

The Lowlander-Highlander Relationship in Thailand and the Role of Anthropologists

Introduction

Although the vast majority of Thailand's population is constituted by ethnic Thai, the ethnic minorities of Northern Thailand, the so-called 'Hilltribes' are well-known among tourists and anthropologists to a big deal due to the exotic-ness of their dresses and way of life. Indeed, their culture differs considerably to that of the lowland population. While the latter are adherent to Theravada Buddhism and traditionally follow a subsistence based on wet rice agriculture, the former are known for their animism as well as their swidden cultivation. Despite the obvious contrast between the both, it does not mean that a social relationship never existed. The highlanders always had social and political relationships to the lowland population to a certain degree.

Doubtlessly the lowland societies dominated the political landscape in Mainland Southeast Asia, and in most cases the highland groups recognized this dominance. But as my paper will show, these groups themselves are politically a part of the lowland political system. However, not all the hill peoples just peacefully subjugated to the external lowland power. Especially the Han Chinese historical account is filled with accounts on military insurgence reflecting the resistance highlanders to the domination of the lowland authorities (Walker 1979: 428). The recognition of the authorities thus depended on the degree to which the autonomy is granted. Once this autonomy is threatened, the hill people were not afraid of warfare. The case of Thailand differs to that of China in the fact that historically such armed conflicts were rare. But still it reflects formidably the mutual relationship between the attitude of the central authority toward the hill regions and the reaction of the hill people. To explore this relationship I will review the works on the historical relationship between the Thai lowland population and the highlanders. I will show that the former indigenous arrangement between the two social groups has altered due to the introduction of western concepts such as citizenship and "ecologism".

I then shall examine the present conflicts between the lowland society and the upland groups referring to newspaper articles. A special focus shall be given to the role of (Thai) anthropologists within this conflict and to the role of action anthropology.

Thai and Kha: Traditional Dychotomy of a Social Ecology

The mainland Southeast Asia is since ever ethnically diverse and the first Thai to arrive from southern China surely did not found a no-man's land. On the contrary, there, the Tai-speaking people were already surrounded by other minority people while being by themselves a minority comparing to the Chinese. But as they arrived in northern Thailand (also elsewhere in Southeast Asia), the Tai¹ found societies with a elaborated chiefdomship and societies with a tribal social organization. One of the former were the Lawa who possessed a larger settlement in the southwest of Chiang Mai (Condominas 1990). By their more elaborate social organization the Thai soon gained dominance. The Tai political domain is the *mueang* which means both the main township and the surrounding area, in most cases limited by mountains. But despite the different linguistic affiliation and historical backgrounds the lines of differentiation were not defined ethnically as one may assume. As Condominas demonstrated by the analysis of original myths, the early Thai (Tai) society comprised both the Thai ("Free men") and the Kha ("Slaves"). As Renard (2000) noted, the term Kha designates a dychotomy of being uncivilized rather than an ethnic category. However, the Thai society is further divided in those of the nobles (*thao*) and commoners (*phrai*). By nature the social division between the *thao* and the *phrai* is more distinguished than that between the latter and the *kha*, a fact manifested in the Tai myths of origin. According to this, the Tai nobility are direct descendants from heaven, while both the *phrai* and the *kha* originate from a gourd. The mere difference between the latter lies only in the fact that the Tai left the gourd through holes cleanly cut by a knife while the *kha* had to use burned out holes as a way to escape the gourd (Condominas 1980:192). Consequently, the skin colour of the latter turned out darker. But interestingly, the same myth is to be found among the Mon-Khmer Minorities living alongside with the Tai groups. Therefore the two groups are linked together to form a kind of interethnic society.

There is more to that. Due to the lack of manpower which is notorious in the traditional Southeast Asia, no society was able to gain political and economic power without taking possession of other ethnic groups. Slavery was hence a common mean to gain manpower for cultivation. The hill people suffered partly under this social system, but simultaneously, assimilation offered the way for social mobility. By assimilating, the Kha were able to become Thai (Condominas

¹ As „Tai“ I define all the speakers of the Tai language family of which many live outside the present day Thailand, including the Lao. The term “Thai” then shall be confined to the Tai-speaking population in Thailand.

1980:297). The same phenomenon is observed by Leach (1954) among the Kachin of northeastern Burma who regularly become Shan.

But even the political domains remained interconnected, however loosely by a tributary relationship. But both polities “were an important feature of each other’s social landscape although they did not merge” (Jonsson 1998:6). They are interwoven by a mutual symbiotic relationship but still outside each others spatial domains, i.e. the lowlanders never penetrated into the forests as well as the highlanders rarely entered the valleys. For the latter the hills were the buffer against other lowland domains. By annual tribute in form of forest products the hill people show their allegiance and in turn were paid autonomy. Renard (2000:68) observes a similar relationship between the Kanchanaburi Karen and the court of Ayutthaya. The aspect of autonomy is crucial to the hill people since a penetration into this is generally considered as a thread to the identity and is responded by rebellion (see Tapp 1989:18 and Walker 1979:428).

The Expansion of the State and the Alienation of the Hill People

Over centuries the described socio-spatial order has remained rather stable. But alongside with the arrival of the nation-state came the profound change of the relationship between the lowland and the upland society. But different to the neighbouring countries, Siam itself went its way to the nation-state without the direct transformation by a colonial rule. Rather, the Thai traditional polity transformed itself to a state according to the western concept of such with a clearly defined boundary. But before analysing this conceptional change, it is useful to review the historical process leading to this. After the expel of the Burmese by the late eighteenth century the tributary relationship between the Chiangmai principalities and the hill peoples in northern Thailand. In proper Siam the Karen² of Sangkhlaburi served as spies under the Siamese *krom atamat* (Jonsson 1998:16) and were especially integrated under the reign of Rama IV. But while the Pwo Karen were partly assimilated into the Siamese society, the administrative and economic centralisation alienated the Karen in northern Siam. By the abolition of the Chiangmai’s right to collect tribute from the hill people the Siamese authorities cut off the political tie that bind the lowland society and the highlanders and placed the latter beyond any political meaning (Walker 1979:428).

² Early evidences of Karen in Thai (i.e. Lanna and Siamese) history are rare. The term *yang* which is used by Northern Thai to label the Karen did not arrive Lanna before the eighteenth century (Keyes 1979:30p).

By 1896, the government set up the Royal Forest Department in order to control the teak trade (Renard 2000:71). The slash-and-burn agriculture thus was considered as harmful to teak forestry though this agricultural method proves to be appropriate to the soil given a minimum of population pressure and a careful practice. The conflicts were limited since the Karen just fled into more remote areas (Renard 2000:72).

Over several centuries the Bangkok officials ignored the hill areas in a manner the traditional Tai do. That enabled the unnoticed immigration of thousands of Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu and Akha from neighbouring countries (Walker 1979:428). But during that time the Thai took on the western concept of nationality, owing it much to King Vajiravudh who, devoted to nationalism, declared the existence of a 'Thai race' (Chat Thai, derived from the Sanskrit word *jati*, meaning 'birth' or 'caste' Vella 1978:177). According to that view, being Thai is not a matter of residence or birth in Thailand or naturalization. His believe in immutable ethnic groups let him ignore the old Thai-Kha relation, the interdependence of the people of the *mueang* and the *pa* (Renard 2000:78-79). Officials, most of whom came from Bangkok or central Siam took with them the nationalistic notion of citizenship and were not able to understand the traditional social reality in the north. As a result, the old Thai-Kha dichotomy was changed into a Thai-alien dichotomy (Renard 2000:279). Meanwhile, no differentiation is made between the established Karen and the recently arrived groups mentioned above. So, both were lumped together as "opium-using, potentially rebellious forest-destroyers who were immoral, unclean, and backward" (Renard 2000:80).

On the other side there is among the hill people a deep distrust towards the state and its officials, as Nicholas Tapp shows on the Hmong (1989). There is a felt opposition which goes beyond ethnic lines expressed by sympathies toward all with a similar situation in relation to Thai governmental servants. But it must be admitted that there is also a kind of admiration and respect and envy for the wealth and progress of the Thai. Yet the Hmong notion of freedom is strong and their appreciation for it makes them attempting to flee external domination as much as possible. This explains the occasional uprisings and rebellions in Thailand as well as in China.

Changing Views on the Forest

The cited view on the minorities has its deep roots in the traditional Thai society. Despite the present popular believe that Thai culture is well adjusted to nature, the ethnographic evidence rather show a traditional disgust and disinterest of it. The present Thai term *thammachat* is rather

recent. Traditionally, everything outside the human domain was defined as “forest” (*pa*) which again had a negative connotation. It was the domain of the malevolent spirits and wild animals and all those living there were regarded as uncivilized. The Thai had no control of the forests and consequently these were beyond their polity (Jonsson 1998:21). But alongside with the western concept of nation came the notion of territoriality. The polity was extended from a mere lowland domain to a nation-state covering every landscape within well-defined boundaries. Consequently, the state had to penetrate into the forests by land-registration and regulation of forest use (*ibid.*). Thus, the state control was firstly confronted with the long practiced swidden agriculture. Regardless the question how destructive this agricultural technique is or not, the fact alone that it is practised must be regarded as lawless and illegal. The state itself attempts to wrest the control over the forests firstly through logging but later on through forest and watershed conservation (*ibid.*). By extending the domain into the forest, controlling them and making them ‘Thai’ the highlanders have become “double aliens” (Jonsson 1998:22). Hence, their abolition out of the “pristine and orderly nature” (*ibid.*) is not considered as wrong.

Only by assimilating themselves to Thai culture the hill people can ensure a minimum of fundamental rights, and the policy of the Thai officials is directing to this. The displaying of the costumes and folklore remains a tourism marketing strategy and does not represent a real interest in the minorities’ culture. Additional to this the substitution of opium by cash crop does not solve the problem economically. Rather, the hill people are further disadvantaged since the so-called cash crops have no profitable markets (Tapp 1989:59). The reluctance does not derive from a negative attitude against modern farming techniques, to the contrary, hill peoples are inclined towards irrigated cultivation of rice as well, but only as long the natural environment allows it.

It seems that the status of the hill tribes itself remains suspicious to Thai officials no matter how ecological sensible a swidden cultivation is to the sensitive environment of Thailand’s hill area. This bias prevents any reasonable discussion on the status of the hill peoples as a part of Thai national society. With the increased public participation the same bias is transferred to ordinary farmers and non-governmental organizations (Pinkaew 1999). For example, the Dhammanat Foundation was set up in Chom Thong district of Chiang Mai with a rather official view on the forest as a watershed area (Pinkaew 1999:5). In the view of the organization, hill peoples are “stubborn forest destroyers by attitude” (Pinkaew 1999:6) despite the fact that most of the damage on Thai woodland destruction is caused by careless burning by Thai farmers themselves (or in many cases by non/farmers carelessly throwing cigarette-stumps). Moreover, the lowlanders

have left overseen the fact that forest conservation is measured with different values: While lowland forest are considered as insignificant, the hill forests are to be preserved for the economic benefit of the lowland. The violent outbreak of the Chom Thong conflict how commoners inherit the official view of natural environments and give up the traditional ties of mutual interdependence, whatever loose they might have been. Environmental issues is ethicised for the matter of territorial access and control to natural resources (Ibid. 1999:11). It is this realm between the two conflicting parties where the anthropologists find themselves who by their field are concerned with ethnic minorities. In my last chapter I shall give an account on the role anthropologists play within this conflict.

The Role of Anthropologists

On the occasion of the Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies in Amsterdam 1999 a panel on ethnic minorities and the nation-state was organised by Chaiyan Vaddhanaphuti and Deborah Tooker. Without exception, the panel participants were anthropologists, and hence the panel represent a rather exclusive round on the concerned issues. Within this panel, representatives of IMPECT (Inter-Mountain Peoples' Education and Culture in Thailand Association) were invited for a paper. Among these was a member of the Akha ethnic group reporting on the issue of citizenship of ethnic minorities in Thailand. Additional to the discussion within the panel, a special roundtable session is held on the issue. Unfortunately, I could not attend this session and therefore am not able to give account to the detailed outcome. But on the occasion of the roundtable a paper of Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Karan Aquino (1999) was presented. This paper gives account on the official policy towards the hill population over the last four decades as well as including a chronology of the forced dispersal of a peaceful rally of hill tribe members on May 18th 1999 provided by the Northern Farmers Network and the Assembly of Thai Indigenous/ Tribal People as well as the Assembly of the Poor. Whatever was the statement given on the round table, the consequences were felt quickly. Not long after the conference the concerned academics were blamed in the press for "selling the nation" (khai chaat). Chayan personally received threats of killing unless he gives up on the issue.

Were the concerned anthropologist traitors of the nation? These incidents show that the conflict show to what degree the racial prejudices have been nationalised. What are the rights or even the duties of anthropologists? By their discipline anthropologists have always concerned with ethnic minorities. In the early years many anthropologists were abused to "civilise" the indigenous

population. In other cases Anthropologists deliberately worked for state institutions and retrieve information of ethnic groups which are considered to be rebellious. For instance, American anthropologists provided information of Columbian rebels or Vietnamese to the CIA. But the colonial origin of Cultural Anthropology bears a heavy burden on the discipline and within a critical self-reflection anthropologists widely agree that they carry a social responsibility toward the people they study. Although advocacy is not their main task, it is an ethical obligation that anthropologists do not carry on research on the disadvantage of the studied society. And since most of anthropologists are concerned with ethnic minorities, it is likely that they become their speakers.

Contrary to the popular view anthropologists are not confined to the study of customs and traditions of exotic ethnic groups. The discipline is rather a varied and deep study of societies different from our own and at last the study of humanity as a whole. This includes interethnic relations and conflicts. Within cultural anthropology, the sub-discipline of “applied anthropology” is concerned with the solution of social and environmental problems of ethnic groups beyond pure scientific research. And a considerable number of anthropologists now work in international organizations. Therefore, it is ethically right for the scholars to discuss the issue on occasion of the international conference. The accusation of being mere lobbyists for the hill peoples is in no way justified. Although a complete objectivity in anthropological work is a mere illusion, like all sciences based on human observation, anthropological work has the claim to be neutral and especially critical. Within this critical view, official policies and concepts have to be questioned and closely examined. It is hence not the main duty for anthropologists to stage rallies for minority rights. But critical opinions on what is called “national interest” is justified. In the same time it is the duty of anthropologists to provide knowledge about ethnic minorities to the public in order to diminish racial prejudices. More to that, anthropologist may contribute as mediators to interethnic conflicts. In order to do that anthropologists have to enter the public debate and draw public interest on the matters of ethnic minorities. The case of Northern Thailand show that this is under circumstances a dangerous task. In the same time it shows that there is an urgent need for public education on the minority issue. The further Thailand goes its way towards a modern society the more the hill societies become marginalised and misunderstood. Lots of efforts have to be done in order re-establish a society based on inter-ethnic dialogue and plurality.

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