts'in Tsai* (Modified from Bernatzik 1938)

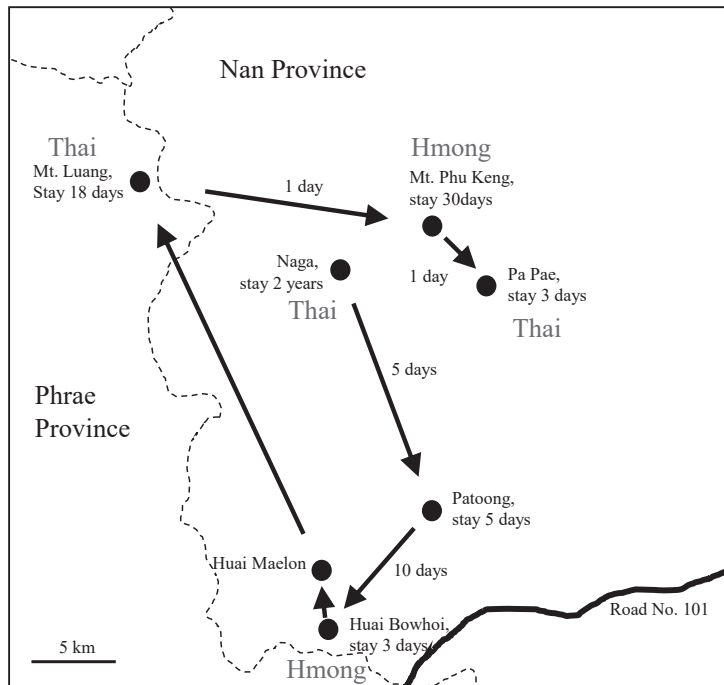
Thai farmers, engaged in paddy rice farming, moved into the area, developed a kingdom, and began to occupy the flatlands; the Khamu lived in areas close to the mountains. As described earlier, the Hmong emerged in Nan Province around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as did the Mien. From the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, they lived in forested, mountainous zones and conducted slash-and-burn farming. Figure



3 portrays the movements of a Mlabri group in the 1980s and relevant villages. This figure elucidates their relationships with the Thai and Hmong. The man on the left-hand side of Photo 2-2 (1960s) is presumably the man in the family in Figure 3, who may have been found mostly in the same area.



**Photo 2** Khun-Sathan village of Hmong in 1960s, Thailand  
 Note; photo 2-1 shows Hmong settlement and photo 2-2 shows Mlabri (Modified from Boeles 1963)



**Figure 3** Migration route of Mlabri in the 1980s: The case of the Ai-Pa family.  
 (Modified from Pookajorn et al. 1992)

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which ethnographic records about the Mlabri accumulated, Trier (2008) collected the locations of camps discovered between the 1930s and 1980s (Photo 3). This collection indicates that the camps were found also in Chiang Mai and Phayao provinces, and discovered as well in Phrae and Sainyabouri provinces (Laos), which are south and east, respectively, of Nan Province. Because of the frequency of the formation of relationships between the Mlabri and neighbouring farmers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, instances of such relationships with Hmong and Thai farmers may have increased to some degree, simply by virtue of the relations between the proximate populations in mountainous wooded areas.



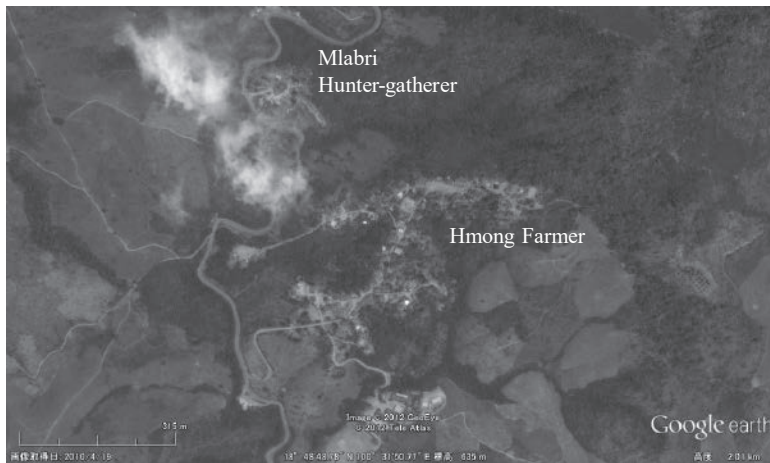
**Photo 3** Mlabri camps located in close to Huai Hom village of Hmong in 1980s, Thailand  
 Note; photo 3-1 shows Mlabri camp (Modified from Trier 2008)

Subsequently, the Mlabri began settling down because of several developmental policies launched at the end of the 1990s, and because of enhanced relationships with local farmers of the Thai and Hmong ethnic groups. The following reviews the status of the Mlabri, principally based on findings from our fieldwork (Ikeya and Nakai 2009, 2017; Nakai and Ikeya 2016). First, in the 2000s, Mlabri villages were integrated into two groups: Huai Yuak (HY) in Nan Province, where a large part of our research was conducted, and Huai Hom (HH) in Phrae Province, which is closely tied to Christian missionary activities.

In areas surrounding HY village, for instance, areas of bamboo thicket resulting from slash-and-burn farming, and patches of derelict land, are readily apparent (Photo 4). The Mlabri settlement is located near a Hmong village: the direct distance is about 500 m (Photos 4 and 5). The populations of the Mlabri and Hmong were approximately 120 and 630, respectively. The Hmong farmers work in family units, growing upland rice for themselves and corn to sell at the market (Nakai 2009). The Mlabri work for the Hmong as farm labourers, but the number



**Photo 4** Mlabri settlement in Huai Yuak village in 2000s, Thailand (Author's field study, June 2005)



**Photo 5** Location of the Mlabri and Hmong settlements in Huai Yuak, April 2010 (Modified from Google earth 2012)



**Photo 6** Mlabri and Hmong people in Huai Yuak village, Nan Province, Thailand (Author's field study: photo 6-1; Mlabri in March 2006, photo 6-2; Hmong in June 2005).

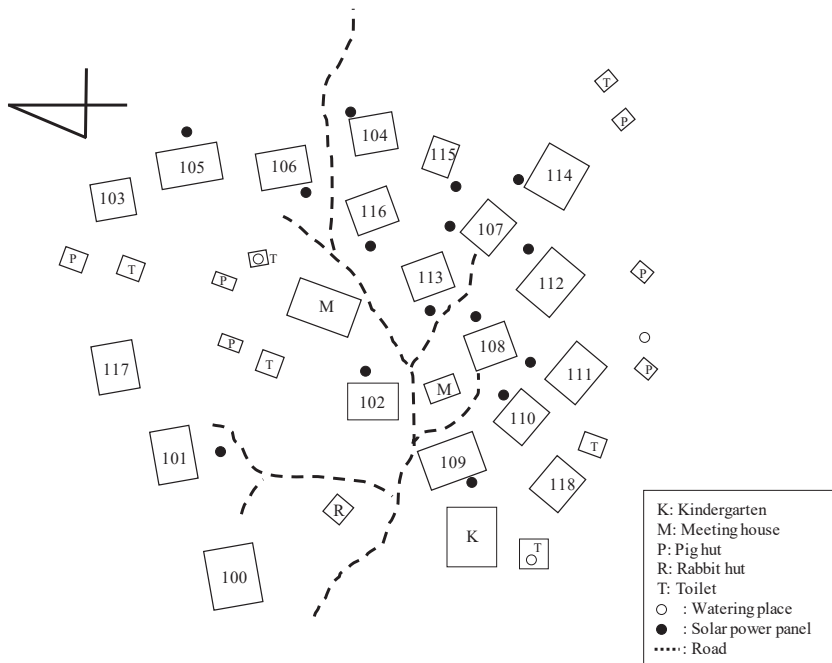


of Mlabri independently engaged in agriculture has been gradually increasing (Ikeya and Nakai 2009; Na Nan 2009, 2012). Although the Mlabri normally wear T-shirts, men sometimes dress half-naked, wearing only a loincloth, and as a performance when visitors (such as tourists) come (Photo 6).

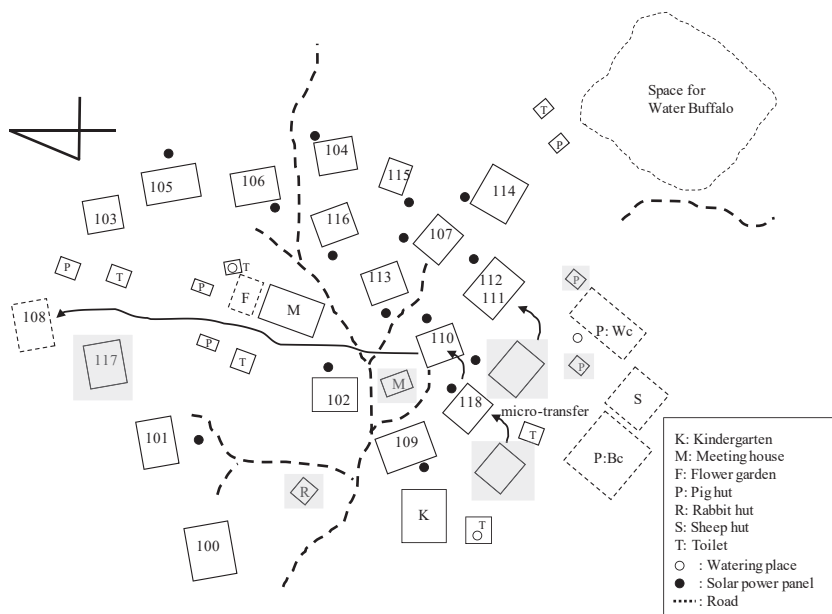
Next, we examine the distribution of households in the Mlabri village. Figure 4 presents the distribution as of October 2005, and Figure 5 as of September 2006. Thai province-level and district-level development policies have led to changes in modern facilities and material culture. These include kindergarten facilities, concrete toilets, solar panels for power generation, and animal sheds for pigs and rabbits. Changes in the household distribution in the village after one year indicate scrap-and-build activities for some houses, suggesting some small-scale movements conducted in a short period of time. Numerous water buffaloes were introduced in 2006; the Mlabri attempted to raise more than 20 of them. However, they stopped after a while. Each of the water buffaloes was reportedly provided by a separate district chief in the province. Providing water buffaloes is the idea of Thai farmers style who had made a living by raising water buffalo and growing rice in paddy fields.

Since approximately 2007 when Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of the Thai royal family visited the area initiatives involving the Mlabri, of the royal family projects, and people related to the Royal Forest Department have been increasing. All these developments have been conducted through officers of Thai. The royal family projects and the Royal Forest Department created new villages, respectively called Phu Fah (PF) and Huai Lu (HL), and moved the Mlabri people into them (Figure 6), thereby making the distribution and number of small-scale movements increasingly complex.

Individual relationships developed in each village. According to Na Nan (2013), the population of Mlabri in 2010 was 172 in HY and 82 in HH, in which there had originally been two major groups. HY and HH are located near Hmong farmers, and there is only five Mlabri in Don Priwan (DW), presenting a similar case. In addition, there are 36 in Tawa (TW) and an unknown number are in Ban Luang (BL) among villages near Thai farmers. Another 61 are in the newly created Phu Fah Cultural Center (PF) and an unknown number are in Huai Lu (HL). The major population mobility around this time was from HY to HL and from HH to PF. The return of some people to their original village because of dissatisfaction with their respective destinations was also observed. Such modern (since the 1980s) relationships between the Mlabri hunter-gatherers and farmers reveal a diversification of the actors involved and their attributes, which has led to a complex situation that does not readily accommodate comparisons in a conventional farmer framework.



**Figure 4** Household distribution in the Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, October 2005. (Ikeya and Nakai 2009, 2017)



**Figure 5** Household distribution in the Huai Yuak Mlabri settlement, September 2006. (Ikeya and Nakai 2017)

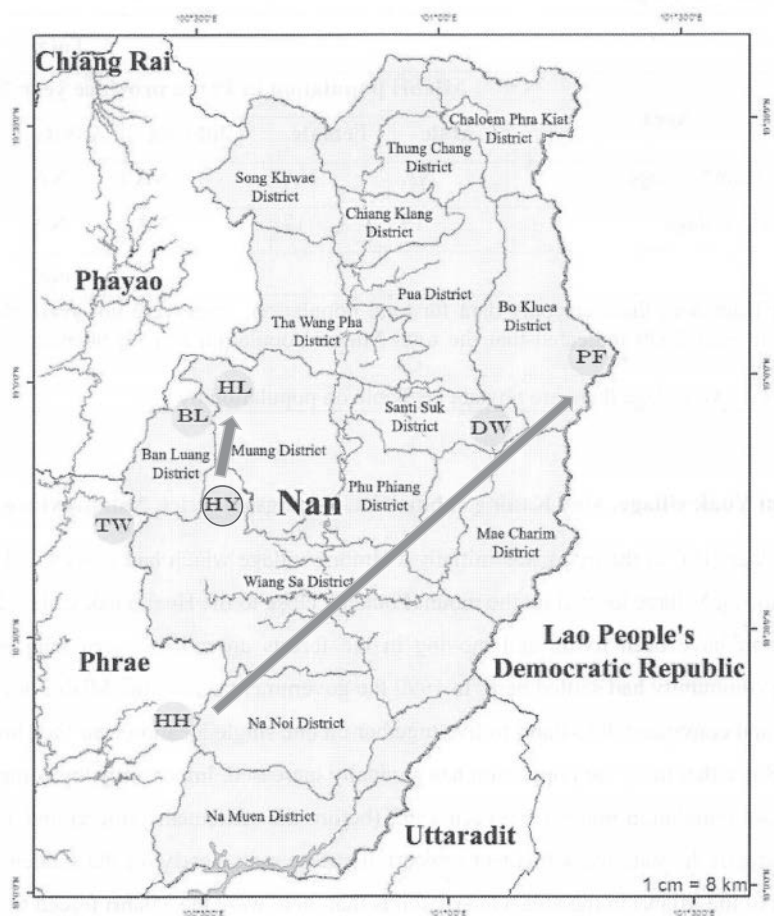


Figure 6 Distribution of Mlabri Settlements in 2010. (Na Nan 2013)

## DISCUSSION: CENTURY-SCALE CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

### 1) Hunter-Gatherer Mobility

This section examines the development of mobility. First, the process whereby the Mlabri gradually shifted from a nomadic lifestyle to sedentarisation shows the considerable impact of government (including provincial administration) involvement since the 1980s (Pookajorn et al. 1992; Na Nan 2009). Sedentarisation led to the establishment of two integrated villages, and farm work began to be carried out by labourers. Although this seemingly signalled settlement, a nomadic lifestyle to some degree was still apparent at the individual level within the village, which we have attributed partly to the simple structure of their homes. Group movements have been increasing since 2007 due to certain policies (such as the royal family projects), which can be regarded as part of the nomadic lifestyle of

farm labourers and which might not represent the nomadic lives of hunter-gatherers.

Moreover, sedentarisation will further increase as they voluntarily start to practise agriculture (Ikeya and Nakai 2009); their nature as hunter-gatherers is likely to change. The Mlabri people who are deemed to have developed as hunter-gatherers from groups of Khamu farmers living in peripheral areas 500 to 800 years ago might be losing their nomadic nature in this context under the influence of diverse groups, which is considerably different from the past.

## 2) Hunter-Gatherer/Farmer Relationships

Next, we discuss relationships between hunter-gatherers and farmers. There are the ties among the Mlabri hunter-gatherers and three farmer groups: Khamu, Thai, and Hmong. In the beginning, when the Khamu became hunter-gatherers, some mutual relationships must have existed. From the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they met then-new farmers who were part of the Thai and Hmong ethnic group, with whom they developed a relationship. Did their relationship with the Khamu continue, despite decreased contact? Did the relationship linking Thai farmers and the Hmong gradually grow stronger up to the present day?

The relationships between hunter-gatherers and farmers can be broadly classified in relation to the altitude of land. According to this model, farmers moved to each of the lowland areas near rivers, which Thai farmers later turned into paddy fields. The mountainous lands were left as wooded areas until the Hmong arrived and encountered hunter-gatherers. Regarding conditions before the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when we infer that farmers had developed from the Hoabinhian lineage in the past, afterwards of those people and those who maintained the characteristics of hunter-gatherers would become more apparent. Further research can be expected in the future into the relationships between these people and the Mlabri, who had developed into hunter-gatherers from the Khamu. Although the Mlabri had advantages in obtaining forest products in the past, some of them became farm labourers by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Others began engaging in farming, for which they had to become adept at various tasks such as slashing, weeding, and harvesting. What will become of hunter-gatherers from now on? If many farmers become urbanised while the mountain population shrinks and woods regain their rich natural state, wooded environments that allow people to live without farming could appear. When such a time comes, will hunter-gatherers emerge again?

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