

*Challenging the Limits: Indigenous Peoples of the Mekong Region.* Edited by Prasit Leepreecha, Don McCaskill, and Kwanchewan Buadaeng. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2008. 379 pp.

Over the past three decades the Mekong region has experienced rapid economic development as well as social transformation at varying paces, against the general background of decentralization. It is particularly interesting to examine how indigenous people have evolved in this context, given the marginalization imposed by state policies and what kind of coping mechanisms can be developed within such frameworks to participate in development without losing their cultural identities as ethnic minorities. “Challenging the limits” is thus a provocative book title among the rich book landscape and consists of a mainly ethnographic approach to describing the diversity of strategies such as reviving traditions, cross-border migration, religious conversion and regional networking as this region is also increasingly exposed to globalization.

This book is a collection of twelve papers that were originally presented at the international conference on “Impact of Globalisation, Regionalism and Nationalism on Minority Peoples in Southeast Asia” that took place in Chiang Mai (Thailand) in November 2004. The contributors range from young scholars to established specialists and thus constitute a mix of experiences as well as analytical depth, yet the key underlying notion is that nationalist policies tend to have adverse effects on indigenous peoples’ livelihoods, cultures, values and beliefs. The book is divided into two main sections; the first one focuses on state policies and impacts on indigenous peoples, followed by a range of local strategies and challenges in the second section to illustrate the variety of possible approaches. An introductory chapter by the three editors (two of which are based at Chiang Mai University, hence the Thai focus with five chapters) gives an overview of nationalism as the main development force, while all countries in the Mekong region pursue hegemonic assimilationist policies to integrate indigenous groups. Here a map of the Mekong

region including settlement areas of the ethnic minorities would have been a useful addition to allow the reader to better appreciate which group lives where.

### State Policies and Impacts on Indigenous Peoples

The first chapter by Charles Keyes contrasts state development in Thailand and a standard Thai alphabet as unifying language with the approach by the French colonial government in Vietnam, which led to a new national orthography with a Roman script. There are two serious ethnic minority conflicts among the non-Thai population, which involve the northern hilltribes and the Muslim minority in the south (incidents in 2001 and 2004). In Vietnam an approach of unity with diversity was followed after independence from France in 1954 and the concept of “*dan toc*” is the key to understanding the policy which propagates that all descendants come from the Hung kings, with common pre-Chinese traditions. The one million “Hoa” or Chinese are seen as a problem in the South and only in 1982 did this segregation end. In conclusion, Keyes identifies three key challenges during state building in terms of ethnicity; the formulation of nationalism, a shared national heritage, and a shared identity of minorities within the nation.

Then Pamela McElwee assesses the impact of globalization, regionalism and nationalism on ethnic minorities in Vietnam, where state development was dominated by moving minorities to cooperatives to move them away from swiddening towards fixed cultivation. A strong migration of Kinh or “central” people into the highlands since 1960 changed the composition of the highland population completely. There were many conflicts as the Kinh used swidden land for permanent cultivation that highlanders could not claim (claims were not recognized), even after the beginning of *Doi Moi* politics. Minority swidden lands were lost to the coffee boom, whereby most benefits went to lowland Kinh and new immigrants. Apart from the issue of coffee production there is little new information in comparison to chapter 1, while issues of the land grab and market orientation were raised, but treated too superficially.

The chapter by To Xuan Phuc on conflicts over forest resources in Vietnam shows a contrast between government perceptions of forests as purely protective and the Dao minority, for whom it is a livelihood. However, the results are eight years old and a revision would have been useful. The author points to problems of the rejection of shifting cultivation by the state, but in doing so should have cited Vietnamese literature and not from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in India. Furthermore, if state priorities are defined they would hardly be derived from Friends of the Earth references (Myers 1989). The indigenous Dao forest management system is a mix of common and individual land with a farming system that is similar in its rotation to the Karen shifting cultivation, and clashes with these state categories. Yen village is used as an example, with state forest land allocation without considering local land use patterns. While this is a useful example, this case is presented as a singular situation and it would have been more useful to assess such clashes more comprehensively with examples from other parts of Vietnam.

One of the key issues for livelihood security, namely land titling at the national level, is presented by Bernard Moizo for Laos, but the introduction lacks examples and approaches from other countries that would have been useful to situate Laos in a regional context (such as the World Bank Land Titling project in Thailand from 1984 to 2004). There is also the wrong claim that Laos is the only country with a national programme for village level land use planning, which also exists in Thailand since the Highland Masterplans were implemented from 1992. This comparison is pertinent since the Lao land titling approach was oriented after Thailand and started in 1997. For Laos it would have been useful to point to the set target date for swidden elimination by the year 2000 to illustrate the hegemonic nature of state policies, yet the author seemed unaware of this policy context. The various pitfalls of this pressure on farmers are well identified in this chapter and include the loss of control, growing inequalities, displacement, and lowlanders grabbing land which in turn pushed swiddeners aside. The issue of common pool resource management is not addressed by this restrictive policy, while

zoning was hurried and without inclusion of local systems, leading to conflicting boundaries of the village territory. Swiddeners experience these consequences like a noose that is increasingly tightened till their farming systems choke. This situation is well analysed, yet examples come fairly late in the chapter.

Paul Cohen and Chris Littleton continue in Laos and describe issues of modernity and social suffering by the Akha in Muang Sing and Long in the Northwest, who are faced with three restrictive policies of swiddening elimination, resettlement (concept of “focal zones”), and opium control. The combination of these accelerated the migration of Akhas to lowlands, resulting in increased mortality, poverty, wage labour, and exploitation. The policy context that created social suffering from political, economic, and institutional powers affecting the Akha are well-presented, with a focus on the policy of swidden elimination. Yet a revised deadline formulated in the year 2000 pushes this policy back to 2010, with an intermediate target of a 50 per cent swidden land reduction by 2005. The Akha were faced with cultural stigmatization combined with government production control, while rapid resettlement led to problems in lowland areas as livelihoods got diverted and the adaptation to a new way of life was hard and often unsuccessful. The conclusion is a criticism of the rapid land conversion approach, which if it had been done gradually would have given people more time to adapt.

### Local Strategies and Challenges

The second section starts with the Karen in Thailand by Mikael Gravers as they attempt to move from the edge (a reference to the book *Living at the Edge of Thai Society*, edited by Claudio Delang in 2003), who are blamed for forest destruction by Thai society and have been marginalized till the 1980s. Karen farming systems are more similar to northern Thai systems (called “rai mun wian”) than the pioneer swiddening systems practiced by other ethnic minorities. While this is true, the author should have pointed to various other factors that have contributed to the Karen stepping out of marginalization, such as highland development programmes,

the recognition of the sustainability of rotational swiddening systems, official highland development master plans and more recently decentralization, all of which allow for easier participation at sub-district level with the creation of Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAO). The political framework conditions have undergone quite significant changes and are missing in the discourse presented here, providing new options for moving away from the edge. The liberalization of Thai civil society also allowed for a more free expression of oppression experienced by minorities in public, such as the celebration of indigenous people in Chiang Mai in August 2007 that figures as a photo on the book cover.

The next chapter by Scott O'Brien discusses Karen perspectives of schooling and continues the thread of traditionalism versus (western) modernism, yet unfortunately starts with too much simplistic criticism of "foreign NGOs" as non-interested and dogmatic organizations that disrespect local culture, though none are named. The author also fails to mention local initiatives like the Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT), as if foreign NGOs are the only players in Thailand. The text addresses the chapter title too little and dwells too much on the author's own interpretation than actual "Karen perspectives". The peak of self-righteousness is reached by calling "research" one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary, yet without analysing the problems of cultural bias when treating the Karen as mere research subjects. This is followed by a simplistic characterization of western scientific classification systems as merely imperialistic tools.

Furthermore it is naïve to assume that the Karen are only confronted with "Western" education when living in Thailand (even in refugee camps), as the influence of the Thai schooling system is much stronger in the foreseeable future as the new host country if the conflict situation in Burma does not change. If schooling indeed undermines indigenous knowledge, then this should be illustrated by survey results to prove the point.

The chapter by Judith Pine focuses on the power and implications of literacy for the Lahu in Thailand, who traditionally did not

have a written language and starts with a gradual positioning of literacy, which occurred in steps until the modern Thai script was confirmed. The research area of Chiang Mai is also interesting in that the previously autonomous Lanna kingdom developed its own Yuan script first, before Lanna was integrated into the kingdom of Siam and the “Sukhodayan” script of King Ramkhamhaeng expanded as the only Thai official script. The Karen came into contact with Christianity first and also mainstream development, whereas the Lahu arrived much later and are thus more marginalized (besides being opium growers and users), hence they attained literacy earlier. There is very little on the Lahu and it would have been more useful to present actual survey results such as examples of literary perception or exclusion from Thai society due to illiteracy instead of broad generalizations. This is even more important in the recent process of decentralization over the last decade with the introduction of TAO at sub-district level, for which literacy is even more important in order to participate in local governance.

Nathan Badenoch then writes about social networks and village governance in Thailand, from the Hmong perspective of managing competition and cooperation. The notion of a “village” as a fixed entity as prescribed by the Thai Government for the village registration process is alien to the Hmong with their traditional clan structure, which thus clashes with centralist planning approaches. The chapter describes the adaptations of the Hmong to a changing environment and is illustrated by a genealogy of three clans. Here the formation of TAO as decentralized development initiatives are correctly perceived in terms of governance implications. There is an interesting presentation of the social network analysis methodology and one of the few chapters that actually describes the research methodology. Apart from clan descriptions the author then assesses three parallel systems of decision-making, namely the village headman, the committee of elders, and TAO representatives. The power relations are analysed in a state of uncertainty in the recent context of decentralization and the author points of an important lack of meso-level village institutions. The chapter concludes with a need to harmonize the

various decision-making systems in order for villages to function as a single unit as the TAO process evolves.

Then comes a total shift with a chapter on the reconstruction of Lahu history in China, the Lahu country of origin, by Ma Jianxiong. The Ming Dynasty is mentioned as the first source of records of the Lahu, but with unclear dating. Most of the Lahu land was lost in various conflicts over time and they moved to Burma from Southwest Yunnan. The written Lahu language was only created in the 1920s by missionaries. Lancang is an autonomous Lahu region in China, where the field study was conducted. Various stories and myths are evoked to illustrate the Lahu origins and interpretation of the world. The author points to a new myth created by Lahu intellectuals under the impact of globalization and nationalism, but this is where the chapter ends without describing it.

The chapter on Theravada Buddhism in contemporary Xishuangbanna (China) by Roger Casas is another historical overview and a description of the Lue minority in China in relation to Theravada Buddhism, which originated from Chiang Mai in Thailand and came to Yunnan as the Sipsong Panna Kingdom expanded around the 13th–14th centuries. Wat Patjee was central for the Buddhist heritage, yet is nowadays presented as an ethnic park by Chinese authorities, and Theravada Buddhism is portrayed as an obsolete “cultural relic”. This means that the Lue cannot expect much support from the Chinese Government to keep Theravada Buddhism and traditions alive, so they have to struggle by themselves to maintain their cultural heritage.

The final chapter explores mobility across the Mekong region by Wasan Panyagaew, first with historical movements of the Lue or Dai (their new name as they were forced to become part of the Dai minority in 1953). There are parallels to the previous chapter of state suppression in Xishuangbanna as they make up one-third of this region’s population. Then the author traces issues of modern day migration using the example of the pop band Dao Mai (interesting Thai name meaning “new star”). Chinese authorities perceive Dai minorities as uncivilized, similar to Theravada Buddhism in the

previous chapter. There is an interesting mix of individual histories of the band members as well as internal struggles as they move across Yunnan to Burma, Thailand and back to Kunming, mixed with a wider analysis of general Dai migration in the Mekong region with impacts on livelihoods. The book thus ends with a nice analogy on challenging the limits imposed by borders, both in a physical as well as spiritual sense, and raises the question of what kind of knowledge is required to face new challenges.

### Overall Assessment

The range of coping strategies presented in this book would have been enriched with a comparative analysis in the form of a concluding chapter by the editors to assess the extent of common trends in the region that still separate indigenous communities from the majority populations in the Mekong region as they challenge the limits. A synthesis chapter should have discussed implications for development and/or recommendations to address future challenges. A concluding chapter can also be a reflection on how much chapters address the general book title, which is less the case for the last three chapters, and why countries like Burma and Cambodia were left out in this regional overview.

The book could also have benefited from more careful editing to avoid missing literature citations in the bibliography (such as Johnson 1954, Freire 1994, and Crabtree 1993), as well as other mistakes like incorrect alphabetical listing (e.g., Sachidananda 1983 is found after Sarasawasdee). Cross-editing would also have avoided information duplication such as the distribution of ethnic minorities in Vietnam (Tables 1.2 and 2.1).

More recent events such as the military coup in Thailand and the law on communal forest allocations in Vietnam have been left out, thus outdated the results presented here a little. A range of important aspects of governance of the commons in contrast with individual land are also missing, even though these are key to the culture of ethnic minorities of the Mekong region. Furthermore, the

impacts of the multitude highland and hilltribe development projects over the last three decades are barely mentioned, and though these projects undoubtedly also made mistakes, they brought livelihood improvements to these minorities such as health, sanitation, literacy, nutrition, and citizenship, as well as the chance to engage in local governance.

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