

*Forests, Farmers and the State: Environment and Resistance in North-Eastern Thailand.* By Amare Tegbaru. Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology no. 41. Stockholm: Elanders Gotab, 1998. 289 pp.

This book was written by a Swedish anthropologist of Ethiopian descent who served as an International Labour Organization official in Thailand. This mixture of anthropological competence, expert knowledge, and the long-term experience of growing up in a developing country has resulted in a remarkable study on Isan farmers in northeastern Thailand.

The trend towards deforestation in Thailand from the 1960s to the 1980s has been alarming. To halt the progress of environmental degradation, large programmes of reforestation have been started, supported by international agencies and international capital. In general, though, economic gains have been put first, despite popular protests. The Thai government has allocated 4.1 million hectares of land in the national forest reserves for commercial eucalyptus plantations, and timber business have gained momentum at the expense of the roughly 10 million people who live on forest reserve lands.

The author focuses his research on a small village of some four hundred inhabitants located within a national forest reserve. He analyses how resistance against the utilization of forest land for eucalyptus plantations is organized, and he has followed village leaders on their journeys to protest in front of government officers. He also indicates how villagers co-operate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in their struggle against the central Thai bureaucracy.

This village environmentalism has grown out of a mixture of indigenous Buddhist ideas and ideas about natural resource use imported via Western experts and contacts with Thai environmental activists. Government authorities and development agencies plant the eucalyptus tree as a species that is supposed to rehabilitate the degraded forest reserve land quickly. In response, farmers uproot the same tree as a species that *causes* environmental degradation and disturbs the biodiversity of the area. A local farmer is quoted as supporting this action by claiming that the "eucalyptus turns its surroundings into a desert where nothing grows. The same is true of the state. It reaches out everywhere and takes

everything from us and gives us nothing in return” (p. 161).

The farmers thus reject the arguments that Thai forestry officials make at several levels: first, they generally dismiss the case for market incentives; and second, they do not accept the conservationist claims made by the forestry officers in support of eucalyptus plantations. Village people, in turn, use ecological arguments themselves to justify their own stand. The eucalyptus makes the environment barren and infertile; it destroys snakes, the natural enemies of rats which devastate paddy fields. The Buddhist Naga mythology is here connected with an understanding of the roles snakes play in everyday life.

Revivalist and neo-Buddhist movements think of the dissatisfied farmers' protests as the expression of a desire to withdraw from the globalized economic and political system, which they blame for destroying the country's values. This type of thinking has reached even this small and remote village, which is the object of the author's research.

One of the most interesting ethnographic pieces in the study concerns a meeting between forestry officials and villagers in which the latter were informed that the eucalyptus plantation was going to be expanded into their village domain and their forest sanctuary. The confrontation ends with the decision of the villagers to consult their ancestral spirit. The ritual is then analysed by the author in the context of the new structural and ideological framework that has arisen from the resistance to the government's forestry policy. Villagers employ their ancestral spirit cult as an ideological source for mobilization and as a way of expressing their resentment against the state's forestry agenda.

Isan farmers have for decades been involved in conflict with the government over land rights and resource use rights. The resistance to eucalyptus plantations takes various forms and also, as earlier indicated, serves as a means for expressing other forms of dissatisfaction. The biological characteristics of the eucalyptus — it feeds on water and nutrients at the expense of other species — offers a metaphor of exploitation by the state. The resistance to eucalyptus planting has thus been turned into a metonym for resistance in general. After a long struggle, the farmers, supported by NGO members and student activists from Bangkok universities, are finally victorious. The forestry department finally with-

drew its plans to extend eucalyptus plantations in the village area.

This study is worth reading not only for the Thai specialist but also for those interested in the course of development in Southeast Asia at the local level. Villagers are portrayed not just as exploited peasants subjugated to global pressures, but also as actively engaged with the consequences of modernity.

Hans-Dieter EVERS

---

Hans-Dieter Evers is Professor in the Sociology of Development Research Centre of the University of Bielefeld, Germany.