

Ecotourism as an Indigenous Movement: Strategic Self-Representation of the Karen People in Northern Thailand¹

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1. Introduction

Alternative tourism, such as ‘ecotourism’, ‘ethnic tourism’, or ‘community-based tourism’, has been advocated as a counter to mass tourism since the late 1980s. But recent research on alternative tourism among indigenous communities has argued that there have been unequal relationships between hosts and guests or ‘middleman’ (cf. van den Berghe, 1994), not only in mass tourism but also in alternative tourism. For example, various representations of indigenous peoples have been produced by the hegemonic tourist industry and the state, and imposed upon these people to promote ecotourism or ethnic tourism as a form of alternative tourism (Cohen 2002). Some scholars have criticized ecotourism as a new form of colonialism because it makes local people dependent on the modern conservation paradigm which is derived from the concept of Western environmentalism (Hashimoto 2001, Yamashita 2002).

On the other hand, some recent ethnographic studies of tourism have also shed light on how local people negotiate this unequal relationship and reconstruct their cultural identity in the tourist world. Culture and identity is increasingly recognized as being shaped by contemporary global processes, rather than having natural unity.

This paper is an ethnographic study of social and cultural practices of the Karen people, one of the highland ethnic minorities in Northern Thailand who are involved in a ‘Community-Based Ecotourism Project’ which has been managed in cooperation with local NGOs. In this paper, I will focus on the process by which local people have adapted ecotourism to their own interests and have resisted the dominant power. In other words, the possibilities of tourism as an indigenous movement will be examined.

In northern Thailand, ‘community-based ecotourism’ has been operating among some highland ethnic communities since the 1990s, when it was introduced by some local NGOs. It is inspired by two basic issues. The first one is ‘fair trade’ in tourism, which aims to control and manage tourism by local communities, who share ‘fair’ economic profits from tourism among community members. The second one is to show ‘local knowledge’ of natural resource management to outsiders. In Thailand, highland ethnic minorities have been marginalized and made scapegoats for forest destruction (Pinkaw 2001), although many social scientists and activists have demonstrated the actual cause of the destruction is more complex. Various

factors, such as commercial logging, migration of lowlanders to mountainous areas, tourism development, and cash cropping have influenced the destruction in more complex ways (cf. Anan 2000). These public intellectuals also support the struggle for the land rights of the forest dwellers, describing them as ‘forest guardians’. In this social and political context, community-based ecotourism has been introduced to counter the hegemonic discourse on highland ethnic minorities as forest destroyers, by showing their “traditional ecological knowledge” and their “sustainable ways of life” to outsiders.

However, some literature on CBT (Community-Based Tourism) or CBET (Community-Based Ecotourism) has stressed its ‘political correctness’ and advocated it without deep ethnographic understanding, which has led to poor understanding of social and cultural processes among local communities participating in CBT projects on a micro level. A community should be not regarded as a homogenous or static social structure, but as socially and historically constructed and articulating an external system and discourse.

This paper examines how the Karen people have reconstructed their ‘community’ and social identities through joining a ‘community-based ecotourism’ project. In my research area, the villagers have articulated their local customs using a universal language, the discourse of environmentalism, through this tourism project. This is a process of identity formation for local people, but also a process of localization of ecotourism. For the Karen people, ecotourism is a concept that was introduced externally. Originally, the concept of ecotourism was derived from the Western ideology of environmentalism and the Western tourism market, but the Karen people have localized the external concept of ecotourism, adapting it to their own interests through the ‘learning process’ (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991). This has also been a way for the Karen people to reconsider their cultural practices or ‘habitus’ reflexively, encouraging (re)construction of their identity and sociality.

2. Evolving Environmentalism in Thailand

Before introducing the ecotourism project in the Karen communities, the evolving process of environmentalism in Thailand should be described since this helps in understanding the social and cultural context of ecotourism development in Thailand.

Historically, the Thai term for forest, *pa*, reflects a deeper socio-cultural connotation than the usual Western translation of forest. In a general sense, *pa* means a forested area which is not well ordered, in contrast to the *muang*, a civilized township. It connotes a supernatural and spiritual territory beyond human control (Pinkaew 2001:67).

This meaning of the forest was dramatically changed by the operation of the British colonial logging industry in northern Thailand in the late nineteenth century. Since then, teak forests in northern Thailand have become increasingly significant, both economically and politically. This has encouraged the state to control the forest strictly. In other words, a new form of

governmentality, which is called 'territorialization' has emerged. According to Peter Vandergeest, territorialization is the process by which states attempt to control people and their actions by drawing boundaries around a geographic space, excluding some categories of individuals from this space, and proscribing or prescribing specific activities within these boundaries (Vandergeest 1996:159).

In the context of Thailand, the Royal Forest Department (RFD) has been one of the crucial actors in this process. Since the establishment of the RFD in 1896, it has claimed that all unoccupied forest within the national boundaries was state forest and was thus under its jurisdiction, ignoring local customary land use, and it has implemented strict control of the forest to ensure 'efficient' use.

The process of territorialization has evolved rapidly since the 1960s, when the principles of global environmentalism penetrated the RFD's policy. In this period, the state's control of the forest not only for logging but also for nature conservation has been reinforced in Thailand. Protected areas for nature conservation, such as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, were established with the advice and assistance of the U.S. government.

These RFD policies were based on the belief that human use and nature conservation are incompatible. Especially, they described diverse agricultural practices of highland ethnic communities as *rai luan loy*, 'destructive slash and burn agriculture', justifying the state's control of forest through restricting customary local agricultural practices. Consequently, highland ethnic communities in the protected area have been marginalized as 'forest destroyers', and some of them have faced the threat of eviction from their homelands.

But recently, some highland ethnic peoples, especially the Karen, have responded to the dominant ideology of nature conservation, in cooperation with some local NGOs, monks and academics. This movement is called the 'community forest movement', and claims community rights for customary forest use inside the conservation area. In this movement, some cultural practices of highland ethnic minorities have been described as 'local knowledge, against modern capitalist-oriented development and modern technology. In other words, a new discourse on highland ethnic minorities as 'forest guardians' has emerged. Furthermore, 'ecotourism projects' have been carried out in some communities, inviting both foreign and Thai tourists to show 'local knowledge' of rural communities.

However, some authors have pointed out that this discourse on 'local knowledge' has been based on an idealized and romanticized image of rural communities (Walker 2001). It might be true that the discourse of some NGOs and intellectuals on 'local knowledge' has resulted in the idealization of rural communities, but the emphasis on criticism of ethnic representation may have resulted in poor understanding of the varied processes of community forest movements on a micro level. As Yos Santasombat, a Thai anthropologist has argued, many peasant leaders in northern Thailand have been able to transform their cultural capital into symbolic power and

have established the legitimacy of local communities in the context of tenure insecurity and resource conflict (Yos 2004:106–107). If so, we now need further ethnographic understanding of the varied ways in which they have participated in this movement, highlighting local attempts to negotiate away their marginality and deal with resource conflict (cf. Hayami 2006:396).

This presentation aims to portray the process of reconstruction of the Karen's local knowledge and identity through their participation in the community forest movement, shedding light on community-based ecotourism projects among highland Karen communities in Mae Hong Son province.

3. Community-Based Ecotourism in Highland Karen Communities in Maehongson Province

3-1. The objective of CBT at Huai Pooling

Huai Pooling sub-district (*tambon*) is an old Karen settlement in Mae Hong Son district (*amphue Muang*) in Mae Hogn Son province, on the northwestern border of Myanmar. As of 2005, there were eleven villages (*moo ban*) and all of them were Karen settlements. Three of the villages are inside the Namtok Mae Surin national park, others are inside 'reserved forest (*pa saguan*)' claimed by the RFD. Currently, the RFD plans to expand these 'reserved forest' areas into the National park, in which the RFD can strictly control forest use. According to the forestry law, cultivation inside the national park and reserved forests is illegal, so a conflict over land use has emerged in HuaiPooLing since the 1990s.

Most villagers in Huai PooLing have engaged in rotational swidden agriculture as part of their self-sufficiency system. They cultivate the same plot for only one year, then leave it fallow for seven to ten years. When the vegetation of the fallow land has recovered sufficiently, they cultivate the plot again. In a swidden field of the Karen, they plant not only rice but also various kinds of vegetables, such as yams, taro, cucumbers, pumpkins, chilis, eggplants, and more than 20 crops. These varieties of plants have essential roles in the Karen economy. Multiple cropping in swidden fields helps to sustain the food security and subsistence stability of Karen communities (Pinkaew 2001:194). Some of them also cultivate rice in their small paddy fields, but rice sufficiency from paddy fields is relatively low, so most villagers who have a paddy field also engage in swidden agriculture.

While the Karen's swidden agriculture could be regarded as subsistence orientation, their livestock is more market-oriented. Most of the villagers of Huai Pooling raise chickens and pigs for their own consumption, and buffalo and cattle for sale. Buffalo can be considered as their most important form of capital because they can be sold for 12,000 to 15,000 Baht. Besides that, some men engage in short term wage labor near their communities, but few are regular migrant workers to big cities, such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

Since 1997, four Karen communities in HuaiPooling have engaged in CBT (Community-based Tourism) or CBET (Community-based Ecotourism), in cooperation with some local NGOs and tour operators. The CBT at Huaipooling broadly shares two objectives. The first one is to control and manage tourism by their communities' initiative. In the past, there used to be foreign tourists who used ethnic Thai guides, but the communities obtained little economic profit from them. Because the tours to Huaipooling were organized and controlled by the tour companies, the communities had no voice in the decision-making of tourism management. The villagers also had complaints about the impolite behavior of some tourists and guides, for example littering, approaching their houses, and taking photographs without permission. Thus the CBT has been introduced at Huaipooling to share economic profits from tourism equally and reduce such adverse impacts of modern tourism development.

The second objective is to utilize 'ecotourism' as a tool for communicating the Karen's 'local knowledge' to the outside. As I argued above, most Karen settlements and their swidden fields in Huaipooling are registered as national park or reserved forest by the RFD, and the conflict over resource use has been going on since the 1990s. Within the discourse of the RFD, upland farming has been portrayed as a drifting, unstable and disordered mode of agriculture (Yos 2004:114). However, some NGO activists and social scientists have argued that the Karen's swidden agriculture is not necessarily environmentally destructive, and that the rotation of short cultivation / long fallow periods could contribute to sustainable forest use. Proponents of this counter-discourse of swidden agriculture, *rai mun wian* (literally rotating field), including NGOs and academics, concur that this cultivation system differs from the RFD's hegemonic discourse of shifting cultivation because of its interconnectedness with local knowledge and rituals (Pinkaew 2001:190, Yos 2004:114). Sustainable practices of *rai mun wian* are said to include careful field selection, a system of short cultivation / long fallow, careful management and control of firing, maintenance of emergent relics or large tree stumps in the fields, protection of biodiversity, vigorous forest re-growth, very limited soil erosion and preservation of watershed forest (Yos 2004:115). This counter discourse has also affected the CBT project at Huaipooling. Some NGO workers and villagers consider ecotourism as a communication tool to aid understanding of the Karen's traditional agriculture, and utilize this counter discourse in the context of ecotourism.

3-2. The management of CBT

Most tourists visiting the settlements in HuaiPooling "home-stay" in a village. The village households, registered as members of a CBT group, offer their homes for accommodation to tourists. Most villagers in Huaipooling actively take part in the CBT project. For example, in one of the villages of Huaipooling where I conducted fieldwork, H village, 23 out of 27 households are registered as CBT members.

When tourists arrive in the village, they are first welcomed at the CBT center of the village, where the village headman or the leaders of the CBT group greet them, introduce their host-families, and briefly explain the history of the village and CBT.

During a tour of the village, tourists observe the village life, including the Karen's 'traditional rotational agriculture (*rai mun wian*)', cooking, weaving, natural dying, or they go on a trek to the community forest with their local guides to observe various kinds of birds, orchids,² and other flora and fauna. Besides that, the women's group of the village manages a cooperative handicraft center, selling natural colored weavings, such as shoulder bags, traditional costumes, and scarves, ranging from 70 baht to 500 baht³.

4. Transformation Local Knowledge to Symbolic power

In the context of ecotourism, a local guide is not just a tour guide but an 'eco-guide'. As Kazuya Hashimoto (2001) argued, an 'eco-guide' needs to explain the flora and fauna, and various cultural practices of the host society in the context of the environmental discourse to tourists. But local people in the third world do not necessarily share the Western interest in environmentalism, which has led to difficulties in them acting as 'eco-guides', (Hashimoto 2001). If this is the case, some skills and knowledge to translate various cultural practices into the discourse of environmentalism are essential for local people if they wish to become 'eco-guides'.

In the Karen communities of Huaipooling, local guides often explain their swidden agriculture in the context of sustainable agriculture, anti-globalization, and biodiversity. Below is the narrative of a Karen local guide during a tour to a swidden field.

Our swidden agriculture is not environmentally destructive. We have lived here for more than 200 years but there is still rich forest around here. Is that what you, the tourists are seeking? If our practices were destructive, the forest around here would have disappeared. Swidden agriculture needs such local knowledge as careful field selection, a careful control of firing, maintenance of emergent relics or large tree stumps in the fields. We never cultivate watershed forest and primary forest, but cultivate only secondary forest for sustainable land use. Besides, rai mun wian can contribute to conservation of biodiversity. In our field, there are more than 20 crops and 100 species. You cannot see most of them in the lowlands because they are local species. But if the mono-cultural commercial cropping system, which has been expanded by the governmental agencies to stop swidden agriculture, reaches us here, these local species would also disappear. The crops in the field are chemical-free, unlike those in the lowland markets. We, the Karen people here, eat these vegetables every day, and are healthier than city people (a villager of H village. Cited from my field notes).

Such a narrative should not be regarded as inherent among the villagers, but as socially constructed. Many of the villagers in Huaipooling have joined the community forest movement, actively participating in various NGOs' workshops, peaceful demonstrations in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, and networking with many activists, academics, and peasant leaders. Through social practice in the context of ecotourism and the land rights movement, the villagers have been acquiring the skills and knowledge to articulate local customs in terms of the environmental discourse, legitimating their customary land rights.

But from the villagers' *emic* perspective, their land use is not necessarily oriented to nature conservation. It might be true that the villagers do not cultivate areas of watershed forest, but the major reason for that is not an environmental one; it is that cultivating secondary forest is much more convenient because there are fewer large trees than in primary forest. So it is possible to say the Karen's conservation of watershed forest is just incidental, or "loose local-commons"(Inoue 1997)⁴.

However, the narratives in the context of ecotourism should not be seen just as communicative staging for tourists (cf. Cohen 1996:33–35, MacCannell 1999[1976]). This 'learning process' has led the villagers to rethink their unconscious cultural practices, transforming their cultural practices into "tight local commons"(Inoue 1997), or into symbolic power for negotiating and for securing their livelihood and state recognition of customary practices of resource use.

The former village headman of H village said, *'One of the good effects of CBT is that the villagers have found the tools to negotiate with the government. Before, if the government ordered us to stop swidden agriculture and other forest use, we couldn't do anything. We didn't have the ability to negotiate with them. But now we can do that'*.

The community forest movement is no longer just for negotiation over land and natural resources; it also helps to define the cultural construction of people and communities (Yos 2004:120). Thus the Karen's' cultural and social practices in the context of ecotourism are part of a process of identity formation, but also a process of localization of ecotourism. For the Karen people, ecotourism is a concept introduced externally. Originally, the concept of ecotourism was derived from the Western ideology of environmentalism and the Western tourism market. But the Karen people have localized and appropriated the external concept of ecotourism to their own interests.

5. Final Thought

In this presentation, I have examined cultural and social aspects of ecotourism among Karen communities in northern Thailand. The Karen people in Huaipooling utilize ecotourism as a communication tool to negotiate against the dominant power of nature conservation. In other words, they have adopted tourism as a space for indigenous movement.

Previously, most scholars of tourism studies have considered tourism just as a form of economic development or as an industry. It might be true that additional income from tourism is important for most Karen people in my research area. But considering tourism just as an economic factor would limit understanding of it. Tourism is no longer limited to being an economic phenomenon but can have a variety of meanings, with economic, political, cultural and social aspects.

Notes

1. My fieldwork was conducted in northern Thailand for twenty-six months during 2001–2005. Financial support for my fieldwork was provided by the Japan Foundation and Saint Paul's university.
2. Normally, one host-family and local guide is chosen for each two tourists. A home stay is 100 baht per person per night, 50 baht for each meal per person. The tour to their community forest and swidden field with local guides costs 100 baht per day per tourist. All income from CBT is collected by the accountant of the CBT group, and 20% of the income is saved as the village fund for micro financing of the members.
3. The income from handicraft selling is also collected by the women's group in a similar way to the CBT.
4. Inoue Makoto (1997) categorizes sustainable forest utilization into two types to examine the ecological functions of local resource management systems: "loose local-commons" and "tight local-commons". "Loose local-commons" would be defined as a "haphazard" or "incidental" sustainable local management system in which socially accepted rules for resource management are not tightly adhered to. This type of local-commons lacks the "intention" to develop sustainable use, and may never become sustainable despite implementing drastic changes. On the other hand, the "tight local-commons" system has a strong "intention" for sustainable use, which ensures sustainable resource management occurs in a more effective way.

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