

Social Movement and the Making of Cultural Identity Rights of Karen Communities in Thungyai Naresuan¹

Kritsada Boonchai

Foundation for Ecological Recovery (FER)

kobper@hotmail.com

Introduction

The Karen communities in Thungyai Naresuan are native communities living in a mountainous area called ‘Thungyai (large field)’ in Sangkla Buri district, Kanchana Buri province, and Oongpang district, Tak province, along the Thai-Burma borderline in the Northwest of Thailand. Since late Ayudhya period—some 200-250 years ago, the ethnic minority people have long lived in this area that was beyond control of the state. The state only gave concessions to local urban people for logging and mining. Later, with a concept of forest conservation zoning, Royal Forestry Department (RFD) announced the area to be Thungyai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in 1974.

In 1991, with the public’s rising ‘green’ awareness and an ever more stringent concept on conservation forest management adopted from the West by the state, the Thungyai Sanctuary was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO which also provides financial support. Motivated by vested interests while citing the national security concern, the state needed to take full control over forest management. The Karen people and other ethnic minority groups in Thungyai were seen as problems and obstacles to the state’s forest management. A resettlement plan for those people was thus proposed.

With the radical change that was to be imposed on them, the Karen people who had long been obedient to the state began their struggle to protect their community rights to their resources, economy and culture. The struggle was joined by several civil society groups including NGOs, community-based organizations, academics and journalists. As a result, the Cultural Identity Rights of the Karen in Thungyai was not exclusively their creation, but rather was forged in the particular movement in which the several groups joined force to establish and strengthen the rights to fight the resource war and development discourse put up by the state.

The objective of this study is: to study the state policy which violates the Karen’s rights, uncovering the mentality, ideology, and multiple forms of power wielding by the state, and how groups of people are interconnected at various levels; to uncover the structural problem of power in Thai society; to study the Karen’s movement to protect their rights to resource management and cultural identity rights, leading to understanding the struggle

¹ Excerpted and adapted from a research on state policy and community rights violation in the case of Thungyai Naresuan community, as part of a series of researches on human rights in Thailand, 2002, coordinated by Professor Saneh Jamarik and supported by Thailand Research Fund (TRF)

that sheds new lights on the definition of ‘community rights’ regarding culture and resources.

Cultural Landscape of Thungyai land

Before it was named Thungyai Naresuan, the western forest tract ranging from Oongpang district, Tak province, to Dan Jedi Sam Ong district, Kanchanaburi province, had been called by the Karen as ‘ Song Pai Tae ‘ or ‘ Sacred Territory ‘ that is guarded by sacred beings. There is a long history of Karen people’s struggle in this ecologically rich area. The Karen have built up their own ecological knowledge through their long dwelling in the wilderness.

The Karen settle in 13 villages in Wia Padu area; 6 of them are located in the western part of Thungyai. They live in valleys, practicing rotating agriculture. Their favorite spots for farming are bamboo forests which are regarded, ecologically speaking, secondary forests, a kind of mixed deciduous forests. Pinkaew Luangaramsri (1991) describes this Karen knowledge that farmlands made out of bamboo forests yield the best rice, and the bamboo forests fast recover. The rotating farming is like a kind of secondary forest.

Discourse on forest conservation and the establishment of the state’s power over Thungyai and the Karen communities.

Thungyai: Sanctuary of the wildlife but not Karen.

In 1973, a helicopter crashed in Nakhon Pathom province. Its passengers included high ranking police and military officers as well as civilians. It was found that they, equipped with weapons, had been to Thungyai for hunting. This incident was picked up by activist students who were leading a campaign against the ruling military dictatorship, leading to a massive demonstration that overthrew the regime.

Such incident also made Thungyai, the Karen’s sacred territory, wellknown across the country and abroad as wild nature that needed immediate protection. That urged the RFD which had long surveyed the area to establish the wildlife sanctuary in 1974. Its boundary was drawn to include part of the two districts of two provinces, covering 2,000,000 rai adjoining the Thai-Burma border. It included the 13 Karen villages, but skipped a mine operated by a private company which had been granted its concession by Mineral Resources Department and had leased its land from the RFD.

“ Due to the fact that parts of the Sanctuary had been dwelt by ethnic groups, Karen and Mong in particular, who had not been regarded Thai citizens, their settlements did not exempt from the sanctuary and they were not relocated. As a result, it has been a chronic problem ever since.” (Forestry Science Faculty, part2, 1989)

The RFD and Forestry Science Faculty admitted the Karen’s existence, but dismissed their rights to continue living there. They employed ‘nationality’ discourse as a tool to deprive the Karen of their rights to resources and culture, while well aware that the ‘nationality’ did not depend on ‘race’ or ‘ID card’. The RFD was authorized to evict the Karen from the sanctuary. With the ‘hilltribe discourse’ and radical racism, the RFD make structural violence more than direct violence.

The denial of the Karen's existence by superimposing the sanctuary, together with the rationale of Forestry Science Faculty mentioned above, showed that the violation of the Karen's rights did not result from only the Forestry Act, but also from the bureaucracy and institutions that implemented or enforced the law and are authorized to define Thungyai as only a place for wildlife, not including the Karen.

Nam Choan dam project: a milestone of discourse on forest and wildlife and Thungyai Naresuan

The Nam Choan dam project was not the first proposed for the Mae Klong river basin. Srinakarin dam and Srisawat Dam had been build in this basin by EGAT since 1979

Once the discourse on 'wildlife conservation' was imposed on Thungyai, the Nam Choan project came to a completely different conclusion than that of Kao Lam and Sri Sawat. The campaign against the Nam Choan project has been recognized as the root of the civil society movement to protect the forests and wildlife. Consisting of environmental organizations, academics on wildlife and ecology, students and local urban people in Kanchanaburi, the opponents helped forge discourses on ecology and wildlife against the project: for example, 'the country's most rich forest tract', 'source of rare and endangered species', etc. Even technocrats in the RFD also produced environmental discourses against the project. Symbols of a variety of wildlife were put on the map of Thungyai against the background.

The environmental movement finally held the victory; the project came to an end in 1988. As a consequence, the struggle had imprinted on both the state's and public's mind a perception of Thungyai as an exclusive place for trees and animals. The western ecological knowledge that was used against the project left no room for local ecological knowledge or identity of the Karen; it dismissed the rotating agriculture and the traditional forest management by the communities. Thungyai was perceived as merely a place for the wild only. The identity of the Karen just vanished, despite their joint effort in the campaign against the dam.

'Most of the forests still remain pristine except for the areas that the Karen live, that are cleared for farmlands. Compared to the entire area, only 10% are destroyed by the Karen. This can be easily solved by evacuating them to new settlements arranged by the state. And vocational trainings will also be provided.' (Forestry Science Faculty and RFD, 1988)

The victory of the Nam Choan movement was a victory of ecological discourse over the Thungyai, and also marked a diverging point of the concepts of resource management held by the state and the social movement which were later divided into Eco-Techocentrism groups which includes the RFD and many 'green' organizations, and a school of Political and Cultural Ecology groups that promotes community rights and plays a key role in creating a social space for the Karen in Thungyai. But when the discourse on conservation took over the area, dismissing the rights of existence of the Karen, the state was quick to use the tool to deny them the community rights.

'Knowledge' and 'truth' production process for Thungyai

When logging was banned, the RFD empowered itself in forest management with the western green movement. It proposed the Thungyai Naresuan and Huay Kakang wildlife sanctuaries to be a world heritage site. In December 1991, the was approved and announced. During the course of this, the elimination process of ethnic groups in Thungyai was in place.

A team from the Faculty of Forestry of Kasetsart University—the institute that produces personnel for the RFD and is influential in the forest management policy—had surveyed Thungyai since 1987 to make the resource conservation and management master plan funded by WWF in the US. It was finished in 1989. The need to create system, order and knowledge for strict control, enforcement and practice was stated in the plan as its purpose.

“Hilltribe people including Mong and Karen clear forests and fell trees for cultivation. Mong usually abandon their long used lands that are now becoming revegetated and expanded. These areas barely accommodate large-size wildlife.” (Forestry Science Faculty,123)

Although Forestry scientists to employ ecological knowledge to produce 'truth' based on so-called science, nature or biological rules to legitimize the punishment (evacuation), training and correction for those allegedly devious (by forcing to give up rotational farming), the 'truth' was full of equivocality, inconsistency and contradiction.

The synthesized 'truth' legitimized the Department's ongoing evacuation of the Karen. In 1994, the Department, funded by GEF, hired MIDAS to study the feasibility of bio-diversity conservation in Thungyai. The study by MIDAS which mainly consisted of persons from the Faculty of Forestry who had made the masterplan, had an initial assumption that the Karen had affected the bio-diversity (MIDAS,1993)

Thungyai was announced a 'world heritage site' in December 1991. In early 1992, the chief of RFD Pirote Suwannakon who had previously had a role in opposing the Nam Choan dam project and cooperated with the army to evacuate Mong communities from Thungyai, declared the evacuation plan for the Karen on grounds that the Karen destroyed the forests and wildlife.

The public's perception for Thungyai had placed the Karen on the conventional imagery of the land of 'wildlife'. There was a contrast between the image of Thungyai with the Karen--the state 'forest-destructive hilltribers'—who had their own knowledge of conservation unlike the ecological concept that the state used as a tool to claim power and also there are local groups to monitor RFD's management continually and the image of Huay Kakang that contained a legend of Sueb Nakasatien who represented the RFD. Under highly centralized management, local communities had been cleansed out of Huay Kakang to fit the image of pristine forests in western ecological concept adopted by the

RFD and the Faculty. The dichotomy was one of the driving forces of the RFD, forestry scientist, and some environmental organizations to redefine and rearrange Thungyai by zoning, restricting population growth, farmlands and villages' boundaries as well as restricting modernity and technology from the outside world.

The impact of protected area and development policy to local communities in forest land

The 'community control'—allowing the Karen to cultivate only on lands that had been revegetated less than 5 years--implemented by the RFD affected the communities in many ways. According to the author's survey in 2000, 50% of the population have had to switch to young fallow cultivation and faced 50% reduction in rice yield, insufficient for consumption while other crops also decreased and could not generate income.

The decrease of rice yield and other crops by more than half forced 68% of the population to adapt in various ways: 28% had to borrow rice from neighbors; 18% had to find starchy roots to mix with rice; 8% bought rice from outside their community and asked for help from state agencies. 56% who had their own farmlands had to rely more on the farmlands with help from relatives and neighbors. 43% were landless people and some of them labored in relatives' and neighbors' lands.

The land restriction imposed by the state also affected the tradition, belief and knowledge. The Karen have held rules and belief in choosing lands: for example, bamboo forests over 10 years old, not too steep, proper size for the family's subsistence, and not mixed up with other lineages who respected different ghosts. Once a proper land was chosen, they would ask Mother Earth. If they had bad dreams, they would have to find a new place. These rules were important in resource management and relationship in communities. Once they were forced to grow rice in young fallow cultivation, abandoning their traditional practice, they were anxious of the decadence as the 'development' and 'conservation' were destroying the Karen identity.

Community rights and the movement to protect the Karen's community rights

Community rights in production, resource management according to tradition.

"...We are making merit for the Mother Rice, offering food to the monks, tying threads around the wrists to recall the spirits (Oath taken by the Karen of Laiwo and Ungpang, 1992)

Rice is fundamental to the Karen culture. Secularly, it links living, farming, eco-system, communities' subsistence economy, as well as social structuring, laboring, crops bartering; and it is also symbolic in spirituality as in festive rituals to pay respect to Mother Rice, to make amends for lives disturbed by farming. Communities' values and morales are closely linked with the production system, and form the communities' relationship with living and resource management.

Rights to production, resource management in accord with custom and tradition is a fundamental right of the Karen communities. It is also a rule of management in

communities, as a saying goes ‘To make a living, forefathers teach us that do not fell trees around watersheds, create farms, grow trees for subsistence. For rice farms, do rotational farming in same places’. At the same time, it is a rights that needs recognition from the state and society, especially in a situation the state policy in conservation and development adversely affected the community rights.

Rights to ancestral lands

We have dwelt in this land for ancestor so can refer from Suwanapoom pagoda settlement we have lived in peacefully (Oath taken by the Karen of Laiwo and Ungpang, 1992)

The rights to ancestral lands is related to the rights to production and resource management. ‘Ancestral’ does not imply only ‘long lived’; it reflects their history, identity, dignity, and a long process of learning the lands and forests, developed into culture long inherited. And the rights was recognized by ancient regimes such as Siam, Mon and others. **The rights to ancestral lands is part of the Karen’s identity. The rights is held by the Karen a cultural ‘charter’ that cannot be violated by later modern laws**

As evident every time the state attempted to evacuate them from Thungyai, the Karen would explain like a village head Anon of Sanepong that ‘It is our rights. We have lived long before the law. They announced the conservation zone without heeding us. The law violates us. We don’t break the law. We have been here for 100-200 years, never disturbed the forests. (In their view, farms are not forests-author) I have told villagers of Jakeupeu that don’t be afraid, don’t run away, let them arrest us’ (Anon Setapan, 8 Jan 2001)

As the rights to ancestral lands is the communities’ common rights, every time they petitioned the state, they always said ‘Let the villagers of all villages in Laiwo subdistrict stay in the same places where their forefathers used to live, without any title deeds’ (Petition of Laiwo subdistrict council, 1992)

Rights to tradition, belief and culture

‘Now is the time evils abound, you have to be careful, adhere to morals, the Bhudda’s teachings, and the forefathers’, so that you will not get lost” (Oath taken by the Karen of Laiwo and Ungpang, 1992)

The rights to tradition, belief and culture is also part of the Karen’s identity connected to the rights to making a living, production, resource management, and the rights to ancestral lands, rights to self-determination. Senior people, women, and cultural leaders are well aware of those rights. A group of women in Ja Kae once said that “Being Karen is to make merit. In new year’s day, we offer flowers to monks” (Women group in Ja Kae, 2000)

The senior people’s and women groups’ concern arose under the circumstance that young generations were heedless of tradition and knowledge inherited in the communities. The

problem is attributed to education, development and conservation policy as root cause, violating the communities' belief and tradition.

“We exercise our rights. If the rights is right, and agreed by the majority, it's the rights. An individual has the rights. Our group has the rights. Schools change this, contradicting the tradition, violating our rights” (Kue Lung, Ja Kae, Dec 1999)

Although the state's policy adversely affected the community rights, the Karen were made aware of their rights: production, resource management, ancestral lands, self-determination, tradition and belief. All those are forged into 'identity' or dignity of the Karen in Thungyai in changing situation. The community rights based on culture was a major force in their fighting to protect their rights.

Community rights movement of the Karen in Thungyai

Community eco-cultural discourse : identity retrieval process of the Karen

The pressure from the RFD and academics to evacuate the Karen from Thungyai had been exerted since 1989-1990, after the Nam Choan movement. State agencies and environmental organizations had established the western ecological discourse over Thungyai, totally dismissing the legitimacy of existence of the Karen.

Also as a result from the Nam Choan movement, local organizations and NGOs were aware of the Karen's significance in terms of culture, local wisdom that were in harmony with Nature. The Karen's active role in protecting the forests had helped them gain the rights to forest management and culture. The discourse struggle to retrieve the identity began through activities such as an annual festive ritual which originally had been restricted within community, becoming a public event to communicate their identity to the outsiders. That was a crucial event that the Karen had defined the identity of Karen and Thungyai. Thungyai was not just a 'land of the wild' as portrayed by □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ and was not a sanctuary restricted to only the RFD's sole jurisdiction. Instead, it was a land of old local culture, unlike Huay Kakang forest which was under full control of the environmental discourse established by the state and environmental organizations.

In the making of their discourse, in addition to the livelihood, maps and models supported by Wildlife Fund Thailand were also used. While the state agencies used maps and models to describe how the Karen destroy the forest to create their farms by plotting points representing the farms in each year, not understanding the rotational farming practice. So the Karen and NGOs also used maps to explain to the state and society their farming practice in each year, employing colors. The traditional rotational farming was encoded onto the maps, geographical tools that communicate with images, languages, rationalization. It was a tool the Karen used in communicating with the public to recognize their community rights.

NGOs, academics and journalists also play a key role in promoting the Karen's community rights in Thungyai. There were studies on local wisdom of the Karen in terms of eco-culture, environment and ecology; for example, Pinkaew (1991), Kunvadee

(1998), Alongkot Chukaew(1998), Wildlife Fund Thailand (1994) as well as local historical study previously done by Surapong Kongjuntuek(1988).

In the meantime, the civil society movement had lessened the RFD's legitimacy in centralized control of forest management in activities such as monitoring deforestation in Thungyai due to the authorities' inefficiency, seizing public space by producing discourse and fighting the western ecological paradigm and the Department's centralization.

Networking alliances in the movement to promote the Karen's community rights

As a result from the Nam Choan movement, there had been a network consisting of environmentalists with ecological, social and community concern; for example, movements against building 48 roads for national security reason, logging for tourism development. The Karen protect the forest as their base of living and culture. The environmentalists protect the forests for future generations.

There were many more Karen communities in the west other than in Thungyai who were facing troubles from the state's policy on forests, land and security, for example, in Sri Sawat, Tong Papum and Sankla Buri of Kanchana Buri province, Huay Kot of Utai Tani province, Dan Chang of Supan Buri province and Suan Pueng of Ratchaburi province. Those Karen had formed "Network of Western Karen-Thai People" consisting of farmers, teachers, NGOs, with the objectives of reviving the Karen tradition and culture as well as protecting their community rights to living and resource management, as quoted below:

1. The Karen will take care of their farms and forests by themselves;
2. The Karen will maintain their rotational farming practice as their forefathers have done;
3. The Karen demand the buffer forest areas be canceled because we already conserve the forests;
4. The Karen want to return to their original home and farms.

(Network of Western Karen-Thai People, 2000)

The roles of the Karen in Thungyai were influential to other Karen communities in other provinces as those in Thungyai were the center of culture and tradition. In January 2001, the Karen in Lower Clity village revived a festive ritual after years of absence. Unable to conduct the ritual by themselves, they had to invite seniors from other villages in Thungyai to do it for them. The network also played a key role in protecting the communities in Thungyai, campaigning against the state's evacuation of the Karen.

The Karen value revival was taken serious when they became aware of their identity. Karen language was taught to the youths. Local historical study was conducted to recover the dignity and confidence to make a defense against the development and conservation imposed by the state.

Direction of the identity rights movement of the Karen in the West

The Karen in the West, especially Thungyai, had faced the paradigm, policy and mechanisms used by the state and capitalists that destroy their resource base, subsistence, culture and belief which are fundamental to their identity. With cultural base, the

struggle for the rights was to recover consciousness, dignity and identity of the Karen. The community rights was based on the rights to making a living, traditional resource management, rights to ancestral land, rights to self-determination and rights to culture, tradition and belief.

Finally, the survival of the Karen in Thungyai depends on solidarity of the communities, restoring culture and tradition and coordinating with social movements at all levels. The protection of the Karen's rights was not restricted only for communities in Thungyai, but also created new meanings of community rights and identity to be progressive, strong and dignified under the changing circumstance.

References

- Alongkot Chukaew (1998) Study on Botanical Knowledge of Karen Communities in Thungyai Sanctuary, Bureau of Scientific and Technological Development: Wildlife Fund Thailand
- Biological Forestry department, Forestry Science Faculty, Kasetsart University and Wildlife protection division of RFD (1988) "Impacts of Upper Kwae Yai Hydropower Project (Nam Choan) on Forests and Wildlife", Nam Choan dam and the end of the world heritage, Forest Lovers Club, Bangkok.
- Forestry Science Faculty, Kasetsart University (1989), complete masterplan on Thungyai Naresuan Sanctuary management, Kanchanaburi and Tak provinces, Bangkok.
- Kulvadee Boonpinon (1995) Institutional Arrangements in Communal Resource Management: A Case Study of Karen Village In A Protected Area. Faculty of Graduate Study : Mahidol University (A Thesis) Bangkok. Thailand
- Laiwo subdistrict council (1992), citizens disagreed with the evacuation plan for the Laiwo villagers out of the Thungyai Sanctuary: Kanchana Buri
- MIDAS Agronomic Company, Limited. (1993), Conservation Forest Area Protection. Management and Development Project Pre-Investment Study. Draft Final Report: Volume No.1 : Executive Summary
- Pinkaew Luang-aramsri (1991), Ecological knowledge of agricultural communities in forest areas : a case study of Karen communities in Thungyai Naresuan, Anthropological Thesis for graduate study, Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University.
- Pinkaew Luang-aramsri (1998), "Hilltribes' Discourse", Social Science and Marginal People, Sociological Journal, Chiang Mai University, Volume 11, Issue 1 (July-December 1998) ISSN 0125-4138.

Surapong Kongjuntuek (1988) Karen-Thai Long Relationship, Silpa-Wattanatam magazine. 10 November

Western Karen-Thai People Network (2000) Statement of the western Karen in the workshop at Huay Hin Dum village, Dan Chang district, Supan Buri province, 19-20 August.

Wildlife Fund Thailand (1994) Report on land use survey by Laiwo communities, Sankla district, Kanchana Buri

Interviewees

Kue Lung, Deputy village chief of Jakae village, Laiwo subdistrict, Sankla district, Kanchana Buri, 14 January 2000

Anan Setapan, village head of Sanepong, 8 January 2001

Housewives group of Jakae, 18 January 2000

Seniors group of Jakae, 17 January 2000