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Centre for Indigenous Governance and Development

Politics and Professionalism in Community Development:

Examining Intervention in the Highlands of Northern Thailand

Katharine Islay Mckinnon

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Centre for Indigenous Governance and Development
Level 3, Geography Building
Turitea Campus
Massey University
Palmerston North
New Zealand

http://cigad.massey.ac.nz

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Politics and professionalism in community development: examining intervention in the highlands of northern Thailand

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Abstract

It has been suggested that the practice of international development assistance is so deeply problematic that the only moral choice is to abandon the work altogether. The practice of community development in the Third World has been the subject of extensive critique for several decades. Scholars and development practitioners speak of the 'tyranny' of development and discuss the ways in which development is a means of control and domination rather than an altruistic enterprise whereby wealthier nations lend assistance to poorer nations. How are these debates relevant to highland development programs in northern Thailand? And how are development practitioners responding to the suggestion that they are making things worse rather than better? This paper explores the history of development in the hills and suggests some ways that development practitioners can - and do - take on board recent critiques of development while continuing to work for the betterment of highland lives and livelihoods.

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Biographical Note

Dr. Katharine Mckinnon's academic interest in issues around the politics of development practice and discourses of national identity began early, as an 'expat' child in a household of development professionals in Southeast Asia. Through graduate studies in Geography/Development Studies and doctoral studies in Human Geography, she has developed a research agenda around these interests. Her current research brings post-Marxist and post-structural theories of hegemony and subjectification into development geography, and is an effort to contribute new paths of analysis for development studies that move beyond often paralysing debates around the moralities of development intervention.

Introduction

It has been suggested that the practice of international development assistance is so deeply problematic that the only moral choice is to abandon the work altogether. The practice of community development in the Third World has been the subject of extensive critique for several decades. Scholars and development practitioners speak of the 'tyranny' of development and discuss the ways in which development is a means of control and domination rather than an altruistic enterprise whereby wealthier nations lend assistance to poorer nations. How are these debates relevant to highland development programs in northern Thailand? And how are development practitioners responding to the suggestion that they are making things worse rather than better?

This paper explores the history of development in the hills and will suggest some approaches through which development practitioners can, and do, take on board recent critiques of development while continuing to work for the betterment of highland lives and livelihoods.

This paper is based on research undertaken for my PhD in human geography at Australian National University. The research was based in Chiang Mai, and focused on highland community development and research programs. There has been a huge number of researchers, development experts, agronomists, NGO staff and so on heading into the hills ever since the late 1960s and early 70s. The research grew out of a fascination with the interest in the highlands and a desire to know more about what effect all these people were having.

My interest is not only academic – it is also part of my family history. My father was one of the first foreign researchers to be employed at the Tribal Research Centre, and my family lived in Chiang Mai on and off during the 70s and 80s. I grew up around the people whose work I ended up examining in my dissertation, and in a household where talk around the dinner table was often focused on the political situation in Thailand and the situation in the mountains. When I returned to Chiang Mai in 1998 after an absence of 12 years to volunteer for an Akha NGO, I had the chance to see for myself that after three decades of development intervention – interventions that were supposed to be making life better for highland communities – there were still a lot of highlanders in a fairly precarious

position: no citizenship rights, no land title even where they had been settled for hundreds of years (such as Karen communities in Doi Inthanon), subject to constant racism, many struggling to make a living, with many turning to opium, heroin and (from the late 90s) *yabba* or methamphetamine, as a quick and cheap way to forget their worries. There seemed to be a serious deficit of happiness in the highland communities I got to know and I started to get really curious: after so many decades of so many development programs and researchers, so many NGOs and missionaries all doing their best in their different ways to 'improve' life in mountain villages – how could so many people be in a situation of such utter despair and hopelessness that they rely on narcotics for some sense of happiness? What was happening here? Who were all these people trying to do good? And why was it not working?

These questions were the starting point for my research, and when I came back to Thailand again in 2000 for my PhD research it was these questions I came looking for answers to. Something had gone wrong with the development process and I wanted to figure out what role development professionals had played.

I would like to make a note here that I am using "development professionals" as a broad term – meant to denote researchers, extension officers, NGO staff, foreigners, Thai and highlanders, who are involved in planning, doing and researching development in the highlands in a professional capacity.

Development as tyranny? Critical debates on development

I am not the only one who has been questioning development processes of course – and my research was also informed by a body of critical debate in development studies, geography and anthropology. My work is situated in an emerging literature on post-development. The use of the 'post-' prefix indicates a certain rejection of key aspects of mainstream development thinking. At the same time the continued use of 'development' indicates that although we are critical of the idea of development, we still think it is an idea that has merit.

Since the 1950s, development has been represented as an altruistic endeavour, of wealthy nations helping poor nations, or developed nations lending a hand to underdeveloped nations so that they could 'catch up' to the standards of living

enjoyed in the west. A classic example of this kind of rhetoric is a famous quote by President Truman in his inaugural speech in 1949:

> We must embark [President Truman said] on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.
>
> The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing (Esteva 1992: 6, parenthesis in the original).

The post-development critics such as Esteva (1992), Escobar (1995), Ferguson (1994), and Yapa (2002) argue that in fact development has been simply a new kind of imperialism, and exploitation for foreign profit has played a huge part – although the profit has not always been financial. These critics argue that international aid acts as an instrument of power and control; that understanding the world as divided into 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' grants economic, cultural, moral, political and intellectual superiority to the First World, and constructs the Third World only in terms of the ways in which it is deficient and lacking. The act of imagining the world in this way creates the rationale for the development industry to exist; the rationale that charges largely First World agencies and professionals with the responsibility of introducing structural adjustment, economic progress, social change.

For some post-development critics, development is simply a conduit for such First World agencies to assert their dominance over the Third World, all in the name of progress. For some critics, the whole process is so morally corrupt that the idea of development itself needs to be got rid of. For others in the post-development camp, however, (such as Gibson-Graham, 2005; Parfitt, 2002; and in Escobar's more recent work, 2004) the idea of offering a lending hand to people struggling with poverty is a worthy aim, and despite the problems with development – the idea of trying to help, and to achieve a more egalitarian global community, is still something worth striving for.

The hill tribe problem and development in the highlands

How are these debates relevant to highland development programs in northern Thailand? And how are development practitioners responding to the suggestion that they might be acting as instruments of a new kind of imperialism? I will move now to exploring the history of highland development with these questions in mind.

For at least four decades highland communities in the mountainous northern borderlands of Thailand have been the subject of extensive research and development activities. Between the late 1960s and 2000, highland villages were the focus of activities for approximately 20 internationally funded multilateral development projects with a total budget between them of approximately 185 million US dollars (Renard 2001: 70-71); at least 158 registered non-government organisations (NGOs) if not more (Kampe, unpublished data 1995); and an indeterminate number of researchers – including at least 101 foreign researchers who registered with the Tribal Research Institute between 1968-1992 (Tribal Research Institute 1992).

The highland population that was the focus of all this attention was estimated to be approximately 770,000[1] in 1997 (Hill Tribe Welfare Division of the Department of Public Welfare, cited by Satawat and Nipatvej 2001) out of a total population in Thailand of approximately 60 million (National Statistics Office 2000 cited by Satawat and Nipatvej 2001: 1). 'Hill tribes' or 'highlanders' are catch-all phrases used to describe these 770,000, though in fact the number encompasses very diverse communities. The Ministry for the Interior officially recognizes ten groups as 'hill tribes': Karen, Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Htin, Khamu, and Mlabri. Over time these groups have been distinguished by anthropologists on the basis of culture, the altitude at which they tend to establish villages, their farming systems, and their language group.

In contemporary Thailand, significant numbers of highlanders live and work in lowland towns and cities. Historically, the 'hill tribes' made their homes in the mountainous landscape that now forms the borderlands stretching from the Thai-

[1] This figure is for the groups classified by the Ministry for the Interior as 'hill tribes': Karen, Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Htin, Khamu, and Mlabri.

Burma border, across northern Laos and southern China, to the northern highlands of Vietnam.[2] Many family or village groups migrated across these borders into what is now Thai territory after contemporary state boundaries were created, perhaps moving to escape conflict in neighbouring countries or for economic reasons, or simply following connections with kin who had already migrated into these areas. But many groups were also in Thai territory for much longer – and since before the current borders were drawn between Thailand, Burma and Laos, the 'hill tribes' have built their villages in the mountains and upland valleys of this region and cleared pockets of forest to grow rice, vegetables and (sometimes) opium.

With the advent of the development era these diverse highland communities became redefined as a problematic population. Highland communities started to be represented as a population inadequately understood, and thus in need of research attention, and as a population in need of help, through the interventions of development agencies.

The emergence of the 'hill tribe problem'

Since the mid-1960s the highland population has been defined as problematic for a range of reasons, including opium, drug trafficking, national security during the Cold War, illegal immigration, destruction of forests, erosion, and water pollution among others. The idea of a problematic hill tribe population brought significant resources into Chiang Mai, through a range of development programs and research projects that employed both foreign and Thai academics and development professionals. Many of these programs commenced work based on the assumption that the problems of drug trafficking, forest destruction and so on, were genuine and needed to be addressed. But the story of the 'hill tribe problem' is not so simple, and it is important to understand how the 'problem' emerged in order to understand what has been happening in the hills over these past decades.

To properly understand how the 'hill tribe problem' emerged as it did, we must begin well before the era of development commenced, in the pre-colonial

[2] It is important to recognise that a significant proportion of those living in highland areas, if not the majority, are in fact 'lowland' Thais (see Hinton 1969; McKinnon and Wanat 1983).

kingdoms that were incorporated in the contemporary Thai state. Histories of 'Thailand' often seem to take for granted that Thailand as such has always existed, that the current boundaries and government have more or less been inherited from a long established political entity. Recent work of historians such as Thongchai (1996; 2000a, 2000b) and Renard (2000) makes clear that Thailand, as both a nation and a territory, emerged only over the last 150 years, and it took its shape largely in response to the influence of colonial powers on the geo-politics of the region.[3] A very different sense of territoriality and nationality existed during the pre-colonial era.[4]

In the pre-colonial era, borders were much less clearly delineated, and the state structures followed a system very different from a contemporary vision of the nation in which a group of people and a particular territory is something defined by birth. Prior to the colonial period, the state system that predominated in South-East Asia was focused around networks of city-states which were based in cities such as Chiang Mai. From centres like Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai, rule was established not through the conquest of land, but through the formation of allegiances. In this system rule was not uniformly established across contiguous space (Bowie 2000; Osborne 2002; Renard 2000; Thongchai 1994). Instead, there were pockets of state spaces in which individual tenants, towns and agricultural communities maintained allegiances with the lords of the land, who were, in turn, aligned with the rulers of the city-states.

In between these governed and protected spaces lay forests and mountains which were subject to more local modes of rule within individual villages and communities. These were ostensibly non-state spaces (Scott 2000) that were a refuge for bandits and refugees and the domain of autonomous self-governing societies of highlanders. Within this system there were state subjects who were tied into a system of allegiance with the ruling powers. Alongside, there were non-state subjects who had, at best, only fleeting loyalties to valley kingdoms. People were able to move between state spaces and non-state spaces, from highland to lowland, from forest to city, and vice versa.

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[3] This is a widely accepted characteristic of Thai modernity, see for example Osborne (2002), Tarling (1998), Wyatt (1984).

[4] Thongchai (1994) explores the shifting territoriality of the Thai state, and more recently (2000a, 2000b) has considered shifting concepts of ethnicity in Thai statehood.

This is a very different system to what was to come with the colonial era. Following British and French incursions into mainland Southeast Asia, a new concept of the nation-state was introduced, in which states were expected to establish rule over contiguous spaces that were clearly defined by a cartographic boundary. A nation-state is a space of continuous rule by the state, and there is no room for non-state spaces – one state's border meets the next, and movement across the boundaries is carefully controlled. At the same time, those who are identified as subjects within the state are defined according to a shared nationality – a shared heritage, a shared cultural history, a shared ethnicity.

When the British and French arrived, it was quite suddenly no longer adequate to have a fuzzy non-state buffer between one kingdom and its neighbours – the land had to be mapped and clear lines drawn that demarcated exactly what was and was not Thai territory. Through a long process of negotiation between the Siamese, British and French authorities, the modern borders of Thailand were finally set down in the early 1900s. At the same time it was necessary to define who was and was not a true Thai. The Siamese set about a campaign to construct a shared Thai identity – to create an integrated state made up of "many peoples, Tai speaking and others, who had little previous connection with the Kingdom of Siam" (Wyatt 1984). Of course the process was not smooth: laying claim to the territory was not the same thing as being able to govern every inch inside the national boundary; and not everyone was included in this new state – highlanders, for example, were left out of a newly formed Thai national identity.

And so it went until the rise of the Cold War – Thailand's borders were clear on paper, but actual effective government of the border areas did not extend to the full territory of Thailand, and not every person living within those borders was officially a subject of the Thai state. In the 1950s, however, it became important that the Thai government have complete control over its borders. The political climate in the region shifted dramatically following the defeat of the French at Dien Ben Phu in 1954. With communist governments being established in China, Laos, North Korea, and the beginnings of the war against communist forces in Vietnam, it was feared that Thailand would be the next to 'fall.' At this time the United States focused on Thailand as an independent state to be defended against communism, and as a regional power to be wooed to the cause of containing communism in the region (Wyatt 1984). Compared to its neighbours

Thailand was seen as politically stable, especially under the rule of the Phibun government from 1948 to 1957. Thailand thus became the focus of international efforts to 'stop the spread' of communism.

Development assistance was a central tool through which the international community, and particularly the United States, sought to address such political concerns. In part development emerged as a strategy of the democratic 'free' Western world to combat not only poverty, but the spread of communism. Development assistance was a way to secure the loyalties of 'underdeveloped' countries that were supposedly in danger of becoming communist. Thailand – identified early on as a strategic ally in the war against communism in Asia – thus became the focus of considerable development assistance from the United States.

Concerns about national security

National and international concerns with the region's vulnerability to communist takeover translated into concerns about the prospect of communist forces forging alliances with highlanders. Highlanders were recognised for their intimate knowledge of the borderlands and exceptional communication channels between scattered mountain settlements across state borders. Saihoo, lecturer in Social Anthropology at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, noted that in the absence of a strong sense of 'national loyalty,' it was feared that

> given adequate support and encouragement from outside, the hill tribes in a particular country may easily engage themselves in subversive activities to further their own ends or to put up resistance to the national authority which seeks to impose some control contrary to their interests (Saihoo 1963: 16-17).[5]

The concerns that the highlands could be a conduit for communist aggression against the Thai government certainly seemed justified in Nan province with Hmong rebellion in 1967 (Hanks and Hanks 2001), which the Thai government identified as a communist uprising. Hmong who had been involved told Hanks and Hanks (2001) that the insurrection was a response to repeated attempts of Thai

[5] In fact, the United States was quite successfully exploiting a very similar strategy against the North Vietnamese by recruiting and arming Hmong to fight against North Vietnamese forces. The assistance of highlanders was secured due to ongoing economic support from the CIA which took the form of the purchase and transportation of heroin (McCoy 1972, 1991).

officials to exact exorbitant fines for cutting trees without permission. Robert Cooper reports that "police patrols were only ambushed after they had destroyed Hmong villages which refused to pay an increase in the unofficial tax that is levied on opium cultivation in some areas" (Cooper 1979: 325-326).

Regardless of the underlying causes the Thai government responded as if it was a communist inspired uprising. Hmong and Yao villages in the area were cleared out. The Thai Cabinet declared the area a free fire zone, and it remained so into the 1970s. All villages in the free fire zone were evacuated and anyone remaining in the hills was considered a communist. At some point during this time the insurrection became a reality and Thai army units in the hills were targeted by rebels – even the governer of Chiang Rai and his police chief were killed in an ambush on a mountain road (Hanks and Hanks 2001). The Hanks' interviews with Hmong who lived in the region at the time make it clear that Pathet Lao – the eventually triumphant communist faction in the Laos Civil War – was recruiting among Hmong across the Thai border, and supporting the insurrection with arms and ammunition (Hanks and Hanks 2001: 196)

Concerns about opium

As the issue of national security came to prominence as a 'problem' in the highlands, the issue of opium production also began to be discussed as part of a discourse of the 'hill tribe problem.' Opium has been grown in the region for centuries for its medicinal qualities. Following the 1839-1842 and 1858 Opium Wars between Britain and China, and China's subsequent legalisation of the trade, opium became a major cash crop in China. Cultivation of opium was legalised in Thailand in 1855 and was strictly regulated under the Royal Opium Department. This department acted regulated opium supply which was then sold at exorbitant prices at licensed opium dens. The drug was only banned after many years of internal negotiation in the ranks of the leading military and police personnel. In 1957 Field Marshall Sarit launched a campaign to make opium illegal, but was persuaded that the opium revenue was still vital to secure the ongoing loyalty of his subordinates, and so the campaign rested (Chupinit, pers. com. 2001). Under strong international pressure (particularly from the United States) opium was finally made illegal in 1958 (Proclamation of the Revolutionary Party, No.37, 9 Dec 1958, cited by Wanat 1989: 13). By this time however, the opium crop –

which was ideally suited to the difficult terrain and touchy soils of the highlands – was well established as an important cash crop to supplement the livelihoods of many communities in the highlands (Geddes 1976).

The problem of environmental destruction

A final component to what would become a three pronged 'hill tribe problem' hinged on the concern that rotational farming methods were causing environmental damage and deforestation.[6] Rotational, or swidden farming systems are commonly used in upland areas where irrigation systems cannot be built due to unreliable water supply or particularly difficult terrain. Fields are cleared in the forest and planted in rice and vegetables. When yields start to decrease the fields are either left fallow or are abandoned altogether, leaving the forest to entirely reclaim the fields.[7] Recent research shows that this system is one of the most ecologically sound for the highland environment: it maintains bio-diversity, protects forest cover, and sustains soil fertility without the use of fertilisers. However, it was assumed very early one that swidden agriculture was innately harmful, as well wasteful. This was an idea most likely introduced to Thailand from British colonial authorities in Burma (Renard, pers. com. 2001).

The Thai Royal Forestry Department was established in 1876 under the leadership of Slade, an Englishman trained in German forestry. The German forestry model is based on carefully managed single species plantation forests, clearly separated from agricultural endeavours whose proper place was in the lowland valleys. The existence of agricultural lands scattered through the forests was an affront to the German forestry system of clearly delineated and carefully managed forest lands, as distinct from settled agricultural land. The regular clearing of forest by swidden farmers was also widely considered to be an extremely wasteful use of resources (see for example Pendleton (1945) and Blofield (1955) discussed in Saihoo, 1963).

[6] Sturgeon (1997) discusses the ways in which state exclusions of 'hill tribes' are articulated through policies of environmental management, and have subsequently shaped the environmental management practices of highlanders.
[7] On swidden farming in the north see Grandstaff (1980) Keen (1972) Kunstadter *et al.* (1978) McKinnon (1989).

It was not long before this 'wasteful' method of agriculture was to be considered a serious problem. Despite the lack of "accurate data" the Department of Public Welfare estimated in 1964 that hill tribe activity had destroyed 67% of forest in Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces. By 1960, when the first highland Land Settlement Projects were established, so-called "slash-and-burn" agriculture had been made illegal (Manndorff 1967: 533).

Although there was not yet any "complete data or results of specific studies" (Saihoo 1963: 15), by 1963 the three interrelated issues of swidden, national security, and opium were well entrenched as a 'hill tribe problem' that needed to be urgently addressed. Saihoo characterised these three issues (quoted verbatim) as follows:

> It is by now generally agreed among persons interested in Thailand hill tribes that they invite careful consideration in three important respects:
>
> 1. Their shifting cultivation which involves the destruction of extensive areas of the forests on the mountains and moving the villages in search of new fields with possible consequences of soil erosion and damage to watersheds which would affect the supply of water for the lowland Thai cultivators.
> 2. Their little recognition of international boundaries and national authority and control with possible consequences of border insecurity, especially in the present world political situations, for the country in which they reside.
> 3. The production of raw opium of some tribes which supplies the country and the world with an illegal and harmful product in various forms (Saihoo 1963: 15).

In the absence of hard data, trust was placed in the "reliable observations of those who are in well-qualified positions" (Saihoo 1963: 15). On this tenuous basis the three-point 'hill tribe problem' would form the cornerstone of development and research policy from the 1960s to 2000.[8]

When development began to get underway in the highlands it was driven by these three interrelated concerns. For example, the objectives of the Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program as stated in 1964 were:

[8] The dominance of the three pronged 'hill tribe' problem is widely recognised. For specific discussion see Kammerer (1989), Kampe (1992).

1. To promote and develop the socio-economic standard of the hill tribes by ways of promoting their occupation, education and health as well as helping develop their own communities.
2. To prevent forest and watershed destruction by way of introducing stabilized farming.
3. To abolish opium production by way of introducing other occupations to replace opium raising.
4. To guarantee the public safety in border provinces by way of promoting mutual understanding and loyalty (Department of Public Welfare 1964).

The three core 'problems' for which aid was required, happened, conveniently, to coincide with international geo-political concerns of the day. The Thai Ministry for the Interior began to take interest in the highlands around the height of the Cold War and in the midst of the United State's engagement in Vietnam. It was also a time when the trade in narcotics and the preservation of old growth forests were internationally emerging concerns.

The issue of opium eradication was to become a core focus of many of the interventions in the highlands. It was a focus which would allow projects to simultaneously address issues of national security, the threat of communism and deforestation.

International involvement in the drug eradication process in Thailand came out of an international conference on drugs held at UN offices in Geneva at the end of the 1950s. Thailand had only recently banned the production of opium in 1958. At the conference the United States was negotiating for sole involvement in the opium eradication process. Under an informal (and still unacknowledged) agreement with the United States, Thai representatives at the conference were under-reporting opium production figures. In the course of proceedings however the Thai contingent rethought whether it might be in Thailand's best interests to allow the United States to be the sole international assistance with crop eradication. Overnight the official figures for opium production in Thailand presented at the conference grew by several hundred tonnes, and the Thai delegation was able to recruit international support for crop eradication programs (Geddes, pers. comm. with John Mckinnon 1977).

The process of negotiating development assistance was always more than simply identifying an appropriate way to deal with real problems. Sole charge of the opium eradication process could also mean unique access on the ground for the United States at a time when the border regions were still beyond direct government of the Thai state. Given Thailand's reliance on United States' aid money it is not surprising that the government was initially supportive of this. The final decision to negotiate for development assistance with a broad range of international powers (including Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and the United Nations), was an astute move which would ensure that no single international power gained too much of a foothold in the borderlands.

Unlike the accusation by some post-development authors that development is about the First World asserting its power over the Third World, this case demonstrates the degree to which Thai state authorities were able to negotiate arrangements that suited their own interests. While allowing United States military and security activities to continue, the Thai administration also ensured they would not have free rein in the mountains.

Although it was underpinned by regional geopolitical concerns of the Cold War, the 'hill tribe problem' articulated broader international concerns. The 'problem' itself called for a remedy which could be provided by international development donors.

The very process of defining a 'hill tribe problem' identified both a problem which development projects could be established to address, and defined a new 'hill tribe' subject which could become the focus of a range of interventions. The 'hill tribes' became defined by the 'problems' they represented. Official definitions of 'hill tribes' are exemplified by the following extract from a Department of Public Welfare (DPW) brief on the Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Programme, 1964. It is an example that has not dated at all:

> It is estimated that there are between 200,000 – 300,000 hill peoples living interspersedly [sic] in the densely forested hill ranges of Northern Thailand. These people belong to various tribes having their own distinguished languages, cultures, traditions, beliefs etc. Most of them raise and sell opium, practice shifting cultivation and always keep on moving to hunt for new pieces of land for cultivation which have greatly resulted in the forest and watershed destruction.

> These hill tribes are generally illiterate, have ill health and are economically deprived and could become the victims of [communist] infiltration so easily. These lead to the problems of social economic development, administration and political security of the nation which therefore demand the most urgent solution (Department of Public Welfare 1964: 1).

In this picture the 'hill tribes' are identified by their primitiveness, their illiteracy, ill health and economic deprivation, and by their destructive agricultural practices, for which they must "always keep on moving." This representation of dirty and problematic 'hill tribes' attributed a single identity to diverse and widespread communities on the basis of a shared 'problem' they presented to the Thai state.

The act of problematisation was an important step in the process of establishing state rule in the highlands. By identifying a problem that needed to be fixed, the Thai state created a rationale for getting more involved in the highlands, and a reason to being exercising greater control over the border regions. Rendering the hill tribes 'problematic' made it possible to subject them to the tools of government: registration, policing, survey and ultimately development. These measures would succeed in transforming the highlands from ungoverned to governed spaces, bringing them into Thai-land.

Domestic development measures

The Border Patrol Police (BPP) was the first agency charged with working in the mountains in 1955. Their work involved patrolling remote areas; forging contacts; establishing schools; and sometimes, intimidating the population. The establishment of the BPP was the first step towards bringing the northern borderlands under state control, and thus actualising the vision of a nation-state as a contiguous territory, uniformly part of Thai-land, and uniformly under the governing gaze of the state. It involved an odd blend of policing, establishing links between state institutions and highland villages, and introducing Thai schools and health services.

As the beginnings of a process of bringing highlanders into the embrace of the state, BPP interventions began to establish highlanders as *inside* the state. As insiders, highlanders could be distinguished from and used as a defence against a

new threatening outside – the communist insurgent. Bringing villagers under the 'care' and 'protection' of the Thai kingdom was a step towards ensuring their loyalty to the kingdom, and lessening the likelihood that they might be recruited by communist insurgents.

The responsibilities first taken on by the BPP were soon taken up by the Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program introduced resettlement projects that sought to bring highlanders within the circle of government surveillance and control:

> The primary purpose was to settle hill tribes in locations suited for them, by means of establishing 'settlement areas' (Nikhom) on the ridges and high plateaus which are the most favoured sites of the hill peoples, and by encouraging the tribes to migrate to the settlement areas (Manndorff 1967: 531-532).

In this way it was hoped the projects could address the most urgent concerns of government authorities with 'the hill tribe problem': dangerous and destructive agricultural practices of slash and burn, opium cultivation, and the national security risk that was posed by an un-governed and mobile population.

The *Nikhom* experienced some "setbacks" during the initial period of operation, in part because "the Thai were not at all experienced in hill agriculture. In the 900 years of their history in Thailand they had never taken great interest in the mountains. It took some time to realise that the concepts and experience derived from lowland settlements could not easily be transplanted into the hills" (Manndorf 1967: 532). The Land Settlement Projects were reshaped as highland development blocks to cultivate experimental cash crops, establish training centres and provide health, education, and welfare services for hill people living nearby.

In response to the initial failures of the *Nikhom*, the Public Welfare Department established Mobile Development Teams in the late 1960s. The idea behind the mobile teams was that,

> since it would be unrealistic to expect that those tribesmen scattered over the hills would migrate into the sphere of the settlements (or even visit and study their demonstration plots), the hill tribes should be approached in their own villages... in

> their own world, in their own physical and social environment (Manndorf 1967: 537).

The teams were made up of Public Welfare Department recruits, all lowland Thais who had been employed straight out of tertiary education. The three member teams consisted of one leader, who had usually completed an undergraduate degree in social science; an agricultural extension worker who had studied at agriculture college; and a sanitary worker with at least three years of high school and hospital training (Chupinit, pers. comm. 2001).

To these young team members the mountains was like another world. Ajhan Chupinit Kesmanee, a former team leader and now lecturer Srinakharinwirot University, recalls how – although they remained within Thailand's borders – going into the mountains in those times was like "going to another country" (Chupinit, pers. comm. 2001). Most villages could only be reached on foot and teams would often spend weeks at a time walking from village to village. The food was different, the language was different – in stark contrast to the contemporary situation in which the majority of villages have road access, Thai television and the village shop usually sells a range of instant noodles, sweets, Coca-Cola and the ubiquitous Red Bull. In this setting, the teams' practical duties were to promote agricultural systems as alternatives to shifting cultivation and alternatives to opium crops; to provide a primary health care service; and to provide identification documents such as household registration, birth, death and marriage certificates, and travel permits. The presence of the Mobile Teams in this remote and unfamiliar place began a process through which the highlands would become less like "another country" and more like part of Thailand.

Calling in the 'foreign experts'

The BPP and the Mobile Development Teams were only the first step in what would become a much more extensive process involving internationally funded multi-lateral development programs and teams of international researchers. A discourse of a 'hill tribe problem' created a space of development in the highlands in which highlanders were reconfigured as problematic 'hill tribe' subjects and to which development 'experts' could be called in for remedial action. Over the next two decades the United Nations, and the governments of the United States,

Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Germany among others, would establish multi-lateral development programs in the highlands.

The Tribal Research Centre (TRC) was also established in 1964. The TRC received foreign support in the form of anthropological advisors from Australia and New Zealand and funding for the library and photographic and recording equipment from Britain. Non-Thai anthropologists would provide initial leadership for the Centre until Thai researchers, apprenticed to the trained anthropologists, received enough training to take over the research work at the Centre.

The social scientists at the Tribal Research Centre were to provide research results which would help to shape government policy and provide the knowledge which would help to resolve the problems of the highlands.

Foreign expertise was also called in to help address the 'hill tribe problem' through community development projects on the ground. The first international development project got underway in 1972. This project, the Joint Thai-United Nations Programme for Drug Abuse Control, was the first of many multi-lateral opium crop replacement programs.

While opium crop replacement was often the central focus of these projects, the process of finding alternative cash crops was expected to simultaneously address issues of national security and deforestation through the increased contact between highland communities and state officials, and the introduction of permanent cropping systems which would entail permanent settlement.

There was broad consensus across the DPW, UNDCP, and international partners in multi-lateral highland development programs that these 'hill tribe problems' could be addressed by improving farming methods and replacing opium with alternative cash crops. 'Improvement' meant moving to permanent fields of paddy rice, fruit orchards or cabbages, simultaneously preventing the destruction of more forests due to practices of clearing the fields in rotational farming methods, reducing erosion by moving to more intensive cropping on less steep land, and eliminating opium production in the move to 'harmless' crops such as coffee, kidney beans and cabbages. These cash crops did not fit in with the rotations of the swidden agricultural system, and thus, it was expected that the process of taking up such

permanent crops would mean that highland settlements would also become permanent, and people would cease to regularly migrate to new village sites and new fields in the mountains (Geddes 1967; Manndorff 1965, 1967; Wanat 1989). As well as ensuring that no more virgin forest was cleared for fields, permanent settlements would be much easier for state institutions to access, and thus to regulate and administer.

But, despite the fact that many of the multi-lateral projects had as part of their brief to facilitate the "integration of highland populations into the mainstream of the Thai nation" (Dirksen 1993: 4), none of them succeeded in obtaining the citizenship papers or land title that would signal formal recognition of the legitimacy of highlanders as part of Thailand. The only project that came to close was the Mae Chaem Integrated Watershed Development Project run by USAID. The USAID project introduced coffee as an opium replacement crop. In order to give villagers the confidence to invest in the new crop USAID had negotiated with the Thai authorities to have land certificates issued. When Royal Forestry Department officials objected the project went so far as to withhold funding for a year until the Thai Cabinet passed special legislation to exempt the area from Royal Forestry Department regulations. Over 4000 permits were issued, only to be revoked after the project ended and the village fields had long been converted to coffee production (Kampe, pers. com. 2001)

This was as close as any project got to obtaining for highlanders the rights accorded to the Thais of Thai-land. While development projects were helping to make the highlands governable, they did not (and could not) make highlanders national subjects.

After years of development programs highland communities remain in a tenuous situation within the Thai state. The discourse of the three-fold 'hill tribe problem' has changed, but the same scape-goating still occurs. This is evidenced for example, in hill tribes being blamed for recent flooding in Chiang Mai, for polluting waterways, for AIDs; and in the fact that highlanders are still seen as illegal immigrants. The landscape for professional involvement has altered considerably through the emergence of many local NGOs focused on advocacy work. Many of these are succeeding in lobbying at the national political level for highland rights, especially highlanders' rights to citizenship and land title.

A rough view of what development programs have achieved over the decades reveals mixed results. The opium crop has been largely eradicated – although Renard (2001) claims that this was more due to action taken to burn opium fields than to the interventions of development programs. All highland villages are now permanent settlements, and have been incorporated in a national state administration and the national Thai education system (at the primary school level). At the same time, however, the interventions of development programs haven't necessarily meant that highlanders are able to enjoy more stable livelihoods, and despite the emphasis that was placed on the aim to foster national loyalty, key components of this – such as issuing citizenship papers or land title – have been missing (see McKinnon, 2005). Furthermore, some observers argue that the process of development has led to a decline of traditional cultural practices and point to escalating rates of drug addiction in highland communities as a clear sign that life is not better than it used to be, but worse (see Chupinit and Gebert, 1993).

Development professionals and the desire to do good

So far this brief review of highland development seems to support the contention that I began with: that development is an instrument of power and control; that it is about obtaining power over populations and territory, rather than being a project of social justice. This is not, however, an entirely fair picture – not once we start to look at what development professionals in this community, in Chiang Mai, have been striving towards for all these years.

The professionals I worked most closely with during my research maintain a strong ethic of working for the people, and see their role as facilitating a process through which highlanders can make a better life for themselves. Even the most cynical, and those that present the least optimistic view of what development has managed to achieve, continue to see their role in that way and continue to strive towards some sense of social justice (for further discussion refer to McKinnon, 2006 in press).

These professionals have worked hard over the years, often working against the prevailing climate – politically and in the organisation they have been part of. Through persistence and hope, development professionals have made significant

contributions in northern Thailand. Professionals have provided vocal and powerful critique of existing hill tribe policy and have undertaken research that has undermined the key tenants of the 'hill tribe problem'. Non-highlander professionals have played an important role as advocates for emerging highland organisations, and with Thailand's more liberal democratic environment since the early 1990s, highland leaders have been able to foster increasing activism by highlanders as well as a new leadership within the burgeoning NGO movement. Development professionals have also played a central role in pushing for a participatory approach in all highland development – an approach through which the concerns and interests of highland communities are the basis for any development work that is done.

This list of achievements is perhaps not what most professionals had hoped to achieve through their work. But it is testament to the positive impacts professionals can have – a far cry from the post-development critic's assertion that it would be best to just not do development work for fear of the harm that it can bring.

Conclusion

Development processes in the highlands, like development processes everywhere, are always political: the problems to be solved are defined by actors working on a particular political scene; any development effort has to contend with the way the problem was imagined, as well as the contemporary political context at local, national and international levels. If development professionals are going to continue to try and head out into the work and do something to help people, then what they can do (and what they are doing) is to work with a strong awareness of what they are really hoping to achieve: that is, a vision of a fairer, more egalitarian world, where disenfranchised people like the highlanders get a good shot at a happy, secure life. Professionals also have to try and achieve this vision with a full awareness that development is a game of politics, embedded in specific political situations and a bureaucratic setting. Development professionals must themselves be political creatures, working to formulate strategies based in an alert engagement with the politics of development.

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