

# It Takes a Rooted Village: Networked Resistance, Connected Communities, and Adaptive Responses to Forest Tenure Reform in Northern Thailand

Kimberly Roberts

► Roberts, K. (2016). It takes a rooted village: Networked resistance, connected communities, and adaptive responses to forest tenure reform in northern Thailand. *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 9(1), 53-68.

Conflicts persist between forest dwelling communities and advocates of forest conservation. In Thailand, a community forestry bill and national park expansion initiatives leave little space for communities. The article analyzes the case of the predominantly ethnic Black Lahu village of Huai Lu Luang in Chiang Rai province that has resisted the threats posed by a community forestry bill and a proposed national park. The villagers reside on a national forest reserve and have no *de jure* rights to the land. This article argues, however, that through its network rooted in place and connected to an assemblage of civil society, local government, and NGOs, Huai Lu Luang has been able to stall efforts by the Thai government that would detrimentally impact their use of and access to forest resources. Their resistance is best understood not in isolation – as one victimized community resisting threats to their livelihoods – but in connection to place, through dynamic assemblages. A ‘rooted’ networks approach follows the connections and nodes of Huai Lu Luang’s network that influence and aid the village’s attempts to resist forest tenure reform.

**Keywords:** Community Forestry; Ethnic Minorities; Resistance; Rooted Networks; Thailand

~

## INTRODUCTION

In the face of global concerns over deforestation and conservation, throughout the highlands of Southeast Asia, the narrative of upland communities as forest destroyers persists. This concept that people and forests are mutually exclusive has direct implications when policies aimed at stalling or reversing deforestation rates run in contradiction to the livelihoods of communities living within these forests. Political ecologists have long investigated these relationships between nature and society (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Robbins, 2004) and have explored state territorial expansion through forests (Bryant, 1997; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995), the mechanisms behind resource use and access (Peluso & Lund, 2011; Ribot & Peluso, 2009), the appropriation of land for conservation (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Roth, 2008), and how these forest governance mechanisms impact local communities (Hares, 2009; Vandergeest, 2003; Walker, 2003; Wittayapak, 2008).

In Thailand, community forestry policies, the expansion of the national park system, and a community land deed pilot project represent attempts to reduce

deforestation rates and provide opportunities to either exclude communities from forests or incorporate them within the management of these ecosystems. Between 1961 and 2005, forest coverage in Thailand decreased from 53.3% to 31.5% (World Bank, 2016), giving Thailand one of the highest deforestation rates in Southeast Asia. More recent calculations suggest a slight increase in forest cover to roughly 33% (Leblond & Pham, 2014). However, pressure still remains from the Thai Royal Forestry Department (RFD) to conserve the remaining forests (Wittayapak, 2008). The 1985 National Forest Policy strives to maintain the country's forest cover and in 1989, the Thai government implemented a nationwide logging ban (Johnson & Forsyth, 2002, pp. 10-11; Vandergeest & Peluso, 2006, pp. 377-379). This shift in forest policy from timber to conservation management relies on the stringent separation of people from forests (Walker, 2003, p. 2) and eventually devalues traditional swidden agriculture and non-timber forest product (NTFP) harvesting practices of the roughly 6 million highland ethnic minorities of Southeast Asia who live within the boundaries of protected areas (Badenoch, 2006). The notion that forests and people cannot co-exist implies that forest dwellers must be evicted in order to protect forested areas. Holders of this position argue that deforestation is caused by population increases and by illegal forest encroachment for activities like shifting cultivation (Walker & Farrelly, 2008, p. 377). Due to the illegality of residing within forest reserves, most upland villages live under the threat of eviction – a threat which is occasionally realized (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011, p. 595). In 1991, an estimated 20% of the 56,000 villages in Thailand were located within forest reserves (Bugna & Rambaldi, 2001). A detailed survey of 1,400 communities undertaken by the Department of Land Development in Chiang Mai province around this time found that 90% were located within forest reserves meaning that a large number of upland communities are actually illegal (Walker & Farrelly, 2008, p. 377). By 2000, the Department of National Parks (DNP) had established 13 national parks, resulting in the relocation of over 200 communities (Srimongkontip, 2000). According to Leblond (2010), the majority of these conservation-induced relocations took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a higher risk of relocation for non-Karen ethnic minority groups.<sup>1</sup> The most famous of these relocation attempts was the *Khor Jor Kor* scheme of the early 1990s. After the 1991 coup, the military government attempted to evict five million people from reserve forests (Hall, 2011). During the initial implementation of the program, at least 16 villages were relocated. The number of households affected ranges from two thousand to as many as forty thousand (Walker & Farrelly, 2008). However, the scheme was shelved after vigorous protests from farmer organizations and civil society groups (Hall, 2011; Walker & Farrelly, 2008). However, recent changes in Thai politics have again raised this threat of eviction. On June 2014, the current junta's National Council for Peace and Order issued two orders, the first stating that encroachers in protected areas and poachers of forest goods will face strict legal measures and the second stipulating that the poor and communities settled in protected areas prior to this policy will not be affected (Editor2, 2015).

This article converges on the interactions of Huai Lu Luang, an ethnic minor-

---

1 Out of the 12 officially recognized ethnic minority groups in Thailand, Karen are the largest (353,000), with Hmong (112,000), and Lahu (82,000) following in size. Karen are also the only group that can claim to be 'indigenous' in Thailand (Forsyth & Walker, 2008).

ity village in northern Thailand, as it responds to challenges to their forest access through relationships that assemble, disassemble, and shift over space and time. Focusing on three distinct mechanisms that could alter Huai Lu Luang's *de facto* use of forest resources in Thailand, the article looks at the community forestry bill, a proposed national park, and a proposed community land deed pilot project. These mechanisms are initiated in separate agencies, the Royal Forestry Department, the Department of National Parks, and Thai Parliament, respectively. Huai Lu Luang's responses to each of these mechanisms are best understood not as an isolated community, but instead through an assemblage of relations. In the literature, the actions of marginalized minorities get cast as either events of strength, as in the Chiapas rebellion of 1994 in Mexico (McMichael, 2008), or as everyday actions of resistance that remain a powerless community's only recourse (Jones, 2012; Scott, 1985). However, as Rocheleau (2015) showed in Chiapas, many of these resistances do not take shape in isolation, but through networks, rooted in place and strengthened through a web of civil society and communities.

Huai Lu Luang's rootedness connects to Michaud's (2006) Southeast Asia massif. Approximately 80 million people reside within the Southeast Asian massif (usually above 500m) of mainland Southeast Asia, stretching across Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, China, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Michaud, 2006, pp. 2-5). These 'minority' populations are larger than the population of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia. However, representing numerous transnational ethnicities, these highland peoples typically reside in the periphery of their nation states and are often categorized as backward, barbarian, uncivilized, and wild (McCaskill & Kampe, 1997; Scott, 2009; Vandergeest, 2003; Vienne, 1989). Moreover, with their subsistence livelihoods, mobile communities, and diversity – all of which are hard to govern and difficult to tax – they pose a threat to settled agrarian states (Bryant, 1997; Scott, 2009).

Literature on resistance incorporates any form of resistance to impositions from a dominant power (Baviskar, 2001; Peluso 1992; Scott, 1985), suggesting that any activity can be political (Jones, 2009). In the uplands of Southeast Asia, Scott (2009) conceptualizes the resistance of communities as anarchist. Yet, contemporary Huai Lu Luang, rooted in place, engage with civil society, neighboring communities, NGOs, and local government. Huai Lu Luang has 'resisted' threats to their forest resource use and access through both avoidance and defiance as well as cooperation. As in Chiapas, this resistance is best understood in connection to place, through dynamic assemblages. Rocheleau and Roth's (2007) analytical framework of 'rooted' networks allows for a way to follow the connections and nodes of Huai Lu Luang's network that influence and aid the village's attempts to influence various branches of the Thai government's forest tenure reform efforts. These are not the sterile networks of some types of complexity theory, but are rather rooted, disrupted, and shaped by territory, infused with power, containing social and natural nodes and exhibiting both static and dynamic characteristics. Such network thinking allows for an exploration of these actions and actors that resist dominant powers. Hence, in understanding the situation of rural, landless communities, we must carefully trace their connections to both human and non-human entities and seek to understand how power shapes the nature of those connections (Rocheleau & Roth, 2007).

### HUAI LU LUANG VILLAGE

Huai Lu Luang is a village of roughly 400 people and is located in Mae Yao sub-district, Muang district, in Chiang Rai province alongside the Mae Kok river at roughly 475m elevation. The Lahu people of Huai Lu Luang have responded to, prepared for, and adjusted to external forces affecting their lives and livelihoods since the beginning of the 20th century. Originating in southern China, Lahu are part of the Tibeto-Burman language family group. Over the last two centuries, they have dispersed and migrated across the uplands of Southeast Asia. The largest population of Lahu still resides in southern Yunnan (China) (approximately 453,700 people in 2000), while an estimated 78,000 live in the Shan state of Myanmar, 103,000 in northern Thailand, and less than 16,000 are dispersed between Laos and Vietnam (Michaud, 2006, pp. 130-131).

Huai Lu Luang's history and networks start in the early 20th century in the remote mountains of Yunnan. Three generations ago, in the 1940s,<sup>2</sup> many of Huai Lu Luang's ancestors lived in southern China, converted to Christianity, practiced shifting cultivation on the slopes of mountains, and grew rice in lowland paddy fields. According to Lahu Baptist Convention staff, in 1896, the American Baptist missionary William Marcus Young moved to the Shan state of Myanmar. From Keng Tung, Young's missionary work expanded north to Yunnan province where many of the Black and Yellow<sup>3</sup> Lahu people converted to Christianity (Lahu Baptist Committee, personal communication, March 31, 2009). Mao's communist China brought with it religious persecution, demand up to 80% of the villager's crops, and forced labor. Thus, many Yellow and Black Lahu moved from southern China to Keng Tung. In the 1960s, the military junta took power in Myanmar, once again restricting villager's religious freedom and forcing some into labor camps. Yet again, many Black and Yellow Lahu were forced to leave and migrated from Myanmar to Thailand to create the village of Obsuawan in the northern sub-district of Mae Yao. In 1962, mostly Yellow Lahu families from Obsuawan created the village of Panasawan. Around 1973, 12 Black Lahu families separated from Panasawan and established Huai Lu Luang. A large influx of migrants from Myanmar between 1974 and 2006 increased the population of the village household number from 30 in 1977 to 90 in 2010, with a total population of around 400 (village pastor, 18 October 2010). Religion and connections to 'parent' villages feature strongly in Huai Lu Luang. Just as spider plants drop new offshoots of roots when overcrowding, encouraging a relocation for access to greater nutrients and water (Rocheleau & Roth, 2007, p. 435), Huai Lu Luang became an offshoot of Panasawan, which itself was an offshoot of Obsuawan, which was an offshoot from a village in Keng Tung, Myanmar, which was an offshoot from a village in the Yunnan province of China.

Today, a national forest reserve – first designated by the RFD – surrounds Huai Lu Luang. In 2002, the RFD gave permission to the DNP to work toward establish-

2 All dates referring to the migratory history and establishment of Huai Lu Luang result from oral history and are therefore to be regarded as generalizations.

3 Among the Lahu six subcategories are recognized (Michaud, 2006). Of these subcategories, Black, Yellow, and Red (English translations) live in the sub-district where Huai Lu Luang is located. From conversations with community members, there are linguistic and cultural distinctions between these groups.

ing Lam Nam Kok National Park (Department of National Parks, 2015). The DNP is currently in the process of turning the forest reserve into the Lam Nam Kok National Park. Four districts and 13 sub-districts are located in the area proposed for the national park. In Mae Yao sub-district alone, this includes 13,000 people and 18 villages covering an area of 733 km<sup>2</sup> (UHDP staff, 26 July 2015). Villagers of Huai Lu Luang have *de facto* but no formal (*de jure*) rights to the land that they use, which includes the forest and the fields that surround the village. The majority of households in Huai Lu Luang farm paddy fields, and few that do not, either share or rent fields from their neighbors. Moreover, all households farm upland fields and have access to a shared community forest (village pastor, 18 October 2010). The villagers plant rice in paddy fields as well as rice and corn in upland fields and have an average annual per capita income of THB 9000 (USD 250) (Kaiser et al., 2012). The lack of available land precludes the use of swidden agriculture, which Lahu historically practiced in China and Myanmar where they cultivated fields for three years and then fallowed fields for one to two years (Lahu Baptist Committee, 31 March 2009). Huai Lu Luang has roughly 90 households, 95% of whom are Black Lahu and the remaining 5% are ethnic Yellow Lahu or Akha. The village has a history of organizing around committees, with a youth committee, church committee, and community forest committee. However, as a traditionally patriarchal society, only men serve on these committees (Community Forest Committee, 28 October 2010).

The classification of Huai Lu Luang as a marginalized community harkens to its status as a 'hill tribe' (*chao khao*). In Thailand, *chao khao* make up only about 1.45% of the officially registered population and scant attention is paid to them (Michaud, 2006, p. 240). There is, however, a popular narrative of *chao khao* as 'forest destroyers'. The Karen are the only ethnic group that have escaped the narrative of 'forest destroyers' and instead have donned one of 'forest guardians' (Forsyth & Walker, 2008; Michaud, 2006). Thai government officials and the media characterize all other officially recognized ethnic groups as uncivilized and blame them for national problems such as deforestation. The term 'hill tribes' came into use in the 1950s to describe the non-ethnic Thai groups living in the uplands of northern and western Thailand that quickly became identified with the negative stereotypes of forest destroying, opium cultivating, and non-Thai troublemakers (Buergin, 2000). However, this narrative does not always reflect the reality on the ground (Sato, 2000, pp. 164-165) but further marginalizes ethnic, upland 'hill tribe' communities.

#### APPROACH AND METHOD

This article uses Rocheleau and Roth's (2007) framework of rooted networks to analyze how Huai Lu Luang – through its network – has responded to threats to forest access as well as opportunities to secure formalized access. Rooted networks utilize actor network theory's ability to combine non-human and human entities and political ecology's placement of these entities within territories, literally 'rooting' networks to place. Building on these aspects, these networks then expand to understand constructs and interactions of nature and culture through a web of relations that carry power and polycentricity, situated knowledge(s), and rootedness and territory in its understanding of relations and processes (Rocheleau, 2008, p. 215). While the frame-

work broadly seeks to address four challenges – placing power in networks, connecting those networks to territories, incorporating natural and social elements, and integrating static networks and dynamic system behaviors – this article focuses primarily on the first two. Treating roots and networks as active analogies to plants helps to understand how a network can be dynamic and still ‘rooted’ to a territory. Plant species vary in fixity and mobility, individual and collective associations, and in relation to habitat. Extensive tap roots anchor some plants, spider plants send out new roots when resources become scarce, and fungal mycorrhizae networks aid plants’ ability to absorb nutrients in porous soils (Rocheleau & Roth, 2007). Like Rocheleau’s examples of resistance in Chiapas (2008) and the Dominican Republic (2009), Huai Lu Luang’s resistance is rooted in place and in a network of unequal coalition of NGOs, local government, and local community groups (Rocheleau, 2008; 2015).

My own work with Thai NGO *Upland Holistic Development Project* (UHDP) and my later role as an academic researcher place me as a small piece of Huai Lu Luang’s network. In 2007, I began my ongoing relationship with UHDP when I moved to their small agroforestry resource center. The center, established in 1997 in northern Thailand, took up space on a west facing hillside, barren at that time, but since then covered in agroforest, upland fields, orchards, fish ponds, agricultural plots, animal pens, and an assortment of homes that housed the mixed community of Lahu, Karen, Palaung, Kachin, and Akha staff and their families. Prior to interviews I conducted for my master degree, my work at UHDP had already acquainted me with the predicament of Huai Lu Luang’s community forest and its many layers. As a volunteer for UHDP from January to June 2007, I worked on counter mapping efforts for the community forests of villages in Mae Yao sub-district, including Huai Lu Luang. This included an overnight visit in April 2007 with UHDP co-director Bunsak Thongdi, hiking the boundaries of their community forest with the community forest committee and recording GPS waypoints. Later, in May 2007, I conducted GPS use trainings for members of Huai Lu Luang’s community forest committee as well as for neighboring communities and in 2008, I became a liaison between the US NGO *Plant With Purpose* and UHDP.

I returned to Huai Lu Luang between September and November of 2010, conducting key informant interviews, group interviews, and semi-structured survey interviews. For the semi-structured surveys, I interviewed 32 individuals (roughly 13% of the village’s population) and conducted follow-up interviews with the community forestry committee, village headman, and UHDP staff. Every interview was tape recorded and Warunee Harichaiikul – a Lahu villager working at a Chiang Rai Lahu Boarding School – translated the interviews from Kham Mueang (Northern Thai language) or Black Lahu to English. The survey interviewees were selected through a purposive sampling method, a type of non-probability sampling where I ascertained which units should be observed based on my judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative (Babbie, 2007, p. 193). Based on participant observations, I noted that individuals of differing ages and genders used different forest resources in their daily lives; therefore, I selected the sub-groups of gender and age because I wanted to capture as much diversity as possible (see Table 1). Communities are not homogenous entities and the participation of only one ethnic group, social class, or gender in community forest governance may negatively impact that gov-

ernance (Ratner & Moser, 2009). The age groups were chosen based on discussions with UHDP around labor divisions.

	Male	Female
Age Group A (ages 19-34)	5	5
Age Group B (ages 35-49)	7	5
Age Group C (ages 50+ )	5	5

Table 1. Number of Interviews by Age and Gender.  
*Notes: Age group B contained male Yellow Lahu and age group C contained one male Akha respondent. (own compilation).*

## THE ROOTED NETWORKS OF HUAI LU LUANG

Huai Lu Luang's rooted network extends throughout the Southeast Asia massif, connecting it with communities and religious organizations in China, Myanmar, and Thailand, while being grounded through the ecological constraints and requirements of managing a community forest. Within Thailand, Huai Lu Luang connects with NGOs, civil society, and the sub-district government through dynamic arrangements that shift and alter depending on changing circumstances. The following section describes Huai Lu Luang's efforts to either secure formalized land rights or to ensure a retention of current informal land use. To this end, they have joined national debates on community forestry, formed a network with neighboring villages and partner NGOs, and collaborated with the sub-district both to resist the creation of a national park and to apply for a community land deed.

### National Community Forest Debates

Community forestry represents a form of common-pool resource management. Contrary to Hardin's (1968) tragedy of the commons, commons do not always lead to ungoverned territories and the deterioration of ecosystems, but instead often involve complex and sophisticated governing mechanisms (Agrawal, 2007; Thompson, 1975). Chhatre and Agrawal (2008) define the common pool resource of forest commons as "forests used in common by a large number of heterogeneous users" (p. 13286). In Thailand, variations of community forestry have a long history. These community forests show the characteristics of defined resource boundaries, user group identity, and property rights for resource benefits (Ostrom, 2002). In the last 30 years, competition for forest products between villages and business interest in combination with a nation-wide logging ban have caused a resurgence of community forestry efforts (Ganjanapan, 1998, p. 78; Li, 2002; Walker, 2003).

In 1977, over concerns around forest degradation and water quality, Huai Lu Luang established a community forest, with *de facto* permission from the RFD (which later in 2001 transferred authority to the DNP). Representatives of the 30 families (one representative for each family) present in Huai Lu Luang at that time voted unanimously to accept the community forest, its committee, and its rules. According to the committee the community forest was established because:

Before the community forest, everybody did what was right in their own eyes concerning the forest. It's a must to have a committee. Before, outsiders like Thai people cut the trees, and we had no authority to stop them, because we didn't have the committee and the community forest. (Huai Lu Luang, 18 October 2010)

The committee itself is made up of 13 Black Lahu volunteer men broken up into the roles of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. Women are not allowed on the committee or in any leadership role in Huai Lu Luang. The committee agreed on the community forest rules before they were submitted to the rest of the village for approval. However, Huai Lu Luang's *de facto* community forest lacked formal *de jure* status. At the end of the 1980s, groups of activities, academics, and NGOs began to argue for *de jure* local control of resources through community forests as an alternative to the forest conservation strategy of the RFD (Buergin, 2000, p. 11).

In 1990, the RFD wrote the first official draft of the community forestry bill to address the issue of forest tenure reform. According to Johnson and Forsyth (2002), development-based NGOs, academics, and grassroots organizations criticized this version for maintaining a state-led system of forest management. From this point, a back and forth process began with the community forest bill. In response to the RFD version, a coalition of activists and development NGOs drafted the first 'people's' version asserting the rights of local villages to enter and use forests (Johnson & Forsyth, 2002, p. 14). Through Huai Lu Luang's community forest, the village became actively involved in the community forestry debates in Thailand, with the survival of their *de facto* community forest hinging on the outcome of these debates. In 1999, some Huai Lu Luang villagers joined some roughly 3000 representatives of the different minority groups to demonstrate in Chiang Mai, demanding their right to citizenship, a simpler naturalization process, and recognition of their settlement and land use rights in protected areas (Buergin, 2000, p. 14).

Unfortunately, neither the RFD version nor the 'people's' version of the community forestry bill actually accounts for local use of forest resources (Walker, 2003). For swidden agriculturists, land is that of a shifting mosaic of forest, agroforest, and agriculture supporting their livelihoods and often increasing biodiversity of the area (Xu, Lebel, & Sturgeon, 2009). However, for villages like Huai Lu Luang, a lack of land security caused a spatial reorganization where they moved away from overlapping and flexible boundaries to more static and clearly delineated forests, upland fields, and paddy fields. As Roth (2008) references, this negotiation between state and community is a spatially produced process and reflects social and environmental relationships. For Huai Lu Luang, agriculture exists within the forest, and villagers both plant desirable species within their community forest and harvest products beyond timber from the forest. Villagers listed forest vegetables, wood for building houses, mushrooms, bamboo, food, firewood, herbs, banana flower, raising cattle, nuts, construction wood and bamboo, water, string bamboo, medicine, land, and furniture as services they get from the community forest that they could not afford to pay for otherwise. The 'forest', for Huai Lu Luang is a component of an integrated landscape that provides long term and short term benefits and products. Larger debates surrounding conservation have shifted Huai Lu Luang's use of space from swidden agri-

culture to agroforestry plots and backyard gardens. This allows community members to maintain their use of traditional forest products, while respecting the boundaries established by the DNP.

### **Forest for the King and the Arrival of NGOs**

In the midst of the community forestry debates, and in another attempt to secure access to forest land, Huai Lu Luang set aside part of the forest for the King. Although Huai Lu Luang is a predominately Baptist Lahu village, Buddhist students from Chiang Mai visited Huai Lu Luang and recommended that they dedicate a portion of the forest (not already designated as community forest) to the King in order to prevent the government from taking the land. In 1995, due to encouragement from these university students, the villagers conducted a Buddhist ceremony to set aside an additional portion of 5,000 rai (800 ha) for the King. Concurrently, in the late 1990s, other NGOs began to work with Huai Lu Luang. One of their first established relationships was with the Thai-Lahu Baptist Convention (initiating projects on health, AIDS, drugs, environment, and community forestry), but later they established working relationships with the Mekong Minority Foundation (MMF), Mirror Foundation, Compassion International, Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), a Rice Bank, and UHDP. These organizations have worked independently and cooperatively with Huai Lu Luang, depending on the intersections of the various projects, each contributing to Huai Lu Luang's rooted network.

UHDP began working with Huai Lu Luang in 2006, with the original goal to improve the networking and farming capacity of villagers and to increase their understanding of community forestry. UHDP was founded in 1996 by Baptist missionaries from the US, with an aim of assisting marginalized or resource poor ethnic minority communities along the Thai-Burma border (UHDP, 2 February 2007). The first year of Huai Lu Luang's connection to UHDP involved the establishment of watershed networks. These networks provided a space for seven neighboring communities to meet and discuss their interactions with the sub-district government, RFD officials, and DNP. Through the network, UHPD also gave trainings in community forestry and related laws that provided a chance for neighboring villages to network and update each other on the situations in their respective villages and to take a proactive, rather than reactive, stance to changes in forest policies. During these meetings, villagers talked about the potential problem of the proposed national park and encounters they had experienced with the DNP. In one case, the DNP offered THB 50,000 (USD 1,670) to Huai Lu Luang villagers under the pretense of preserving the forest and giving the land to the DNP. One community forestry committee member described his experience as this:

I sensed that something was wrong. The next morning the officer come again and asked for us to give them the land, but then on another day the officer said he wanted to negotiate with the villagers. That day I was not around, but then all the villagers signed their signature. Why they signed is because the government said 'we will give you 50,000 baht, this money is not to buy the land but

to help you save the forest'. When I found out the villagers had signed I went down to the headquarters and told the officer 'it's wrong for you to do that, to just ask some of the villagers to sign the signature in order to approve that. You have to get the signature from the headman all the way down through to the sub-district'. The officer that gave the money said he wouldn't give money anymore. But it didn't stop there, he came one more time and tried to entice the headman. But I said 'you cannot do this, if you want to ask us to accept the money, you must tell all of the villagers and ask them first whether they think it's good and if they agree to sell the land or not. (Huai Lu Luang, 18 October 2010)

Although the villager encouraged Huai Lu Luang not to accept the money, that was not the case for neighboring villages. Panasawan (see Figure 1) received THB 50,000 and lost the land they had used as a community forest. Eventually, Huai Lu Luang ended up giving Panasawan a portion of their community forest. In 2007, villagers proactively decided that they needed to map their own boundaries of the community forest so that they would not have to rely on DNP documents. This led to GPS trainings and GIS, which I designed for UHDP staff and members of this watershed network (see Figure 1).

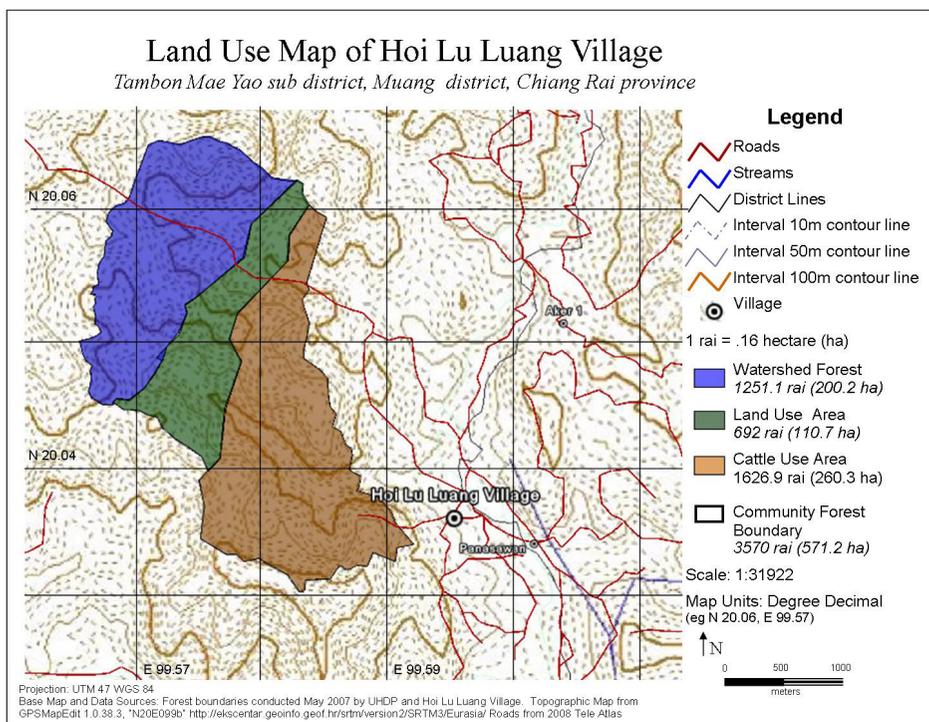


Figure 1. Huai Lu Luang Community Forest. (Roberts, 2011).

### National Park Plans and Collaborations With Local Government

By 2008, the sub-district (*tamboon*)<sup>4</sup> stepped in and showed support for the villages by helping them create more detailed maps. These maps used 1:4000 scale aerial photos and each household could trace the outline of their paddy and upland fields. The hope was that by designating the land and creating official maps, villages would have better negotiating tools with the DNP. In December 2008 and January 2009, the conflict over forest access came to a crisis when the DNP began a serious drive to establish the Lam Nam Kok National Park. According to UHDP, the DNP needed to get approval from communities within the different sub-districts before officially establishing the national park. The villages had to vote on 15 January 2009 about whether or not to allow the national park in their area. On 23 December 2008, the villages held a meeting, appointed two to three people from each village for a meeting with the *tamboon* on 28 December.

On 15 January 2009, the representative from Mae Yao sub-district rejected the national park. This vote forced the DNP to hold more formal communications with the *tamboon* and the villages themselves. According to UHDP staff members, the park was approved in all sub-districts except Mae Yao. So while the park was partially approved, boundaries have not been set and it has not been officially established:

Many things have started about the national park, they have a center, they have put up signs, but they still cannot get the approval from the central government because of Mae Yao. The national park has tried to work with the sub-district administrative governments. It happened in one area [not Mae Yao] that there was an official agreement between the national park and the local leadership that 'okay we're going to set the boundary between the national park and the community, but there's no document. So they're working on that. It's not easy, because there's no document. . . . In the case of Mae Yao, the department can't get the approval from the local communities because people understand and through the work of UHDP and the watershed network, they are aware about these problems. Even the local leaders of Mae Yao, they understand and they indirectly support the local communities instead of working with the national parks on this process, they insist on getting approval from the local communities first. (UHDP staff, 28 July 2015).

### Thai Parliament's Community Land Deed Pilot Project

Simultaneously, while the DNP was pushing its national park plans, the central government was moving ahead with its pilot project of community land deeds (*chanod*

---

4 The Tamboon Administration Act, established in 1992, sought to delegate more jurisdiction to sub-district and district level administrations. As a result of this act, governance is divided between central, provincial, district, sub-district, and village level administrations. The ministries and departments fall under the jurisdiction of the central government, with its elected officials and appointed ministry positions. The central government also appoints provincial and district level officials. A district is composed of at least two sub-districts (*tamboon*) whose officials are locally elected for five years and operate under the supervision of the district chief officers. At the village level (*mooban*), a village headman is elected for five years. Both the *tamboon* and village headman positions are considered government officers and get a monthly remuneration from the central government (Government of Thailand, 2006, pp. 1-15).

*chumchon*). A *chanod chumchon* is another alternative to the community forestry bill. Prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's cabinet approved community land title deeds in June 2010. The objectives are to improve soil quality and provide land to poor farmers through the issuance of land rights certificates for communities living on state land (Chudasri, 2010). Chudasri (2010) suggested that the community land deed screening committee would give priority to communities that demonstrated a good land use plan with strong internal community control and a commitment to caring for natural resources. Against the background of the project, Huai Lu Luang shifted its focus from community forestry to obtaining a *chanod chumchon*. No longer concerned with just mapping and documenting the boundaries of the community forest, Huai Lu Luang began efforts to demonstrate that they had "a good land use plan with strong internal community controls". Aided by the *tamboon*, they obtained 1:40000 air photo maps on which they meticulously traced all community land use from the forest, to the fields, to the village center. Additionally, my own research evaluated Huai Lu Luang's capacity to effectively self-govern their community forest. These findings then strengthened Huai Lu Luang's *chanod chumchon* application to demonstrate strong internal community control and a commitment to caring for the forest. However, as with the national park, the situation for Huai Lu Luang has not substantially changed since 2010. Due to the political turnover from Vejjajiva's government to Yingluck Shinawatra's government to the 2014 military coup (BBC, 2015) the future of the *chanod chumchon* project remains uncertain.

## CONCLUSION

Huai Lu Luang's tale is not one of resounding success. Pressures on natural resource use and labor in China caused many villagers to migrate to Myanmar in the 1940s and similar pressures from the Burmese military junta in the 1960s caused a later undocumented migration to Thailand. In Thailand, Huai Lu Luang's *de facto* use and access to forest resources has made their circumstances precarious in the midst of national concerns over deforestation rates and a racialized narrative that criminalizes ethnic minority communities inside forested areas. As a result of perceived and actual threats of relocation or forest access restriction, they involved themselves in national debates over community forestry, defiantly attending protests, while also trying to cooperate with restrictions placed on them by the RFD. As a Christian community, they respected the Buddhist national religion and dedicated part of the forest area they use in a Buddhist ceremony to the Thai King. In response to national park creation plans, they have counter-mapped the area of the forest that is unofficially designated as their community forest, not trusting the DNP maps. They joined a watershed network of neighboring villages and NGOs, which helped them to stay informed on the interactions of their neighbors with the RFD and DNP and the rapidly changing policies from the Thai state that may affect them. They have collaborated with their sub-district government to hold the DNP accountable to its claims of an informed consent process over the creation of a new national park, and they have seized the opportunity to become part of a pilot project for community land deeds proposed by the prime minister's cabinet in 2010. In this process, my research project itself became a piece of the community land deed application. Interviews conducted

with Huai Lu Luang villagers unearthed dozens of individual, community level, and, importantly for this article, network level actions that have been taken to either prevent the direct loss of access to forest resources or to secure formalized rights to forest resources.

Huai Lu Luang's responses to the community forestry bill, a proposed national park, and a proposed community land deed pilot project are best understood not as acts of an isolated community, but instead through their 'rooted' network. It is through their affiliation with the Baptist church that the community first moved from China to Myanmar. In Thailand, this affiliation later connected them with UHDP, a new node with international connections. Huai Lu Luang's relationship with their *tamboon* allowed a means of both cooperating with the DNP, as well as resisting any establishment of the national park that did not respect their land use. Some nodes, like their affiliation with national protests over an RFD influenced version of the community forest bill died off, while others, like their relationship to their *tamboon*, continue to change as politics and elected officials change locally, provincially, and nationally.

None of these relationships or actions have guaranteed Huai Lu Luang *de jure* rights. The community forest bill has not guaranteed access to the forest, the DNP still plans to establish Lam Nam Kok National Park, and *chanod chumchon* has an uncertain future. However, neither has the community forest bill nor the DNP cut off Huai Lu Luang's access to the forest. Instead, Huai Lu Luang has demonstrated agency and choice. Through their 'rooted' network, connected to place and through an assemblage of individuals and organizations, they have stalled a loss of forest access and use. They are neither passive victims of the political dynamics within Thailand nor actively resisting the government at every step, instead they are working within their networks to negotiate access. Through these networks, they have gained support from the *tamboon*, have collaborated with national movements, and have formed their own network of villages. These relations to other villagers, local government, religious groups, NGOs, and at times civil society, allow Huai Lu Luang to continue to respond to, prepare for, and, if need be, resist national and regional policies that could either aid or inhibit their attempts to secure formalized land rights.



## REFERENCES

- Adams, W. M., & Hutton, J. (2007). People, parks and poverty: Political ecology and biodiversity conservation. *Conservation and Society*, 5(2), 147-183.
- Agrawal, A. (2007). Forests, governance, and sustainability: Common property theory and its contributions. *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, 1(1), 111-136.
- Babbie, E. R. (2007). *The practice of social research*. Belmont: Thompson Wadsworth.
- Badenoch, N. A. (2006). *Social networks in natural resource governance in a multi-ethnic watershed of Northern Thailand*. Doctoral thesis, Graduate School of Asian and African Studies, Kyoto University.
- Baviskar, A. (2001). Written on the body, written on the land: Violence and environmental struggles in Central India. In N. L. Peluso & M. Watts (Eds.), *Violent environments* (pp. 354-379). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- BBC. (2015, August 19). Thailand Profile – Timeline. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15641745>
- Blaikie, P. M., & Brookfield, H. C. (1987). *Land degradation and society*. London: Methuen.
- Bryant, R. L. (1997). *The political ecology of forestry in Burma 1824-1994*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Buergin, R. (2000). 'Hill tribes' and forests: Minority policies and resource conflicts in Thailand. *SEFUT Working Paper No 7*.
- Bugna, S., & Rambaldi, G. (2001). A review of the protected area system of Thailand. *ASEAN Biodiversity*, 1(3), 36-41.
- Chhatre, A., & Agrawal, A. (2008). Forest commons and local enforcement. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 105(36), 13286-13291.
- Chudasri, D. (2010, September 30). Land reform: First community deeds in October. *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/first-community-deeds-in-october/198513>
- Department of National Parks. (2015, April 22). Lam Nam Kok National Park. Retrieved from <http://www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve/asp/style1/default.asp?npid=233&lg=2>
- Editor2. (2015, February 23). Thai Authorities briefly detain Karen activities for protesting junta's forest policy. *Prachathai News English*. Retrieved from <http://prachatai.org/english/node/4809>
- Forsyth, T., & Walker, A. (2008). *Forest guardians, forest destroyers: The politics of environmental knowledge in northern Thailand*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Ganjanpan, A. (1998). The politics of conservation and the complexity of local control of forests in the northern Thai highlands. *Mountain Research and Development*, 18(1), 71-82.
- Government of Thailand. (2006). Thai Local Government. Department of Local Administration, Bureau of Local Administrative Development, and Division of Technical Services and Foreign Affairs.
- Hall, D. (2011). Land grabs, land control, and Southeast Asian booms. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(4), 837-857.
- Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, 162, 1243-1248.
- Hares, M. (2009). Forest conflict in Thailand: Northern minorities in focus. *Environmental Management*, 43(3), 381-395.
- Johnson, C., & Forsyth, T. (2002). In the eyes of the state: Negotiating a 'rights-based approach' to forest conservation in Thailand. *World Development*, 30(9), 1591-1605.
- Jones, R. (2012). Spaces of refusal: Rethinking sovereign power and resistance at the border. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102(3), 685-699.
- Kaiser, E. T., Roberts, K., Pawkham, J., Thongdi, B., Morikawa, R., & Satre, D. (2012). Healthy forest, healthy people: Remote sensing and monitoring support implementation of community forestry in Thailand. *Proceedings - 2012 IEEE Global Humanitarian Technology Conference, GHTC 2012*, 111-116.
- Leblond, J.-P. (2010). Population displacement and forest management in Thailand. *ChATSEA Working Papers*, 8. Retrieved from <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/CHATSEA-WP-8-Leblond.pdf>
- Leblond, J.-P., & Pham, T. H. (2014). Recent forest expansion in Thailand: A methodological artifact? *Journal of Land Use Science*, 9(2), 211-241.
- Li, T. M. (2002). Engaging simplifications: Community-based resource management, market processes and state agendas in upland Southeast Asia. *World Development*, 30, 265-283.
- McCaskill, D., & Kampe, K. (1997). *Development or domestication? Indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai: Silverworm Books.
- McMichael, P. (2008). *Development and social change: A global perspective* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press.
- Michaud, J. (2006). *Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian massif*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- Ostrom, E. (2002). Reformulating the commons. *Ambiente and Sociedade*, 5(10), 1-22.
- Peluso, N. L., & Lund, C. (2011). New frontiers of land control: Introduction. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(4), 667-681.

- Peluso, N. L., & Vandergeest, P. (2011). Political ecologies of war and forests: Counterinsurgencies and the making of national natures. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 101 (3), 587-608.
- Ratner, S., & Moser, S. (2009). *Community resilience and wealth: The challenges and opportunities for rural communities in a rapidly changing world*. US Endowment for Forestry and Communities. Retrieved from [http://www.usendowment.org/images/Community\\_Resilience\\_Report.pdf](http://www.usendowment.org/images/Community_Resilience_Report.pdf)
- Ribot, J. C., & Peluso, N. L. (2009). A theory of access. *Rural Sociology*, 68(2), 153-181.
- Robbins, P. (2004). *Political ecology: A critical introduction*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Roberts, K. (2011). *Evaluating community forestry in Huai Lu Luang*. Master thesis, College of Forestry and Conservation, University of Montana, MT.
- Rocheleau, D. (2008). Rooted networks, webs of relation, and the power of situated science: Bring the models back down to earth in Zambrana. In M. Goldman et al. (Eds.), *Knowing nature: Conversations at the intersection of political ecology and science studies* (pp. 209-226). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rocheleau, D. E. (2015). Networked, rooted and territorial: Green grabbing and resistance in Chiapas. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 42(3-4), 695-723.
- Rocheleau, D., & Roth, R. (2007). Rooted networks, relational webs and powers of connection: Rethinking human and political ecologies. *Geoforum*, 38(3), 433-437.
- Roth, R. J. (2008). "Fixing" the forest: The spatiality of conservation conflict in Thailand. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 98(2), 373-391.
- Sato, J. (2000). The political economy of bufferzone management: A case study from Western Thailand. In M. Victor, C. Lang, & J. Bornemeier (Eds.), *Community forestry at a crossroads: Reflections and future directions in the development of community forestry* (pp. 87-99). Bangkok: RECOFTC.
- Schendel, W., van (2002). Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Jumping scale in Southeast Asia. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20(6), 647-668.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J. C. (2009). *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Srimongkontip, S. (2000). Building the capacity of watershed network to resolve natural resource conflicts: Field experiences from the Care-Thailand Project. *Asian-Pacific Community Forestry Newsletter*, 13(2), 46-50.
- Thompson, E. P. (1975). *Whigs and hunters: The origin of the Black Act*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Vandergeest, P. (2003). Racialization and citizenship in Thai forest politics. *Society and Natural Resources*, 16, 19-37.
- Vandergeest, P., & Peluso, N. L. (1995). Territorialization and state power in Thailand. *Theory and Society*, 24(3), 385-426.
- Vandergeest, P., & Peluso, N. L. (2006). Empires of forestry: Professional forestry and state power in Southeast Asia, Part 2. *Environment and History*, 12, 359-393.
- Vienne, B. (1989). Facing development in the highlands: A challenge for Thai society. In J. McKinnon & B. Vienne (Eds.), *Hilltribes today: Problems in change* (pp. 33-60). Thailand: O.S.T.R.O.M.
- Walker, A. (2003, July). Seeing farmers for the trees: Community forestry and the arborealisation of agriculture in northern Thailand. *Draft Paper for Discussion at the "Politics of the Commons"*, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- Walker, A., & Farrelly, N. (2008). Northern Thailand's specter of eviction. *Critical Asian Studies*, 40(3), 373-397.
- Wittayapak, C. (2008). History and geography of identifications related to resource conflicts and ethnic violence in Northern Thailand. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 49(1), 111-127.
- World Bank. (2016). Forest area (% of land area). Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.FRST.ZS/countries?page=2>
- Xu, J., Lebel, L., & Sturgeon, J. (2009). Functional links between biodiversity, livelihoods, and culture in a Hani swidden landscape in Southwest China. *Ecology and Society*, 14(2).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Roberts is currently a PhD student in critical human geography at the Department of Geography at York University, Canada. Her research interests include the political ecology of forestry and conservation and natural resource conflicts, specifically in Southeast Asia.

► Contact: [kimr22@yorku.ca](mailto:kimr22@yorku.ca)