You can eat rice, but you can't eat money

Commercial Agriculture and the Value of Rice in an Upland Karen Village

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Contents

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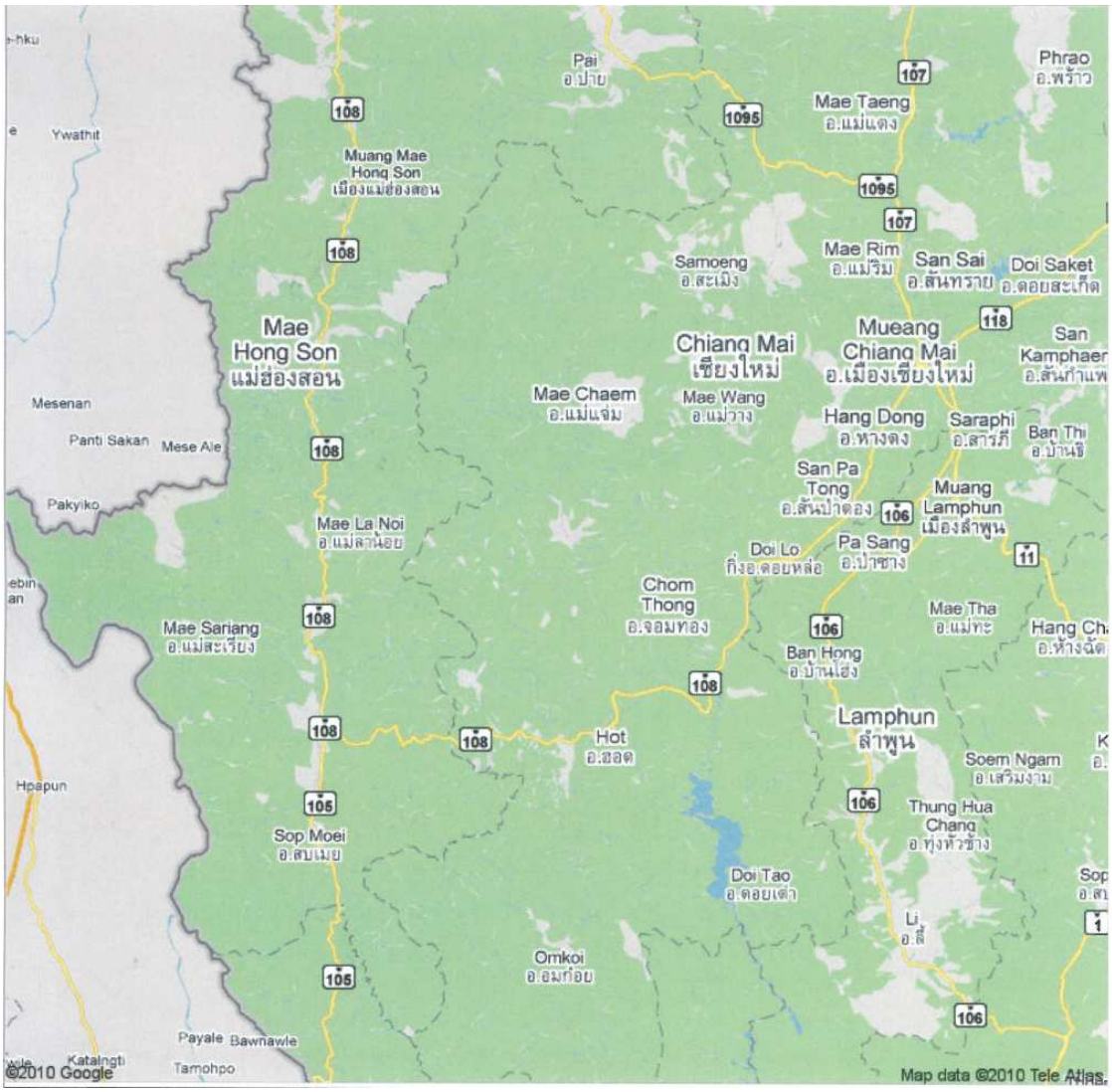
Map of Region



(Google Maps Norge|Beta 03.06.2010)

1 Introduction

- Aim of the thesis -

In this thesis, I want to present my research based on seven months of field work in the Chiang Mai province, northern Thailand. The outset was to investigate how the increasing adaptation to commercial agriculture affected the Karen village life in general. However, as I spent more time in the field, my understanding of the Karen people's relation to farming grew and it became clear that the connection to cultivation in itself was essential to understand how they managed changes in agriculture. I want to challenge the notion that a new, and in some views, improved form of agriculture automatically push out former 'inferior methods'. This view is typically represented by the idea that an agrarian community can increase its financial turnover, and thus elevate its living standards, by changing from subsistence[1] to commercial[2] agriculture. A way to achieve this is to adopt high profit yielding crops as an alternative to those currently grown. Although it may be true that this increases the cash flow in the community, it does not necessarily mean that commercial agriculture simply can be parted from self-sufficient. Still, there can be no doubt that the two means of production play separate roles in the village, especially regarding flow of resources. Thus, my aim in this thesis is to put into perspective how two regimes of agricultural production operate in one system as a whole, set apart in some instances and connected in others. I will argue that central aspects of how Karen identify themselves as a coherent ethnic group create bases of value in farming that elevates agricultural production beyond being the means of covering

[1] Refers here and later in the thesis to the concept of self-sufficient farming.
[2] Refers here and later in the thesis to the concept of producing crops mainly exported to the market.

consumption needs. I will try to show this through explaining how these regimes hold different values in the village where I conducted my research.

In this first chapter, *Introduction*, I want to introduce the reader to my field of research and to why I chose this field. Research dissertations on the characteristics of Karen people and the demographic landscape of Thailand is substantial. However, my purpose in this chapter is not to give the reader a descriptional overview of general cultural traits of the Karen, as this would just add to an already stereotypical image of the group. My intent is rather to give account of my experience of the village life in a medium sized Karen farming village. The information on the village itself is mainly based on observation and personal conversations. However, technical data was given to me by an associate who worked at a local Thai government office. The map depicted as fig. 1 is a reconstruction of various official maps as well as my own sketches. Maps of upland villages and regions tend to vary considerably from source to source. The way a map is drafted often depends on what information it is intended to convey. In government institutions it may for example have forest protection and land usage as focal point, while in a NGO working on ethnic minorities, the demographical layout may be more important. Due to these potentially dubious connotations I decided to construct my own map relating it to my intentions directly. Furthermore, contemporary maps often have grid meshes and coordinates embedded, making them unfavourable in the interest of ensuring the anonymity of my informants.

In the second chapter, *Theoretical Framework*, I turn to my place in the theoretical discourse of social anthropology. I identify mainly two themes which I feel obliged to give account of. The first being how social anthropology has found its place in economic studies and furthermore how these two disciplines interact and share, at certain points, common ground. The second is the age old anthropological theme of peasant economy. I put a considerable emphasis on classical peasant economy studies. However, I also draw on more recent theoretical thinking to present a more sophisticated view of the subject. I recognise these themes as central, as flow of resources is fundamental in agricultural practise. The intent of the chapter is to give the reader sufficient ground to understand my trail of thought later in the thesis.

In the third chapter, *Background*, I wish to present the reader with the regional background of my field. Ethnic groups in Thailand are undoubtedly politically charged and play a crucial role in how the Karen is perceived in an outside perspective as well as how they

recognise themselves. Central to this is the upland - lowland dichotomy that makes out the main dividend in the demography of Thailand. Furthermore, how ethnic groups are constructed and reproduced in Thailand, largely due to governmental control of state space, is central to understanding the contemporary situation for Karen farmers. My intent is to give the reader a certain idea of how ethnic labels in Thailand may present implications to the livelihoods of Karen and other minorities, especially in relation to the Thai nation state and land use.

The fourth chapter, *NGOs and Ethnic Identity,* follows the thread of the previous chapter. However, in this chapter I will be looking at Non Governmental Organisations and their work on ethnic minority groups. My intent is to show that their work has certain implications to Karen identity and in turn their livelihoods.

The fifth chapter, *Being Karen,* is a narrowing of the more general view of ethnicity in the previous chapters. I want to show the reader that certain bases in agriculture exist that shares an intimate relationship to the Karen identity and which play a crucial role in how farming in Karen communities holds a value beyond its nutritional and economical role. I particularly claim this as evident in the Catholic ceremony of *Rice Merit,* duly presented in this chapter.

The sixth chapter, *Agricultural Practices in Two Regimes,* presents my idea of how commercial and subsistence agriculture can be said to operate as two regimes in a larger farming system. In this chapter I do not seek to re-invent the idea of a peasant community. Rather, I want to focus on how the two regimes interact and correlate in the Karen society and furthermore how this puts a considerable strain on the producing unit; the household. These two regimes become particularly apparent in how the household perceives value.

In the seventh chapter, *Concluding Remark,* I will attempt to give a short clarifying conclusion of my main argument.

- Approaching the field -

The location of my field is a relatively large Karen settlement in the mountainous region of Chiang Mai, Thailand. In Thailand, the Karen is represented mainly by two groups; the *skaw* and *pwo* Karen. Although these groups differ in certain aspects, the classification is rarely taken into account where I conducted my fieldwork. Also, it has minimal implications for my approach to the field. Consequently, I will from here on refer to the group I studied as Karen.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that differences within the overall Karen label exist and I feel compelled to mention that the village I conducted research in is skaw Karen. Before I go into a more detailed description of the field location I feel that it is necessary to give a short note on why I chose this field, and – of even more importance – how it was possible to enter and stay at the actual site.

Drafting my research proposal, I was determined from the beginning to focus on development problems and resource management. Previous experience made Southeast Asia a natural region of interest. After some consideration, and consultations, the choice fell on the northern parts of Thailand, and more precisely on the Chiang Mai province. I had visited Thailand many times previously; however, I had never been up north. In the decades following the Second World War, Thailand has been through drastical political and economical changes and today we see a certain orientation towards a commercial mode of agriculture, the country being a net exporter of manioc and rubber. Commercial agriculture has also given great consideration in both government and NGO policies, as a mean to raising living standards in the rural parts of the nation. The Eastern and Northern parts of the country have especially been portrayed as typical target areas. Travelling from the city of Chiang Mai to the highway junction that leads to the mountains, I passed several fruit depots and processing plants exemplifying this development. The pickup trucks ridiculously overloaded with produce passing me on their way to large trade points such as Hot or Chom Thong illustrates the shift towards market-oriented agricultural farming in the region.

As I am interested in the relation between subsistence and commercial agriculture, this region is of vital interest. Whilst the commercial mode has in some places more or less been fully adopted, large populated areas still rely completely on subsistence agriculture or on the two in combination. Naturally the relation between them is the most evident and observable where the two modes of production exist side by side. These areas are typically, but not exclusively, located on the periphery of economical centres and depict perhaps what is considered to be the normative peasant[3] community. I experienced myself how quickly the landscape transformed from concrete and tarmac to lush green cultivated areas in the districts outside Chiang Mai city. However, it is not the valley farming communities I wish to study, even if they decidedly deserve more research than what has already been conducted. It is the upland farmers that have caught my interest. Much of this interest, I must admit, is due to my

[3] An expression which refers to a combined system of commercial and subsistence production, duly described in detail in the next chapter.

personal interest in people living on the margins of the wider society, both economically and socially. While terms like 'prosperity' and 'poverty' can be discussed and scrutinised without end, often causing the most honest discourses to descend into disorder, there is no doubt in my mind that the mountainous population of Thailand is in fact marginalised in almost all aspects.

Of the various groupings residing in the uplands, I chose the Karen population for three main reasons; (i) they have time and again been targeted for economic development through agriculture. A typical example of this is the Royal Projects[4] promotion of alternative crops in mountain farming communities, often focusing on high yielding and logistically straightforward produce. (ii) Karen villages have typically a long history of trade with the lowlands, something which is essential in the commercial mode of production and in turn central for my research. As one of the oldest men in the village told me, long before commercial agriculture took hold in the village, trade was conducted with the lowlands for farming equipment and other goods. (iii) Many Karen villages are connected to the main road system through an all-weather road, making it logistically possible to transport produce form the commercial agriculture efficiently. While I was conducting my field work, the first sections of the road were improved by a government initiative. However, this made out barely one tenth of the full distance, marginally improving logistics and causing severely muddy and slippery roads during the rains.

My academic approach to the topic was not alone sufficient for me to start my field work. It was my acceptance as a volunteer into a NGO[5] based not far from Chiang Mai that initially led me to the village of Ban Pha Kwao[6]. The NGO is one of many in the Chiang Mai region that focus on upland ethnic groups. The main goal of this NGO is to promote indigenous[7] knowledge of farming and cultural traits, e.g. clothing, as well as to advocate for the rights of ethnic minorities in Thailand. My position as a volunteer sometimes brought me back down the mountain to Chiang Mai city to partake in conferences and seminars. Leaving the field site for the city often presented me with agonies, as I felt that I was missing out on a

[4]The Royal Project Foundation was established in 1969 as a result of the initiative of His Majesty King Buhimol. The foundation was an answer to the need of alternative crops for upland farmers after the abolishment of slash-and-burn cultivation and opium production. The foundation's main goals are to eradicate poppy cultivation, ensure protection of the environment and offer farmers strategies for balanced and conservational means of utilising land (The Royal Project Foundation, 1996).

[5] I intentionally choose to leave out the name of the NGO to maintain the anonymity of my informants.

[6] Fictional name in the interest of maintaining the anonymity of my informants, the same goes for other name locations, except larger settlements such as cities.

[7] A term loosely used instead of, or in combination with, ethnic group/population.

lot of village activity. Still, I was aware of my obligations to the NGO from the beginning and furthermore of the necessity of their assistance to make my field work possible. Going through my aim and focus of study together with the office staff, I finally ended up in the Regional Coordinator's native village in the southern parts of Chiang Mai, being lodged at the house of his cousin, Lapho. Lapho also acted as translator during interviews and became a dear friend and ally during my fieldwork. Without doubt, I owe great thanks to the seemingly endless patience of Lapho and the NGO's staff in their support of me and my research. Without their help this project would not have been feasible. Although necessary for my fieldwork, working for a NGO and doing independent research simultaneously had its implications. I often, at least in the beginning, got the impression that the information I gathered was aimed at supporting the Karen identity favourably in the lowland - upland discourse. I do not, under any circumstances, imply that the information was false or even useless; however, it sometimes distracted me from my focal point. An interesting implication of working through a NGO was that it gave me a unique opportunity to learn how NGOs and 'target' villages communicate and perceive one another. Also, through an acquaintance in the local Royal Forest Department office[8], I gained a good understanding of how government institutions played its role in this flow of communication. My affiliation with the NGO also gave me valuable insight in the ethnic identity discourse and precious experience working in an organisational milieu.

- Ban Pha Kwao -

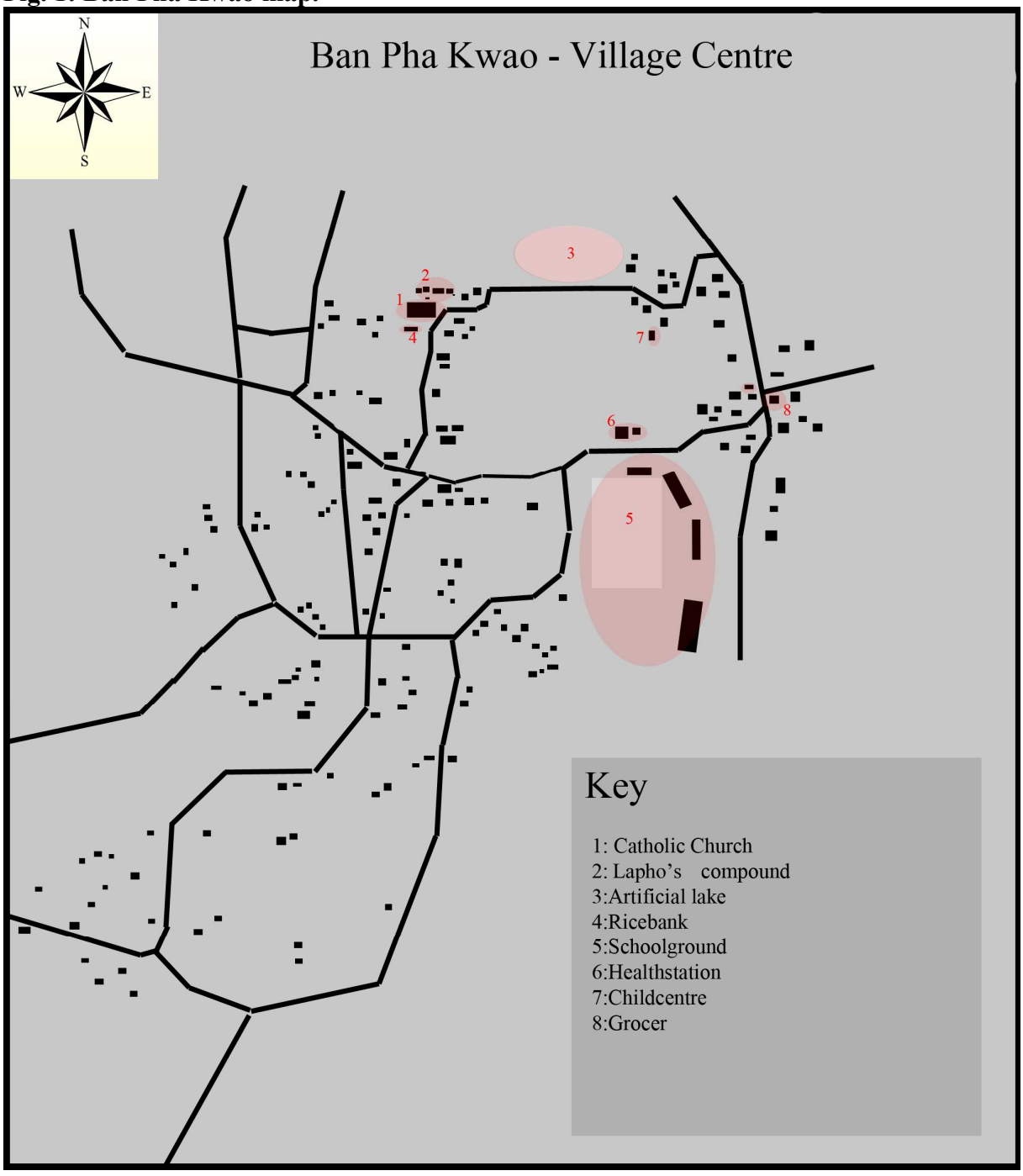
Ban Pha Kwao is located some distance up in the mountains from a junction leading off the southbound highway from Chiang Mai to Tak province along the Ping river. The junction is a small trading point, having a butcher shop, a small grocer and two eateries. The grocer also served simple food when asked. Moreover, the junction was sporadically visited by fruit and fish traders. As the main route for commercial producers took them through this trade point, it was additionally an important place for exchanging information regarding the situation in the mountains and news from the city. During my many trips, I often stopped at this trading point to have lunch before taking on the tiresome mountain road, and it was clear that the grocer

[8]The Royal Forest Department was established in 1896 with the main intent to: (i) address the rights of forest use (ii) protect the forest from destruction and collect revenue and control timer industry (Royal Forest Department, 2001). The mandate of the department has in the later years expanded to audit demographical growth and movement in the upland as well.

knew most of the people of Ban Pha Kwao. Indeed, on most occasions there was a small gathering of mountain villagers drinking or eating outside her shop. This trading point served as a natural meeting place for the mountain villagers and the people living in Bam Sam Lang, which is the closest Thai village to Ban Pha Kwao. I mainly refer to the valley population as Thai intentionally as this was the most common label used by my informants. However, the Thai population is also somewhat fragmented, and one should use general labels of identity with care. Valley population is often also referred to as *Khon Muang,* which loosely translates to 'people of the settlements'. Still, I find the label Thai sufficient for my argument and choose to use it, though with precautions.

Taking off from the trade point through Ban Sam Lang, the road quickly takes on a steep climb, winding itself up the mountain slopes. Although the climb itself is time-consuming and exhausting, enjoying the great view from the peak certainly makes it worthwhile. After a drive of about two hours through the mountain gullies and valleys, I enter the outskirts of the village – passing farmers on their way back from the fields and kids chasing each other home from school. While I do not seek to romanticise village life, a consistent trend in the numerous flyers and brochures found in down-town Chiang Mai, it certainly did make an impression every time I drove through the village in the cool afternoon air filled with the odour of boiling rice and smoke from the cooking fires. The general layout of the central village is presented in the map below (fig. 1); the school, health station and children's centre making out the core with different residential sectors surrounding it.

Fig. 1: Ban Pha Kwao map.



The agricultural cycle of Ban Pha Kwao will be discussed at length in chapter six. Still, I find it necessary to mention it briefly in the introduction. The main implication to the farming cycle in Ban Pha Kwao, and throughout Thailand, is the tropical weather system. Mainly, the annual weather cycle is parted in three; (i) cold dry season (October to February), (ii) hot dry season (March to May) and (iii) wet season (June to September). The wet season usually

starts and ends with monsoon storms and heavy rainfall. The downfall of rain may vary; something that affects the length of time a crop is left to grow.

The closest garden plots for commercial produce were located on hills just north of the artificial lake. Most of the plots used for this purpose are located on the slopes and ridges surrounding Ban Pha Kwao and other villages. The paddies used for rice cultivation cover the floor of large and small valleys in the area, giving the landscape the famous step-shaped characteristic. Lapho's paddies were located in a small valley, with a walking distance of about twenty minutes west from his compound. All households in Ban Pha Kwao, with the exception of one or two full time shopkeepers, are active farmers, operating at some level of mixed production for the market and for own consumption. I came across only one non-Karen living in the village, a Thai. Regretfully, I was not able to learn anything about his affiliations and position in the village. In addition, employees of the Royal Project, which had a large office and farming station in the outskirts of the village, were mostly Thai. Moreover, the employees at the Royal Forest Department were Thai. A typical household is made up of the nuclear family; husband, wife and unmarried children. A household is normally a part of an extended family compound. This compound is made up of the households of the aging parents and their married children. The aging parents hold an informal position of authority on the compound. The pattern of residence will be properly addressed shortly.

There is a large number of Catholic Christians in Ban Pha Kwao. However, many households fully keep their animist beliefs, or mix them with Catholicism or Buddhism. The line between Buddhist and animist belief seemed to be somewhat blurry, and my informants often used the terms erratically when speaking about those who were not Catholic. Regretfully, I had few opportunities to speak with members of the Buddhist group and their thoughts on the topic, as it was acquaintances of Lapho who made out my main base of informants. Furthermore, the Karen often distinguish between Catholic beliefs and Christianity, Christianity referring to the Protestant persuasion. To some extent, households seem to cluster together by religious persuasion, though this is more likely to be a result of family affiliation as most children adopt their parent’s religious views. There is very little tension between religious groupings in the village and they more than often take part in each other’s rituals.

I was told of one incident however, when tension between an animist and catholic family occurred. Two teenagers were discovered to be engaged in pre-marital sexual contact,

this being strictly prohibited on both sides. One of the teenagers was from a Catholic family, the other from an animist one. A quarrel arose as there were some uncertainties about how to restore family honour. Through deliberation by representatives of both sides the incident was peacefully solved with both teenagers going through an animist cleansing ritual and the Catholic confession of sin. Today, an issue pressed more than once by my elderly informants, pre-marriage sexual contact is more frequent and viewed as not properly disciplined. Most of the middle aged and elderly villagers of Ban Pha Kwao perceive Karen history in three steps; (i) the past, (ii) 15-20 years ago and (iii) contemporary. It was difficult to obtain an answer of what this threefold recitation involved, but in my experience it was related to fundamental changes in the way of life in Ban Pha Kwao. The past was by many romanticised as a 'pure' Karen period when Karen traditions was central and the villagers had a clear idea of how to work together. I claim that the 15-20 year span relates to a period with an extensive increase in government control of the uplands, as will be discussed in chapter three. The contemporary period refers naturally to the present day situation that will be discussed throughout the thesis.

The contemporary political structure of Ban Pha Kwao, and most other Karen villages, is led by the local *Pujaban.* The Pujaban is a democratically elected village leader and act as the main link between village affairs and government institutions. The Pujaban also has the mandate to report any illegal cultivation activity. As much of the forest in the region is under protection by conservation law, any cutting or burning of forest for the purpose of farming is strictly prohibited. However, as I was told, attempts to solve such cases internally were carried out before reporting them to the *Ampur Office.* The Ampur Office is the district representation of government authority. Ban Pha Kwao belongs to the Ampur in Chom Thong. Although it is rare that the Pujaban himself act as a mediator in village conflicts, Bun, who was Pujaban some years ago, told me that he in his time campaigned for stricter rules regarding pre-marital sexual relations. Bun is a middle-aged red onion and cabbage farmer who has supplied me with crucial information of village life in Ban Pha Kwao and on its agricultural practices. Bun served as Pujaban two terms, one term lasting five years. Another prominent figure of authority in Ban Pha Kwao is the Buddhist and animist leader; *Hiko.* The Hiko's mandate is to conduct agricultural rituals, ensuring enough rain and warding off pests. Although this is mainly Buddhist and animist rituals, it is not uncommon for Catholics to partake or even perform the rituals themselves, especially amongst the elder generations who were converted in adult age. While the Hiko has no official political power, the villagers

respect him and those of animist or Buddhist persuasion often votes for the Pujaban candidate he supports. The head of the local Catholic congregation has a similar position in advocating a certain Pujaban candidate, in many cases a member of the congregation itself. The three different mandates of authority may in some instances be in opposition and although the Pujaban hold the office of authority, I was told that the welfare of the village was seen as collective responsibility and the representatives often come together to discuss and solve village issues.

Rights to the cultivated land are detailed in chapter six. However, I will briefly mention the characteristics of the contemporary situation here. Land rights are a very sensitive issue in Ban Pha Kwao and a question of great concern. Rights to the paddy fields are relatively well established as these areas have been cultivated for generations. However, rights to garden plots are more ambiguous. These plots are fractions of what were earlier parts of a greater system of rotational farming. This was a system of various large plots which could be left fallow for six years before being cleared again. The system was often made out of seven such plots, carrying names which related to stages in a human life. The oldest (six years) is named *doola* in Karen, which refers to adult age and is a plot ready to be cultivated (Salas, 2006:44). *Hsgi bow* is a plot left fallow for three years and is referred to as an infant child (Salas, 2006:44). Nevertheless, strict government policies on cultivation and forest protection have effectively abolished this mode of farming and retained the plots for more sedentary use. Today, the plots are held by the individual households, but there are no official documents of ownership. The government has shown hesitation to give direct rights of ownership to these plots, thus creating a feeling of uncertainty for most of the farmers who use them to cultivate commercial crops. Still, most of the farmers continue to use these plots more or less unaffected on a day to day basis.

A pattern of locality is at best unpredictable. Lapho explained to me that according to Karen tradition; a newly wed couple would move to the wife's residential area and establish a household adjoining her parents. It is normal practice to live one to two years in the parents house before a separate house is constructed for the newly weds. However, this pattern is not strictly followed. In the case of Bun, he moved with his wife to her residential area when married and lived there for six years. Later, he moved with his wife and young children to his parent's residential area and has lived there for the last 26 years. However, he explains that when his daughters will get married, they would establish a household adjoining his on the

compound. During my field period, he started work on a new house intended for one of his daughter who was to move back to Ban Pha Kwao with her husband after some time working in Chiang Mai. In the case of another prominent informant, Pho, and his wife Pen, moved directly to his family compound after marriage establishing in time a household adjoining his parents. However, Pho explains that he has a brother who married and moved to the wife's parent's residential area. Lapho stated that many farmers in contemporary Ban Pha Kwao choose to follow practical conditions instead of vigorously following traditions of locality. This inconsistency is also commented on by Jørgensen (1998) in his dissertation on Karen history. He states that the social organisation of Karen settlements varies extensively according to geographical location (Jørgensen, 1998:229). However, patterns tend to emerge and Jørgensen remark that matrilocality seems to be in a certain degree the ideal of residential model (Jørgensen, 1998:229)

Paddies are handed down to the newly-weds from the parent family who has the most accessible land, or the land is handed down in part from the wife's family, in part from the husband's family. If the newly-weds settled in the city, as was the case with some of Bun's daughters, they would in most cases be given compensation for potential land in some form. As with residence, the inheritance of land is affected by the practical situation and thus any attempt to make a rule for the transmission would be thwarted by a myriad of exceptions. Still, a rather prominent pattern emerged through lengthy conversations on the topic. Both Lapho and Bun inherited their paddies from their family, as is the case with Pho. When a new household is founded, it is, as far as I could understand, the couple in unison that inherits the land. Even though the man of the house may make major judgements regarding farming and also occasionally refers to the land as his, the whole household holds and uses the land as one social unit. The inheritance of land seems to follow a bilateral pattern. Bun is one of four siblings who settled in Ban Pha Kwao after marriage, he has seven siblings still alive, one deceased. The four who settled in Ban Pha Kwao shared equally the paddy fields handed down from the their parents and Bun explains that he will in turn give three of his seven daughters land, the rest of them have emigrated to the city. Pho inherited his paddies along with three of four siblings, the fourth moved out of the village and was given money and a buffalo as compensation. His wife, Pen, also inherited some land from her parents. Pho claims that smaller conflicts may arise in questions of inheritance, but the decision of the parents are in most cases respected.

Regarding inheritance of garden plots, they are often passed down in the same pattern as with the paddies. However, these plots are also sold and bought in contemporary Ban Pha Kwao. Bun bought the gardens he cultivates today himself and explains that the contemporary situation in Ban Pha Kwao demands a higher level of cash accumulation, in turn supporting a market for buying and selling land. Pho sold off one of his four garden plots some time ago because he did not have time to cultivate them all. He sold the plot for 30 000THB (approximately 920USD in 2009). Bun explains that the purchase and selling of land is a relatively new phenomenon as it before was no need to accumulate large amount of cash. I claim that the commercial mode of production has contributed to creating a market for the sales and purchase of land.

Data given to me by an employee in the local Royal Forest Department office puts Ban Pha Kwao at an altitude of 1600 meters above sea level, located in a mountain valley. The area has 18 140 *Rai*[9] of arable land and 163 Rai of forest used by the community. The arable land is roughly divided into three types. (i) *Rai*, although also used as a general mean of measurement, refers to land left fallow after 3-5 years of use to gain nourishment, it needs to be cleared every year in order not to be overgrown with vegetation. Fruit groves are often planted in these plots. (ii) *Na* refers to the wet paddy cultivated areas covering the valley floors in the proximity of villages. These areas are logically located near a stream or a creek to ensure, through construction of dams, irrigation. The dominant crop cultivated on Na is rice. As mentioned, land rights for the Na are also more established than for other arable land, as it has been cultivated for a substantially longer time. Na is the personal property of the cultivating household and can be, at least in theory, sold off or passed on to next generation by the owner. However, I was informed that in Ban Pha Kwao, paddies is rarely sold or bought as rice is seldom sold for cash. The last main category of arable land is (iii) *Saun* which refers to the main areas where vegetables are planted, thus the main means of commercial production. These areas are in most cases adjunct to Na or Rai, and are also often used to store farming equipment. In Ban Pha Kwao, these areas are mostly located on the slopes and ridges surrounding the valleys. Arable areas in the Saun category can be further divided into several subtypes, and the most prominent type, *Saun Mun Vien* (Saun circulated), account for about 24%. Saun Mun Vien refers to plots that are cultivated once a year, are rain fed and usually located in the hill slopes and ridges. In Ban Pha Kwao, as discussed in chapter

[9] Normative Thai measurement of acreage equal to 1, 6 square kilometres.

six, some of the lower Saun Mun Vien is irrigated through portable sprinklers. Another subtype worth mentioning, as it was one of the main sources of cash income to the household where I stayed, is the *Saun Dok- Mai* (Flower Saun) which refers to plots where decorative flowers for the Royal Project is grown. It accounts for 1% of the arable land. Helping Lapho in harvesting one crop, I learned that this produced an income of about 400THB (12USD), which is an average return. The profit varies however depending on price fluxes, quality and quantity. Lapho had several small plots designated for flower production and this ensured a small but steady cash income to the household.

The household where I lived consisted of Lapho, his wife Pawamo and two sons. One son was attending high school in Chom Thong during my stay, the other kindergarten and later first grade in primary school. The wife worked at a jewellery producer in Chiang Mai, and visited the family about once every month. The house was fairly modern with a concrete first floor and wood boards as the second with a roof made of composite material roof tiles. The house had electricity, a separate building for the hearth and an outhouse toilet with plumbing. This style has become more and more common in the area instead of the customary bamboo boarded thatch huts on stilts. Still the traditional style is by far the most prominent. The house is located close to the Church and shares a compound with the household of Lapho's brother, his widowed mother and widowed sister in-law. The household also has its own sheet metal granary on stilts just outside the main building. They do not possess a pick-up, but Lapho owns a fairly new motorbike, as do his wife. The data I obtained from the watershed management office listed 185 households in Ban Pha Kwao. Of the adult population 536 are men and 1033 women (2009). This number does, however, vary according to source. Lapho claimed that the Catholic population made out the majority with 102 households. He stated that the number of Buddhist or animist households was difficult to obtain, but he was fairly sure that they made out the minority.

There were, as with all field works, several challenges I had to overcome or mitigate in order to gather relevant information. One of them was the label as a NGO worker. I must stress again that my work for this NGO was essential to my fieldwork and that I did not – under any circumstance - regret joining this organisation. However, it gave me a label that was somewhat confusing for some of my informants. Over time I was able to place myself in some distance from the NGO in explaining that my research was conducted on my own initiative. The village life in Ban Pha Kwao is very different from the life of a student in

Norway, and finding common ground to cover this social void presented me with a challenge I was not prepared for. Students and city people are, at least amongst the elders, seen as slightly arrogant and cocky, something I experienced more as an attitude against me rather than actual verbal expression. However, describing my life in Norway, which was a source of amusement and curiosity for many of my informants, I discovered that my upbringing on a small sheep farm was a common ground for understanding. Even though they fully understood that small farming in Norway is fundamentally different from farming in their context, it clearly had a moral value. We often discussed for hours why paddy fields were non-existent in Norway and whether or not it was the consumption of potatoes instead of rice that gave Norwegians such heights. My upbringing also led to the assumption that I was able to work in the fields at the same pace as the villagers. I proved this hypothesis to be wrong on many occasions, needing to lie down in the shade after too much exposure to the sun. I did often take part in the farming work with Lapho and a great deal of what I learned about the village and Karen custom I learned during our breaks in the small sheet metal lunch-hut next to his fields. One of the tasks, one which I personally put great pride in, was the pre-planting of rice and preparing of the paddy fields, discussed at length in chapter six. Obligations in Chiang Mai city unfortunately took me away from Ban Pha Kwao during the planting. Perhaps the major challenge, which endured throughout my fieldwork, was the language barrier. Even though I took Thai classes preceding my fieldwork, as most Karen also speak Thai in addition to Karen, it did not do much good beyond everyday small talk. The Karen language is extremely difficult to learn as it is mainly oral. The Catholic mission formalised a written language some time ago, but this is usually only used in singing hymns during church services. The little Karen I learned was not sufficient and my research inquiries could not have been done without the helpful translation by Lapho. I was often asked why I had come to Thailand when I could not speak the language; a question I admit that I also asked myself many times during the field work and in subsequent periods. Still, with the help of Lapho, elaborate clarifications and quick illustrative sketches, it proved to be more of an educational situation (on both parts) rather than an obstacle for gathering information. A challenge that faces all field workers doing research out of their context is to be aware of their own bias. This is possibly especially true for Western academics conducting research in a non-Western setting. As described in detail in the next chapter, an observer tends to complicate things by applying concepts and analytical tools.

In this chapter, I have attempted to give the reader an idea of my aim for the thesis and as well a perspective on why I chose the field locality and how I was able to conduct my research. My personal experiences, combined with data from the local Royal Forest Department office should also give the reader an idea about the village scene. Since it is necessary for the later analysis to be aware of my theoretical perspective and how I have academically approached the subject of research, the next chapter deals with my theoretical framework.

2 Theoretical Frameworks

- The anthropology of economics -

A sociological view on economic processes is not a new phenomenon, nor is the view on agricultural production as an economical system. As early as the 18th century, Smith carefully examined the link between society and economic processes. He claimed that the flow of resources in a community did not depend on the kindness and generosity of an actor, but on the relationship between goods and the demands for it (Smith, 1976). The value a commodity carries is determined by processes within the society, it holds no economical value in itself. Smith notes on the subject of value that; "The price of every thing, what every thing really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it" (1976:47). Smith's dissertation on the topic, *An inquiry into the Wealth of Nations* (new edition published in 1976), formalised mainstream thinking at the time regarding the flow of resources, and simultaneously reflected the general attitude towards what constituted an economy. Even though it was evident that social processes, such as labour organisation, played a key role in economics, an economy was viewed as the framework of such activities, not the other way around. The flow of resources facilitated social processes.

In more recent times, there have been mainly two economical approaches to social behaviour; the (i) formalist and (ii) substantivist. It is worth mentioning that these two directions carry many connections to the functionalist and substantivist debate in anthropology (Schneider, 1974:4). The formalist view of resource exchange is that it is governed by certain factors that inevitably work to maximise profit for both parties in a trade, in turn constructing models to which society operates, e.g. the supply-demand model (Schneider, 1974:2-3). The formalists celebrate the economic, maximising man as the main

actor in flow of resources. The substantivist view focuses on the flow of resources as a means to maintaining relations between traders, and thus to create society itself (Schneider, 1974:2-3). In the substantivist view, the prime concern is how this relation is upheld by actors; the materialistic movement is only of secondary interest (Schneider, 1974:2-3).

The academic connection between economic and sociological studies, often manifested in opposing arguments, tend to focus on the issue of whether or not a community can be said to naturally inhabit an economic rationale that govern social action. Economic theories, the discipline being a comparative one, strive to explain highly complex realities through generalised rules. These rules have their origins in the modernised market economy of Europe and America, conceptualised by Smith, and thus also connotes general ideas from this time and region. Conservative economics tend to depict the open market as the true economy, where resources, information and labour are available for all. The open market economy is, at least in theory, non-locational and neutral. However, studies on the topic tend to depict especially the modernised Western economy as close-to-perfect according to market logic. Anonymous markets with sensitive response to fluxes in supply and demand have traditionally been the realm of economics. Communities that do not fit into the theory are however not left out or ignored, but defined by their 'progresses' towards a more open economy. What some consider to be 'primitive' economies are seen as not operating in accordance with true market principles and furthermore, not inhabiting 'market mentality' (Firth, 1967:5). Also, the puritan economical view would explain the lack of capitalist entrepreneurial activity as a result of cultural constraints that hamper any actor of such movement.

On the other hand, so-called 'primitive' economies have traditionally been the subject of focus for social anthropologists. Social anthropologists have, like economists, been somewhat occupied with understanding the flow of resources within a community. Malinowski's work on Kula trade among the Trobianders stands as an example. However, the social anthropological approach differs from the puritan economic approach in seeing economies as a type of behaviour rather than as a motive for all behaviour (Schneider, 1974:10). Economy is a form of behaviour as opposed to another behavioural pattern. These behavioural patterns are in the end subordinate to the overall social structure of the society (Schneider, 1974:10-14). In this view, value exchange in a community is dictated by social parameters (Firth, 1967:4). Furthermore, conformity to such parameters may be of such

paramount importance that basic needs may be played down in the interest of maintaining a certain social status (Firth, 1967:4). While decisions in production are - in the economic view – seen as made solely with basis in a wish of maximising profit, the social anthropological view takes into account the processes where the actor must fulfil certain social obligations persisting in the community (Schneider, 1974:7). In such situations, concepts as 'scarcity' and 'abundance' do not only connote mathematical extremes, as it would in market-economics, they would also represent social processes in the community; thus becoming analytical concepts for the social anthropologist (Firth, 1967:4). Where retaining certain objects from the market would, in the view of a market- oriented economist, be friction in the natural flow of resources, it would for the anthropologist represent a value other than the straightforward economic value. Where the conservative economist would identify constraints for an efficient economical process, the social anthropologist would identify a more complex pattern of resource movement. Economics does not disappear when social implications are applied, but it may become more complicated (Joy, 1967).

Even though economical and social anthropological thought represent certain differences, they are by no means direct opposites. As should by now be clear, both social anthropology and economy share common ground in their attempts at identifying factors that determine the allocation of resources (Joy, 1967:29). However, geographically, the regional focus has been somewhat different, as economic studies traditionally have concentrated on the post-industrial Western world, while classic anthropological research often was conducted in a non-Western setting. One could argue that it is when these two disciplines meet in the study of a community's production, whether a modern Western society or not, that economical anthropology plays its part. In many agrarian communities the free market structure of production has gained traction long ago, thus intermixing market and 'primitive' economy. In such situations, the community tends to become very complex due to choices that need to be made in production, a topic I will return to later. When such complexity arises, there is a high degree of interdependence between activities, meaning that choices made have large ramifications throughout the behavioural patterns (Joy, 1967:40). It is this uncertainty and choice that is in need of analysis by an economical anthropologist (Joy, 1967:40). In this encounter, economic and anthropological theory merges. In complex societies there must be some process in which the economical and non-economical realms interfere with each other (Cohen, 1967:115).

Incorporating social anthropology in economics does not mean that one is over-complicating issues; it merely means that one is more observant and inclusive in investigating the processes. To simplify reality, as is often done in classic economics, is not however necessarily a false explanation of resource movement, it is abstracted to gain traction for understanding and induce closer investigation. In economy, time represents an investment for producing goods. The assumption is that an actor would logically use his available time to maximise return on his labour, often represented in material form. Thus time becomes a measure of value (Firth, 1967:19). However, in the view of economic anthropology, time would represent a subject which is entangled in more than investment. This measurement of value do not take into account preferences of time spent due to other factors such as; intensity of labour, skills and alternative resources available (Firth, 1967:20). Even so, for the economic anthropologist, time represents a favourable topic of study in measurement of value. The question that remains is; what kind of value does it measure? In the Marxian sense, labour cost is relative to the time a labourer puts into producing a good. However, this tells us nothing about how the labourer views value in the work he has carried out or in what he produces; it just gives us an impression of the economical process of transforming labour to goods (Firth, 1967:21). Furthermore, it is of vital importance to understand that values change over time, especially in the face of new opportunities (Joy, 1967:31). Taking an agricultural community as an example, which I do in this thesis, the adaptation to commercial agriculture presents such an opportunity. The decision of producing for the market rather than relying on subsistence production, or a mixture, is not a straight forward choice of labour cost. The behavioural pattern is entangled in social rules and expectations that may guide labour into sectors that are not necessarily directly economical profitable (Joy, 1967:35). Still, being presented with new opportunities may lead to a re-evaluation of these rules by the community. As I will discuss in chapter four, central values in the Karen community have a major effect on how the farmers perceive the production of rice in contrast to cash crops. Furthermore, I will show that social value is not something particular to the non-market context, but that it is also a part of commercial production.

What then, is the realm of economic anthropology? One view is that economic anthropology should concern itself with the study of how communities and actors within them solve problems of allocation, of for example labour, in relation to the limits set by their physical environment, as culturally moulded, their social structure and central values (Cohen,

1967:93). The economic anthropologist should strive to go beyond the easily definable measurements, such as Western money or other material objects and investigate the more vague measures like; prestige, value of identity and status (Schneider, 1974:17). Moreover, in the contemporary world, there is a demand, especially in development agency circles, to understand the interplay between local values and economical forces. Schneider goes far in arguing that the perception of primitive communities as non-economical should be abandoned (1974:209). Such a false view is based on the assumption that the economy of primitive communities are governed by cultural traits as a process of natural selection that has balanced out the ecological conditions. This in turn leads us to believe that there exists no feeling of scarcity or needs and thus trade becomes mere social interaction (Schneider, 1974:210). Firth argues that this wrongfully puts the community in a state where all choices have long since been taken and there are no possibilities for opportunistic movement (Firth, 1967:41). In the village where I conducted my research, I found that there was no noticeable scarcity of rice. However, as I will demonstrate in the coming chapters, the increased amount of work due to commercial production has indeed led to a strong feeling of always having to fight to make ends meet.

- Peasant economics -

Peasant economics can hardly be discussed without at least mentioning the agricultural economist Chayanov. His theories stand as the foundation on which much of the contemporary ideas in socio-economics are built. In the beginning of the 20th century, Chayanov presented an alternative to the contemporary idea of all producing units/systems as dependent on the four pillars of economic thinking; wages (of labour), rent (for land), interest (on capital) and profit (of enterprise) (Thorner, 1966:xiii). Chayanov claimed that seeing peasant societies as business enterprises was a certain way of misunderstanding the ongoing complex processes (Thorner, 1966:xiii). To regulate output in a capitalist model, one simply has to make an estimate of the potential benefits/detriments of e.g. lowering wages. However, such elements are not readily identifiable in a peasant context, due to the value of labour not being straightforwardly measurable (Thorner, 1966:xiv). Chayanov claims that in the peasant context, labour to production is supplied solely from the producing unit, the family, not from hired labour as in the capitalist model (1966:53). Thus, the labour force for production in a peasant community is wholly dependent on the composition and size of the family. In this

situation, productivity and return on labour depends on the degree of intensity and willingness of work (Chayanov, 1966:72-73). In turn, this intensity is dependent on what Chayanov has conceptualised as the *labour – consumer* balance (Thorner, 1966:xv). This concept is based on the idea that the peasant family works mainly to support what is considered a satisfactory livelihood. The necessary demands for this livelihood then makes out the strain on available labour (Chayanov, 1966:76). Chayanov holds that when these requirements are met, the peasant family will negotiate the option of continued production in relation to the hardship of work. If the drudgery of extra work exceeds the possible increase in output, the peasant family would cease to produce (Chayanov, 1966:81). This creates flexibility in the peasant economy as extra labour can be mobilised when needed. Chayanov puts this in contrast to the capitalist farmer who already has exhausted all means to maximise production output. In a situation where a capitalist farmer is bankrupt, the peasant farmer can mobilise his labour to an increased level of intensity to continue a satisfactory lifestyle (Thorner, 1966:xviii).

As mentioned, Chayanov's theories are fundamental to many contemporary efforts to explain the processes of a peasant economy. However, his idea has its limitation in assuming that peasant producers solely employ family labour. As I will demonstrate in the coming chapters, this is certainly not he case for the peasant community where I conducted my fieldwork. The farmers of Ban Pha Kwao engaged in cash cropping often hire paid labour in the most labour consuming periods of the production cycle. What constitutes a peasant community is not easily defined, but if we keep Chayanov's view in mind, a relatively more recent and sophisticated idea is presented by Ellis. Ellis defines peasant communities as existing as a part of a larger society, but retaining cultural traits that may differentiate them from another group (Ellis, 1988:5). He goes on to explain that in the contemporary world, peasant populations typically are located on the fringes of the modern world economy and exist in an intermediate state as they are not fully integrated in the commercial economy, yet are not insulated from its pressure (Ellis, 1988:3). The peasant is defined as a farming social unit, usually a household, that have access to own means of sustaining a livelihood, utilising *mainly* family labour to facilitate this, and are somewhat engaged in market economics that tend to function with a high degree of imperfection[10] (Ellis, 1988:12). This also denotes the idea that the same population does retain some form of subsistence production, but must share the available labour between this and the commercial. Wolf claims that the engagement in

[10]Referring to what in classical economics is seen as a state where non-economical elements hamper efficient open market economical process.

commercial activity is often triggered by the producer's inability to meet certain social expectations within the community and he thus wants to accumulate cash to supplement the subsistence production in order to meet these demands (1967:504). Ellis' idea of peasant society clearly conveys a notion of transformation of society from one stage to the next. However, he stresses that this must not be taken as a view that peasants exist in a midway state 'waiting' to become modern farmers. Even though it is a transitional phase, the outcome and speed of transition is not known or determined in advance (Ellis, 1988:5). His argument is that peasants are never just subsistence farmers frozen in a state of production, but communities that constantly adapt to a changing environment (Ellis, 1988:5). Mountainous population groups in Thailand have often, as I will discuss later in the thesis, been portrayed as 'living in one with nature' and inhabiting a natural environmentalist attitude. Although certainly concerned about the well-being of their surrounding environment, this does not rule out commercial production for the Karen of Ban Pha Kwao.

The term *peasant economics* is a response to the need for a concept that evokes ideas of resource management beyond the easily identifiable flow in modern market economics. The term defines a populations partial and varying commitment to market production rather than the absent of it and at the same time incorporates the notion that the actor can withdraw form the market and still survive on subsistence farming (Ellis, 1988:10). The term also suggests a level of cultural autonomy.

Ellis holds that the feature of cultural autonomy may present the observer with elements of non-economical trade that seem to dominate over personal gain in the market (1988:10). In the view of conventional economics this would represent imperfections and friction to the progress towards fully incorporating the open market, because the value exchanged is not readily transformed to a measurable unit. Many see this movement as following different rules than those of clear cut economics, creating a desperate need for analysis and definition. One attempt is the idea that these processes are driven by a social logic that works differently from, yet not opposite to, market economics (Hydén, 2006:7). In this view, actors in the community may take decisions based on social expectations as well as economical; the social expectations may even be strong enough, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, to overrule the possible 'smart' economical choice. This behaviour was conceptualised as 'economy of affection' by Hyden in his work on state and society in Africa (2006). This concept is an attempt to give the sometime confusing mergence of commercial

and subsistence production clarity for analysis, it implies an inner logic to non-market exchange in the line of economic maximisation, making an analytical approach possible for peasant societies with one foot in the 'economy of affection' and the other in the 'market economy'. However, it is important to stress that none of these schemes are totally consistent. The connection between community and marked may also be imperfect. Uneven development of infrastructure and merchant/market activity hampers the flow of resources, but does not eliminate it (Ellis, 1988:11). Possibilities for a peasant family to take part in the commercial market is thus held back by for instance the lack of capital markets and moneylenders, erratically available production inputs and poor market information on price fluctuations. In comparison; for a family farm in the economical centre of a greater society, credits for investments are often readily available, as are a highly developed network of information (Ellis, 1988:12).

If agricultural systems in the peasant form are to be studied one must keep in mind that they are not simply a combination of commercially oriented production and 'economy of affection'. The two regimes mix and fuse in many different ways, as will be shown in chapter five. However, such agricultural systems are in the need of study as they are typically part of the poorer and less prosperous group of a greater society (Ellis, 1988:3). Even though one can discuss at length what constitutes being poor, there can be no doubt that peasant societies in reality often are less prosperous than the economic centres of a society, the community where I did my fieldwork, which will be discussed in detail in later chapters, stands as a good example.

Spedding claims that to study agricultural systems, the approach of observation should be tuned to "[…] the level of understanding to be achieved and this should be related to the purpose for which such understanding is to be harnessed" (1975:2-3). What Spedding means is that agricultural systems are so complex and entangled in a myriad of social, economical and political processes that one has to tune ones approach to the issue to gain sufficient and relevant knowledge. Also, the knowledge gained will unavoidably be coloured by the observer's intentions for the usage of data. A government official having the purpose of reporting misuse of protected forest may interpret data gained differently from an agronomic researcher trying to understand cultivating processes. The complexity of agricultural systems often arise in the eyes of the observer, not in the system itself (Spedding, 1975:4). Any entity subjected to investigation and any observation easily gains a high level of complexity when

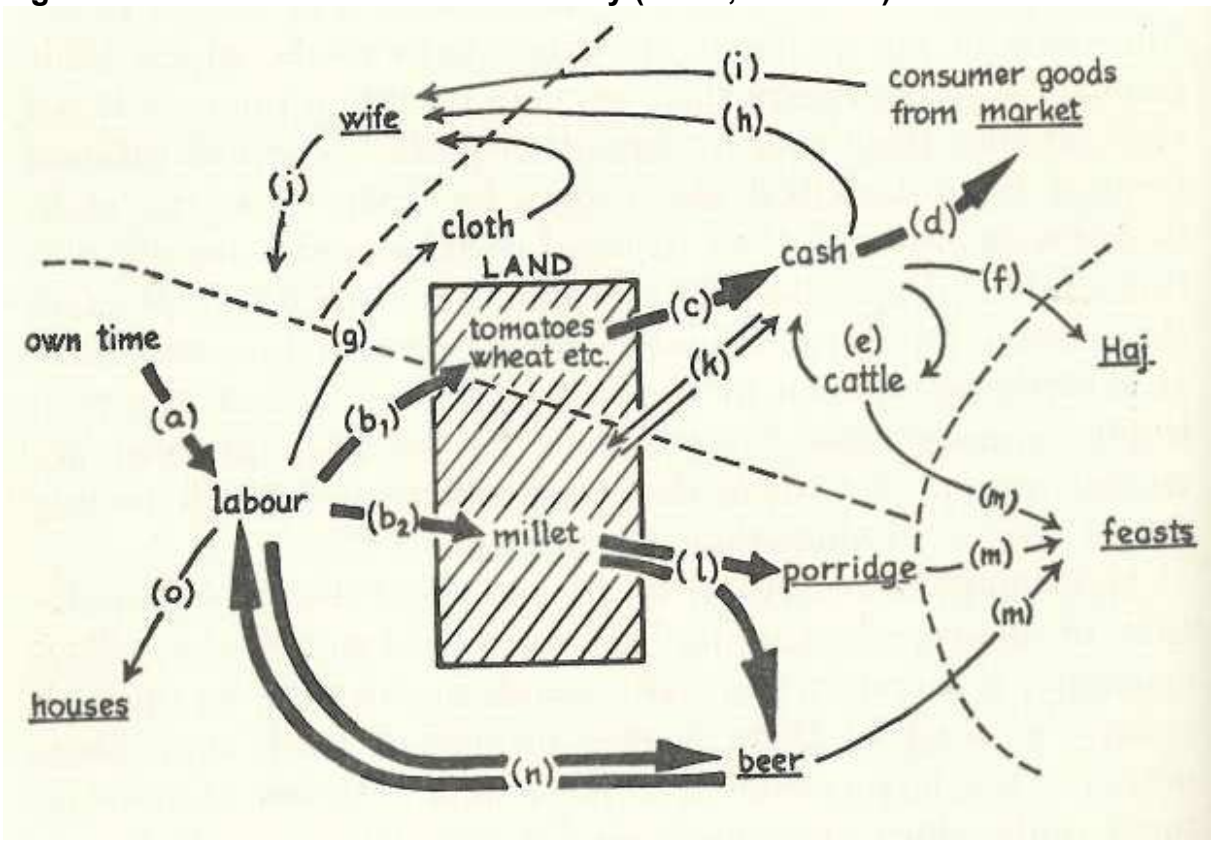
fractured and mixed with conceptual analysis. I consider it the observer's duty to keep this in mind when conducting research.

Studies of agricultural systems have a tendency to base themselves on a high degree of classification, legitimised for the purpose of generalisation and future references. It is important to remember that, as mentioned earlier, agricultural communities are subjected to outside influences that constantly shape the parameters of choice. Also, within the established classifications, such as; rural, peasant, commercial and industrial, there might be such a degree of variation that few actually fit with the abstract category. Furthermore, most classification schemes do not sufficiently cover supplementary produce from activities other than farming. Even so, classifying agricultural systems is a way for the observer to approach the topic and conduct sensible research (Spedding, 1975:6). One has to use certain tools to understand and derive useful information form complexity.

A mere glance at the vast number of dissertations on peasant economics reveal that choice of production and use of time plays a central role. A farmer has, as everyone else, a limited amount of time at his disposal and logically has to make choices for how to use it. This is central, at least to an actor-oriented approach.

Based on extensive research on the Fur economic system, Barth makes the claim that economic anthropology should apply itself to study the flow of resources between different realms, or spheres, of the community (Barth, 1967:157), particularly values crossing from the subsistence to the commercial sphere and vice versa. In his study of the Fur economy, he goes into detail, describing all alternative flows of resources based on standard choices of allocation (Barth, 1967:157). This is manifested in his legendary flow chart depict below in fig.2.

Fig. 2: Barth's flow-chart of Fur economy (Barth, 1967:158)



The model is an attempt to illustrate how an actor is presented with certain choices in the use of his own effort for production, and what the outcome may be in a given situation. Time becomes one of the main means of measurement and facilitation in the relation to choice of production. The issue at hand is how to use time to satisfy a certain consumer profile (Barth, 1967:157). If we are to follow Barth's idea, the behavioural pattern of economics in a peasant community correspond to the total sum of available choices and opportunities for the acting production unit. But, it can not be stressed enough; this is only true for a given point in time as new opportunities without doubt will arise. This, Barth explains, is due to the constant effort of entrepreneurial actors that probe and search for new opportunities to gain a better trade off from resources (Barth, 1967:171). The flow chart is, as is the nature of classificatory systems, a highly simplified version of reality. As Barth himself notes, the chart presents us with a society where actors have near equal access to production facilities and the group represented live in a "[…] relatively homogenous society, their habits and appetites are similar, except for the male-female differences which mainly reflect reciprocal obligations in marriage " (Barth, 1967:157). Economic activity, claims Barth, is the result of producing units channelling its own assets towards various goals, the goal being to (i) achieve maximal

increase in own assets and (ii) obtaining a balanced distribution of the available goods on the present market (Barth, 1967:162). This balance is again determined by the consumer profile of the producing unit (Barth, 1967:162). A farming household in the mountainous region of Southeast Asia may have a significantly different consumer profile than a sheepholding family farm in Norway. I will return to the issue of choice in Ban Pha Kwao in chapter five to show that a household has to take certain social values into consideration regarding cultivation.

The choice of production directed towards subsistence or commercial agriculture is influenced by many factors. It has been suggested that external trade through commercial agriculture occurs when there is a surplus, making a production unit able to supply its consumer base with additional goods beyond those needed for survival. This may make sense in a straight-forward budgeting of available resources in the community; however it gives an over-simplified picture of the situation. The concept of surplus denotes the idea that all subsistence needs have been fulfilled before the producing unit manages to add cash to the consumption base, giving the impression that the producing unit has time to spare after the subsistence base is covered and thus can easily choose to use his time to accumulate cash instead of relaxing. However, trade frequently occurs in societies that can be said to, even in a broad sense, not be in a situation of surplus (Bohannan and Dalton, 1962:13). A typical example put forth by Bohannan and Dalton is the cases where *emergency trade* occurs. In situations of famine and drought, objects may become commoditised and sold off to cover the subsistence base (1962:14). Further, choosing to take part in the commercial sector may be a mean to heighten one's level of material possessions. Even though many peasant societies have been portrayed as a population not in pursuit of modern material goods, this, as I will show in the later chapters, rarely fits with the real picture. Additionally, putting the kids through education and paying for healthcare are elements that are pursued even in cases where the producing unit may not support a large surplus. Government tax-policies may also demand cash payment.

The peasant has three ways of entering the commercial sector; (i) by selling off agricultural produce, subsistence or cash crops, (ii) selling labour for wage and (iii) taking part in commerce through merchant and middleman activity (Bohannan and Dalton, 1962:21). For the villagers of Ban Pha Kwao, the first and second method is by far the most prevalent. Taking part in the commercial sector changes the parameters for choice in production.

Whereas earlier, choice were made on the base of securing nutrition to the consumption base, monetary value in crops produced becomes more important. Bohannan and Dalton, who have done extensive research on agricultural transformation in Africa, exemplifies this with the Arusha people's adaptation to market economics. In the beginning the Arusha was somewhat reluctant to take part in the commercial sector, only selling off a minimum of the traditionally grown crops to cover the tax and supplementary food (Bohannan and Dalton, 1962:21-22). As the market forces gained traction however, many Arusha chose to rearrange their production to better suit the market demands. In time the Arusha economy was transformed to become sensitive to fluxes in the market that in turn led to commercialisation of previously non-commercial objects and specialisation in production (Bohannan and Dalton, 1962:22).

In analysing the relationship between commercial and subsistence production/economy the observer should, as noted above, be alert to the fact that his own approach may add complexity to an object of study. The idea that the peasant actively chooses between two economies is a case in point, depicting society as inhabiting a *dual economy* (Bohannan and Dalton, 1962:25). This phrase assumes a 'primitive' economy that has at some level become 'Westernised' through the influence of market forces, illustrated by goods and services that have transcended into the realm of market principles (Bohannan and Dalton, 1962:25). The 'rest' of resource flow is perceived to still remain in a primitive state, under strong influence of cultural restrictions (Bohannan and Dalton, 1962:25). In my opinion, this leads to a distortion of the real situation from the very start. Fundamentally, it implies that the primitive part of the economy is homogeneous and that there is little or no value estimation in this realm. Conversely, extensive anthropological research, for instance Barth's study on Fur economy, has shown that there is a high degree of various spheres and realms within a non-market economy where value is constantly negotiated. Further, the idea of a dual economy suggests a certain void between the different realms. Are we to believe that a peasant producer vigorously parts his work schedule in; (i) commercial production and (ii) subsistence production? In my own experience, the farmers of Ban Pha Kwao never explicitly pointed out that they were going to work for the market one day and on the rice fields another day. All work that needed to be done was seen as tasks that maintained their current way of life. Although the different regimes hold different value, as will discussed in chapter five and six, the actual day-to-day farming practices are not necessarily divided in commercial production on one side and subsistence on the other.

- Peasant studies today -

The theories of peasant economics discussed above are fundamental to approaching an economic system. However, recent ideas offer a rather more nuanced view on peasant communities. Gudeman, whose theories I will make extensive use of in chapter five and six, presents us with the idea of an economic system as containing two value realms; the *mutual* and the *market* (2008:4). The mutual realm, Gudeman holds, is where goods and services are allocated by the means of maintaining social ties and responsibilities; e.g. supporting a household (2008:5). The market realm is where impersonal trade is conducted. In this realm the actors are highly competitive and trade/production activity is separated from other social obligations and relationships (Gudeman, 2008:4). This distinction of the realms is not in itself new, but it is perhaps Gudeman's idea of how they are connected that present peasant theory with a more sophisticated approach. Gudeman claims that the two realms are dialectically connected (Gudeman, 2008:14). The mutual and market realm both oppose and overlap each other in different areas, something that makes the economy rather unstable, as the actor may change the combined use of the two strategies to maintain a desired lifestyle (Scott, 2009:14). Gudeman claims that a tension exists in how the combination of the two realms and what they contain are negotiated by the actor. This, he conceptualises as the *economy's tension* (2008).

Gudeman presents us with a view on peasant economics that goes beyond that of separating the economy into two parts in claiming that what constitutes the mutual realm and the market realm may change over time. What is considered to be part of the mutual realm may be converted to become a part of the market in the same way as parts of the market may be converted to become part of the mutual realm (Gudeman, 2008). An example of this, as will be presented in chapter five, is how the value of rice in the Karen society has changed from being, although to a limited degree, a part of the commercial sector in the past to almost completely being retained from the market in the contemporary situation. For Gudeman, an economic community is built around the dialectical relations of the two realms and around how a tension exists between them as the actor has to make choices of production in the mutual or market realm (Gudeman, 2008:14). According to Gudeman, what is important for understanding the complex processes in a peasant community is to recognise that certain bases of value exists that have major implications to how an individual decides to maintain a livelihood, and also that these bases can change over time to suit the present situation

(Gudeman, 2008), a view I certainly share. Central to this is Gudeman's concept of *Commons* (2001), which will be discussed in chapter five. Gudeman claims that, especially in the mutual realm, objects may carry a value, conceptualised as a Common, that efficiently keeps it from the market realm (Gudeman, 2001). A Common may refer to the shared interest or value of a material or abstract object that contributes to the continuity of the community (Gudeman, 2001:27). The Common then plays a crucial role in how a peasant producer combines the mutual and market realm.

Another fresh approach to peasant theories is Scott's work on the mountainous population and state evasion in Southeast Asia (2009). He claims that the view of peasant communities as living in a condition of social underdevelopment to the urban centres is a misinterpretation of reality. Although Scott, as I will present in the next chapter, mostly focus on ethnic identity and state formation, he touches upon the topic of peasant economics in claiming that people living in the periphery of a state may employ certain agricultural tactics to counter assimilation (Scott, 2009:29). The idea of marginal populations as remnant of a pre-civilised era easily conveys a hierarchical categorisation of population groups, and is at the same time a distortion of history (Scott, 2009:28). Scott claims that population groups on the fringes of urban centres rather have to be perceived as communities that efficiently, and in a sophisticated way, have avoided incorporation to the majority group through choosing political structures, modes of agriculture and settlement patterns that does not readily correspond to state formation (Scott, 2009). If we are to follow Gudeman's theory, the community shifts their production method in order to maintain an independent lifestyle or at least to retain some cultural identity. In this instance, the community is most likely to change towards a behavioural pattern dominated by the mutual realm as it is here we find symbols that conveys cultural autonomy.

I have given account of the theoretical framework for the reader to give an idea of what direction this thesis will take from here. I find it necessary to draw on the more classical theories of peasant economics to show how an agricultural community may operate with a combination of subsistence and commercial production, something that will be prevalent throughout the thesis. Although I share in a certain degree the classical view of the actor's choices and behavioural patterns as the main 'creator' of society, I maintain that the collective members of a group agree upon values in the community that have implications on the choice of production. As will be evident in chapter five and six, I follow the view of Gudeman in that

an economic system contains value realms that are dialectically connected. In communities that have a high degree of intermixing between commercial and subsistence activity it is important for the economic anthropologist to study how choices of production are made based on values that are not necessarily dependent on economic rationality. My overall concern in this thesis is the adaptation to a commercial mode of agriculture and how values and choices in the peasant community of Ban Pha Kwao are negotiated and managed. As the reader should now have a certain idea of where I position myself in the anthropological discourse, we now move to a more regional focus, drawing attention to the intimate correlation between politicisation of state space and formation of ethnic identity.

3 Background

-Living at the state periphery-

In order to understand Karen lifestyle and their relation to farming as it will be discussed in the next following chapters, it is important to have an understanding of how ethnic identity was managed in pre-modern as well as how it is managed in contemporary Thailand. Belonging to a group or community is of great importance in Thai society. Uncertainties of affiliation are a source of concern, as it is important to 'place' an individual in a category in order to behave in the correct manner in social relations. This chapter is an attempt at introducing the reader to my regional focus, as well as at showing how policies of ethnic identity in the Thai society have major implications on how Karen manage their position both as upland farmers and as an ethnic group.

In a recent dissertation, focusing on the formation of nation states in Southeast Asia, Scott introduces the reader to the concept of Zomia. Zomia is described as the mountainous region stretching from the southern part of the Sichuan province of China down to the Annam Cordillera and the north-eastern fringes of Cambodia. This encompasses the extreme north-eastern tip of India, east Burma, north-west Thailand, almost all of Laos and the northern and central Vietnam (Scott, 2009:13-14). Following the lead of Jean Michaud, Scott argues that this area should be studied as a region of its own as it transcend eight nation states and can be considered to be marginal in almost all respects (2009:14). Its population is highly fractured into different ethnic minorities and for the most part located on the periphery of economical centres (Scott, 2009:14). Scott goes on to argue that the upland population are by rule different from the valley population and that the topographical conditions offers geographical friction that leads to a resistance to political and cultural assimilation to the lowlands (2009:17). I will return to the upland – lowland dichotomy later in this chapter. The most

notable difference is perhaps that surplus in the lowlands is often dedicated as tribute to kings or monks, while the uplands do not share the same hierarchical distributional pyramid; instead their structure is rather flat and local when compared with valley societies (Scott, 2009:21).

The formation of a nation state demands a controllable population and a farming system. For a state making process, wet-rice cultivation may offer such advantage. Even though the farming practice offers a low rate of return on labour, its return per land is advantageous to almost all other forms of agriculture (Scott, 2009:41). Actually, the low return on labour could in some cases augment a seat of powers attempt to create a nation state. Low return on labour demand high input in workforce to feed the population, and, according to Scott; "The concentration of manpower was the key to political power in the pre-modern Southeast Asia" (Scott, 2009:64). Production of wet-rice in paddy fields offers the state a population that is concentrated and in turn easy to project its policies on. The sedentary population centres become easily taxable and could also be conscripted to defend the state when needed. Due to the ability to muster population in concentration, almost all pre-modern state cores in Southeast Asia can be found in ecological settings which are favourable to irrigated rice cultivation (Scott, 2009:42). Political and military supremacy may have required access to manpower and land, made possible through wet-rice cultivation. However, agrarian communities did not automatically form states. Scott claims that a state did not necessarily create or directly regulate the irrigated farming, but latched on to it to enhance its ability to govern. It was a relationship of elective affinity, not one of cause and effect (Scott, 2009:42).

Even though the state took good advantage of the concentrated population in wet-rice farming areas, it was not all-encompassing. Scott holds that much of the population of Zomia could be viewed as remnants of refugee groups that have, in an attempt to escape the effective power of a state, escaped to the uplands (Scott, 2009:23). Living at the periphery of the state, these groupings would in many cases break away from any form of taxation or forced labour. Furthermore, the smaller communities would escape the outbreaks of epidemics and crop failures often associated with population concentrations and mono-cropping[11] (Scott, 2009:23). The use of self-sufficient agricultural methods could be seen as a tactical choice to ward of incorporation into the nation state (Scott, 2009:28).

Scott argues that a view of the Zomanians as remnants of a by-gone era in the history of civilizations would be a distortion of reality (Scott, 2009:28). The population of Zomia is in

[11] Referring to an agricultural system where one crop is mass produced in favour of diversity.

many cases refugees from the effective power of states, having moved to the very frontier of the states border or periphery. Because of this, the Zomia population cannot be understood in isolation, but only relative to its symbiotic connection to valley states. Scott goes as far as arguing that social aspects of the various Zomian groups may be calibrated to prevent being assimilated into a nation state (Scott, 2009:32).

Having established a notion of where the periphery of a nation state is located, that is, on the fringes of its effective power, it is time to move on to why it is important for a state to formalise these fringes as a part of its domain. As Scott argues, concerning the state formation in Southeast Asia that; "everything we know about statecraft […] suggests a constant effort, by no means always successful, to hold a dense population at the core and augment it when possible" (Scott, 2009:69-70). A state is in a constant process where it must keep the population it perceives as under its authority under pressure to obey tax rules and policies. The state may expand its reach of power, however, its politics are in a certain degree limited by geographical friction as it, without a strong and concentrated population, would be difficult to physically follow up the enforcement of policies. A migrating population, as could be found in the uplands where certain groups practise, or practised, shifting cultivation would represent a tricky group to press policies on. Not only would they escape auditing, due to their movement, it would be hard to find a base on which to estimate taxation. One of the main alternatives to wet-rice cultivation was, in the pre-modern Southeast Asia, shifting cultivation. As it involved a high level of population dispersal, having a high return on labour rather than land, shifting cultivation has represented an anathema to all state-makers, traditional or modern (Scott, 2009:77). To be able to control the periphery, or metaphorically speaking transforming it to being a part of the centre, governmental policies have to be actively enforced, e.g. forcing population that was former shifting cultivators, to become sedentary through restrictions on the form of agricultural practice. Constantly moving farming plots and establishing new village sites is counter-productive to an authoritarian state, or as it goes, it moves against the grain.

A government's effective reach of power and its ability to police state space is, at least for pre-modern agrarian states, relative to friction of distance. Friction of distance, put in geographical perspective, refers to troublesome terrain for travel and transport. As the seat of power is dependent on controlling agricultural production to both feed the non-grain-producing population (e.g. the political elite and professional soldiers) and to claim authority

over a population, the reach of government would indeed be very vague after a stretch of geographical distance. Even in areas with flat terrain and roads, the effective reach of a pre-modern Southeast Asian state would not exceed more than 300 miles (Scott, 2009:43). The constant problem concerning transport of food to exercise governmental control is captured in this predicament; friction of distance. While an ox-cart with produce travel at a high level of friction, due to its need of roads and fodder, population can traverse the terrain almost frictionless and settle well beyond state control (Scott, 2009:43). Instead of paying a seat of power tributes or tax, the farmer may instead pack up and move to the periphery. Concerning hilly terrain, as we find in Zomia, the state effort of exercising control is easily outmanoeuvred by the population's ability to move. Without being able to exercise power, these groupings would represent the frontier of the state and their loyalty to the government would be, at best, uncertain. Outside the core of a kingdom, especially in a pre-modern state, a population may be influenced by several state powers at once or none at all (Scott, 2009:61), thus creating fluid borders where allegiance is uncertain and containing a myriad of less and more submissive population groups. It is important to mention, on account of being a monsoon-affected area, that pre-modern states in Southeast Asia was highly seasonal, if we are to count a state on its effective reach. Take as an example the attempt of Burmese troops to take over the hinterlands of Burma; campaigns were time and again thwarted by the monsoon season as it washed away roads and made rivers impassable. In Siam, tax collectors would have considerable trouble moving far from the state centre in force during the rains as the alluvial plains were flooded (Scott, 2009:61).

I have directed focus towards the pre-nation states in Southeast Asia intentionally because their sovereignty was limited by their effective reach. Anyone living outside this reach would by default be stateless and under their own control. However, I hold that the modern states eliminate this as its borders and jurisdictional reach is determined by geographical parameters, ruling, on its own logic, all population within the border. At least, this is how it would work ideally. This does not mean that the ideas of pre-modern state formation are outdated and obsolete. On the contrary, they are essential to understand how labels of identity have been partly constructed and put on the numerous ethnic groups living in the part of Zomia that falls inside Thailand. Ethnic labels in Thailand have a strong connection to a state's need to exercise sovereign control over the population that is within its authority, as will be discussed at length later in this chapter. A precondition to this ethnic

labelling and need of control is the categorisation of state space that dominates thoughts of policy making; the distinction of upland and lowland.

-The upland - lowland dichotomy-

The northern part of Thailand is by and large a landmass covered by valleys, river gullies, and mountains. Geographically, the northern lowlands are located on the alluvial plains covering about ten percent of the landmass. In addition the slopes at the foot of mountains fall within this category. In elevation above sea level, the lowlands are typically located between 300 and 400 meters (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:31). The mountain ranges are without doubt the major geographical feature of the North, as nearly 60 percent of the land cover is located above 500 meters and 20 percent above 1000 meters (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:29). Even though the mountain ranges are perceived by some to be the southernmost extreme of the Himalayas, temperatures rarely drops below freezing. The glacier flows that feed India and Nepal with water is absent in Thailand, thus the catchment of rain by forested areas becomes the primary feed to the hydrological system. Although much more can be said of the geographical conditions, I attempt to show in the following section that also the social, economical and cultural aspects of northern Thailand is reflected in the topography (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:27).

One of the fundamental social distinctions between up- and lowlands is the differentiation of *muang* from *pa*. Historically muang refers to the first northern Thai population centres (the word itself translates to settlement), e.g. Chiang Saen, Chiang Raia and Chiang Mai, where advanced irrigation systems supported rice production sufficient for larger settlement (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:27). In the contemporary as well as in the pre-modern times, muang conveys the meaning of civilisation and development. It is around this typical classification that the main social distinction revolve, the lowland population considered "[…] themselves as being socialised into the 'cultivated' space of valley polities and perceived hill people as living in a state of nature in the 'uncultivated' forest." (Peleggi, 2007:25). This is underpinned by the fact that head administrative units of government, e.g. Ampur, have always been located in the larger valley settlements instead of in the uplands. Scott claims that historically the muang made out one of the three larger political units in Southeast Asia, the two others being the Malay *Negara* and the Burmese *main* (Scott, 2009:36) . It is in particular agricultural sophistication and cultural superiority that has led to

the widespread self-labelling of the northern Thai population as Khon Muang – people of settlements/townships (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:28). The immediate opposite to muang is the *Pa,* which denotes an idea of wilderness and lawlessness. It formally translates to forest, but it conveys older connotations of uncivilised, cultural scarcity and a general lack of domestication (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:28). Pa is often paired with *thuen, Pa Thuen,* which suggest a degree of illegality. The pa is considered to be a dangerous place as its realm is outside the civilised and governed, a notion that exists at the foundation of the upland – lowland contemporary issues.

Today pa connotes a more positive idea. For both Western and Thai activists as well as many NGOs, the uplands present itself as a viable alternative to the perceived uncontrolled commercial exploitation that follows liberal economic policies. The word pa has for many been shifted to *thamacht* in modern Thai, a word that translates as nature rather than as forest/wild (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:28). The perception has shifted to see the uplands as areas of pristine order without the disturbance of the predatory capitalism, inhabited by, rather than random savage groups, a culturally diverse population (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:28). Even though this may be taken as a sign of progress towards greater acceptance of upland groups as a part of the general population, it still passes on upland – lowland dichotomy. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the work of NGOs can in a certain degree be related to this dichotomy. Even though transformed, the dichotomy fuels popular beliefs about upland population, having a tremendous effect on policy making. Attempts to exercise state power in the uplands has often been represented by forest conservation acts in a top-down approach, opposed time and again by community and bottom up policy making, represented largely by NGOs and activist groups. In spite of their stark opposites, they have one thing in common; they reproduce the upland – lowland dichotomy through a preoccupation with preserving the wild pa/thamchat and the perceived lifestyle of people living in its realm (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:28).

Scott claims that a state is only as strong and influential as its ability to exercise power, creating ambiguous population groups at the fringes of state reach (2009). Not ambiguous in sense of nationality, as the nation-state eliminate this, but in the sense of loyalty and governability. If we draw on Scott's theories, I claim that we can readily understand the uplands as being in the peripheral areas, the lowlands being at the centre, in socio-economic terms at least. This provokes the idea that in an attempt to characterise inner state space,

exercise of power is directed to keeping a certain rationale of normality, putting the uplands in contrast, or even opposition to lowlands, as it is the lowlands that holds state power. This relationship is then reproduced in the need for state control in certain instances; either it is the call for increased national security, focus on environmental degradation or problems of integration. Though, as Forsyth and Walker argues, this presents us with a homogeneous and two-dimensional picture of the relationship between up- and lowlands, depicting the state as administrative uniform pushing commercialisation; and the uplands being traditional and oriented towards subsistence economy (Forsyth and Walker, 2008). The real picture is somewhat more complex.

As the upland population, living in the pa, often is portrayed as ungovernable and being a part of the wilderness, it easily takes on the idea of the state being in opposition to the community. In Thai language, community is referred to as *chomchon* which conveys a notion of a rural population (Reynolds, 2009:30). In his research on the contemporary Thai society, Andrew Walker explains that a chomchon is often idealised as an older and 'traditional' Thai way of life, governed by certain morale codes rather than economical rationales. Elements of subsistence agriculture in opposition to commercial oriented production are often put forth (Walker, 2009). The idea is founded on the existence of an authentic community which is corrupted and broken down by capitalist/commercialist socio-economic forces, and that this can be prevented or encouraged by human agency. The transition from labour exchange to paid labour, for many representing a hallmark for economic development towards capitalism, is in this setting viewed as a degradation of and 'authentic economy'(Walker, 2009:12). The economic aspect become severed form the social structure, existing in a domain of its own, manifested in the rapidly commercialisation of agriculture in Thailand (Haughton, 2009:53). The consent is that people in what is considered chomchon, before being exposed to commercial forces, acts out of an embedded morality rather than the economical imperative found in the modern market (Haughton, 2009:44).

Especially, policies focused on community based development have in many ways contributed to this idea being mainstream in the contemporary context and, as Walker holds, in turn amplified already existing social differentiation in Thailand (2009). NGOs and academics in Thailand campaigned heavily in the 1990s for a scheme of development which attributed characteristics and moral codes of what was considered to be an authentic community, which would by default, have a more nature-conservative approach to resource

management (Walker, 2009:3). Parting the state from community represents in many ways spatial organisation of state space according to a popular perception of pa being a natural opposite to muang, or if we put it in a more topographical grammar; lowland in contrast to upland.

When a popular belief or narrative gets enough traction, it will after some time come to represent the general consensus about the state of things, such as ethnic categorisation and state space classification. A reason for a narrative to gain support in the general population is due to its ability to simplify reality an in turn make it attractive for a broad base of the general society (Forsyth and Walker, 2008).

In regard to the state versus community-dichotomy in Thailand, the concept of community holds a basis for political campaigns for development, conservation and empowerment (Walker, 2009:15). Restrictions put on upland agriculture may represent such activity. An idealised reality that narrates the upland population as a natural extension of the forest speaks to the separation of pa from muang, and justifies forest and land regulations. The notion idealises the upland as a place for genuine rural life, seeing intrusion of the market economy as a negative abnormality instead of as a part of reality.

For many academics and activists, as well as political opportunists, community is seen as being an alternative to state power as an agency of development. Furthermore, the community is perceived to inhabit a kind of moral logic and social capital that by design regulates the management of land resources (Walker, 2009:16). Campaigns for community rights to self-regulation, often facilitated by NGOs, focus on the need for considering local regulatory techniques rather that centralised state policies. Even though this may be an important step towards a more reality-tuned development course, it still plays on a simplified separation of state from community. In addition, such discourses have a tendency to be constrained by stereotypical anti-state/commercial way of thought (Walker, 2009:16-17). Founding, implementing and pushing policies of development on such a reality does not necessarily express local aspirations and desires. The community-based approach to development has a tendency to become the problem it set out to solve. As regulatory policies was seen as too destructive to local ‘culture’, the community-based approach itself thwarts its effort in promoting policies, as it is based on a distorted picture of the upland population. Even so, the concept of community is omnipresent in contemporary development discourse, conveying values of empowerment and self-agency (Reynolds, 2009).

Perceived by environmental activists and similar groups, the modern economic model is an alien and destructive force in the uplands of Thailand, a force that can be mitigated with a focus on community-based approach to development. Led along by popular narratives, there exists a surge to preserve uplands in a state of pre-modernity. In this view, the utilisation or adjustment of a cultural trait would represent a break with what is alleged to be normal, and may even be viewed as a betrayal of the 'authentic' behaviour (Haughton, 2009). There can be no doubt that this distorts the actual social processes in the contemporary uplands of Thailand. With regards of my own research, Ban Pha Kwao would represent a break with the romantic picture of upland village life. Although the farmers, especially the older ones, claim that the Karen has an intimate connection to the forest and nature, this does not hamper the cultivation for commercial purpose. Bun pointed out to me during an interview session, that commercial agriculture is today a necessity to maintain a lifestyle and although it might have altered the village, the inhabitants are still Karen in all aspects. Cultivating cash crops is – in my experience – not seen as a betrayal of 'real' Karen way of life, but as a necessary mean to support a household. As I will show in chapter five, supporting a household is fundamental to what it means to be Karen. Furthermore, I will show in the following chapters that Ban Pha Kwao is not in any way a remote 'forest' village, but a community with a firm connection to the modern market economy. To perceive the community in any other way is to undermine the farmer's own agency. We now turn to see how pa in contrast to muang plays a part in the spatial organisation of state space and the politicisation of it through demographical mapping.

-Demographic mapping and the construction of Chao Kao-

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the modern concepts of borders replaced the notion of the state's right to exercise power based on its actual reach. The borders were no longer represented by groups of population living on the frontier of a nation core, but by geographical bounded factors correlating to nation maps, clearly showing where the jurisdiction of the states ends. National borders represent themselves a base of power and authority that can not be contested without offending the state itself, clearly manifested by the long hours waiting in line at border checkpoints. Picture a map where the base of power is represented by shades of red relative to the grade of effective power. The borders, large cities and international trade zones would be glowing red-hot, representing the pinnacle of power, while vast mountainous regions and hinterlands would be pinkish or light red. The *geo-body*

of Thailand, or Siam, was established (Laungaramsri, 2003:26). As the edges of the Thai state now was no longer ambiguous the population inside the borders had to be accounted for, this did not only create a new identity for what it meant to be Thai, but also for the non-Thai groupings (Laungaramsri, 2003;26). The concept of a geo-body is introduced by Thongchai in his dissertation *Siam Mapped* (1994). Thongchai claims that the ethnic Thai attempts to define a notion of *Thainess*, or *kwanpenthai* in Thai, for the population perceived as the majority group of the nation (1994:3). However, it is an elusive idea which slips through the fingers as soon as someone attempts to characterise it. Due to this, Tongchai claims that Thainess is more often recognised through what it is not, a sort of negative identification (1994:5). The popular expression *farang* serves as a case in point. Farang is used to describe any Western person, not referring to nationality, religion or ethnicity. The term may carry negative connotations. Still, this is not always the case. Farang is a concept used to define who Thai is through negative identification. That is, it conceptualises those who are not ethnic Thais in order to determine who is Thai. This method of classification has also been in use actively to map the demographic landscape of the Thai nation. During the cold war era, politics became an integral part of the notion of Thainess as communist activity was perceived as a break with what it meant to be Thai (Thongchai, 1994:167-170). In turn, this singled out parts of the population who were left-wing sympathisers as non- Thai and as a threat to national security. As mentioned above, this often involved the upland population.

Thongchai claims that the idea of Thainess correlate to territoriality (1994:16). A nation's territory does not simply refer to a limited part of the earth's surface, but to the intricate processes of control of the population within it. Territoriality refers to the active effort of a leading group or individuals within the nation who attempts to exercise control over the population through putting constraints and limitations on individual affairs (Thongchai, 1994:16). The Thai geo-body then refers to two aspects; (i) firstly to the geographical parameters which correlates to coordinates on a map and (ii) secondly to the effort taken by inner power groups to exercise control over the general population. The geo-body signify an object which is physically fixed, but at the same time a myriad of complex social processes within the borders (Thongchai, 1994:17)

Forging the nation state of Thailand entailed that the included population's obligations to the state had to be defined. These obligations could be such as duties to the government or rights as citizens of the state (Jonsson, 2005:46). The uplands, representing the former frontier

of state power, contained a number of groupings with their own customs and livelihood, standing in stark contrast to the lowlands where we could find a more homogeneous population concerning religious practice and social organisation (Scott, 2009:57-59). It stands to reason that this mosaic of population groups had to somehow be managed to be able to control the inner state space. A baseline of what it meant to be Thai and who this included had to be created (Laungaramsri, 2003-27). Jonsson claims that the marginality of highland population in contemporary Thailand is anchored in the conflation of the concepts race and citizenship that emerged in the newly forged Thai state (2005:46). One of the earliest theories coming out of Bangkok, the centralised seat of power, on why uplanders were so different from the lowlanders was that they belonged to an entirely different human race (Jonsson, 2005:47). This is an idea that still has, at least in my experience, some footing in contemporary Thailand. Many of the popular ideas amongst the elites of Bangkok were that the highlanders were of Chinese or Khmer origin. This in turn denoted the idea that they were a sort immigrants living in Thai national space, as the narrative of heritage referred them to other national territories (Jonsson, 2005:47). The non-Thai population of the state was effectively deprived of any form of stand-alone agency or formation through a process of nationalisation of space, identity and history. This nationalisation was fused by the issue of race and thus enabling the Thai government to plot in the different groupings on a demographic map of the nation state population (Jonsson, 2005:47). Levels of progress and civilisation was included in the discourse and this in turn led to the consensus that the lowlands was civilised, while this was something that uplanders had not been able to, or were yet to, develop (Jonsson, 2005:47).

This kind of classification of the landscape made the hugely heterogeneous population of Thailand manageable. Laungaramsri claims that the idea of Thainess, conceptualised by Tongchai, is a product of a racialisation process (Laungaramsri, 2003:27). The essence of Thainess correlated to an axis that curves around the parameters *ancientness* and modernity. This celebrates the Thai population as the master race and the other groupings as mere branches of that race (Jonsson, 2005:50). This put the Thai population at the centre of modernity, reflected in the Bangkok hegemony's attention being put characterisation of 'primitives' during the late nineteenth century. In turn, this put the Thai population outside the concerns of ethnography and reproduced the classification (Jonsson, 2005).

As the need to manage the upland groupings emerged, a label to categorise them by was needed. During the 1950s, the Thai government funded extensive research on the upland population to put a stop to opium cultivation. From this research the concept of *Chao Kao* surfaced as a point of reference when talking about the upland cultivators, in time this became part of the mainstream way of categorising uplanders from the valley population (Jonsson, 2005:55).

The term Chao Kao has a double meaning. The literal translation is *hill* or *mountain people.* However, when put in the context of *Chao Rao,* loosely translated to lowland population, it takes on the form of differing us (Chao Rao) from them (Chao Kao) and effectively maintaining a system of differentiation (Laungaramsri, 2003:47). Also, Chao Kao may be translated to a concept found in numerous tourist guide-books, museums showing upland lifestyle and signs in front of agencies and handicraft shops in down-town Chiang Mai; *Hill Tribe.* The official definition of the Central Hill Tribe Committee (CHTC) is that the Chao Kao is "[…] referring to the minorities residing in the highlands." This was an official status given as a result of the formation of the CHTC (Laungaramsri, 2003:29). CHTC was established in 1959 and its domain within the Ministry of Interior was to formulate a policy regarding the upland population in relation to national security, policies that although somewhat altered, remains today (Buergin, 2000:7). A general consensus on the Chao Kao was manifested in a report by the Department of Public Welfare in 1962 on the issues regarding the upland population.

> "Slash and burn agriculture is the economic foundation of the hill tribes under discussion. Without any exception they have not yet advanced to stabilize farming. As will be seen, almost all the problems which the hill tribes constitute in this country – such as destruction of forest, opium growing, border insecurity, difficulties of administration and control – derive from this very fact. An immense progress would be made if the hill people would learn and practice cultivation in permanent fields"
>
> (Dep. Of Public Welfare 1962:17, in Jonsson 2005:55)

Even though this definition of the Chao Kao lifestyle may be outdated, I hold that it serves as guides to how the uplanders of Thailand are placed in the demographic landscape and on the hierarchical ladder of development. There can be no doubt that the label of Chao Kao grossly generalises a huge part of the population. By the 1990s the Chao Kao were in fact estimated

to count 840 000 people, or 1.3 % of the population in Thailand (Buergin, 2003:52). This is however an official figure, which themselves vary according to source, and the actual number might be a lot higher. Regardless of their distinctiveness in social patterns and general lifestyle, numerous groupings are lumped together under the label Chao Kao, including Karen, Hmong, Lisu, Akha, Lahu, Yao, Kamu, H`tin and Lua (Laungaramsri, 2003:29-33). Laungaramsri holds that it is important to note that this homogenisation of the uplands must be seen in connection to the Cold War climate. Increased stress on national security boosted the hill/valley or wild/civilised dichotomy due to the demand for control over peripheral groups by the lowland dominant population (2003:29-33). As mentioned, the Karen is also included in this generalised category. However, Laungaramsri hold that the Karen themselves do not perceive their ethnic identity to fall within this category and they feel no direct affinity with the other upland ethnic groups other than occupying the same geographical region (Laungaramsri, 2003:29). As I will discuss in the next chapters, this self-perception is however, to some degree, situational. In certain instances, especially when related to commercial production, the farmers put forth their identity as upland cultivators rather than as Karen.

In the pre-modern state, the Karen was classified as a superior branch of the Chao Kao, as they had close contact with the Thais and as they were by some Thai monarchs considered being the protectors of the forest (Laungaramsri, 2003:28). In the modern Thai nation state, too, the Karen is somewhat differentiated from the rest of the Chao Kao. They are allegedly people who migrated to the region even before the Thais. Nonetheless, this does not grant the Karen a different status outside the fact that they in some publications are considered more shy and submissive than other ethnic groups (Laungaramsri, 2003:30).

Before the formation of a Thai national state, the peripheral population was not considered a problem as such, but more like a frontier with the potential to be included in an expanding state. Why is it then that the upland population, Chao Kao, Hill Tribes, indigenous people or whatever label is used, has become such a problematic topic in the modern nation state? In my own experience, working in the NGO environment in Chiang Mai, this label of identity was a sensitive one and one that had to be used with care not to offend. Gravers claims that an ethnic identity differ from a national identity in that it often involves visions of being embodied, bounded and rooted in a reality different and deeper than "[…]a mere abstractly conceived national identity" (2007:2). Laungaramsri relates the problem to the need

of politicisation of the state space in which notions of borders and, in the case of upland population, elevation have become important traits in the discussion that separates the Thai from the non-Thai (2003:23). The discussion puts focus on national security and coherence to the national economy through agriculture and thus puts the Chao Kao in the line of fire concerning problems with lawlessness and issues of forest destruction. Elevation and borders represent a territorial imperative that forces the nation state to construct such labels as Chao Kao if not to foil its own imagined prominence (Laungaramsri, 2003:31).

To highlight the way the Chao Kao, including the Karen, ethnic label can be seen as a product of politicisation of state space I find it useful to draw shortly on a comparative pattern. For this purpose I will use research done on ethnic labels in Burma, extracted from the dissertation *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma,* which was edited by Gravers who himself has done extensive field studies among the Karen of both Thailand and Burma.

As mentioned, Gravers holds that ethnic identity often differs from national identity in that it denotes something primordial in the way it is represented. In the modern society this is brought to the table when discussing ethnic groups and for instance their civil and territorial rights, accordingly it also becomes a mode of identifying a group in a political context (Gravers, 2007). Gravers goes on to say that ethnicity in the modern state is not a mere political tool to campaign for one's rights, it also reflects how the people who feel unity in this identity see themselves and their position in the greater demographic picture (2007). In Burma, the various ethnic groups are manifested in a list that compiles the official 135 national races, simplifying ethnic identity to basic characteristics and putting forth the idea of these being derived from a natural order (Gravers, 2007:5). For the various groupings, this identity is projected when confronting other ethnic groups and the identity is indeed often used to legitimate political movement (Gravers, 2007:5). The classification of ethnic groups in Burma therefore becomes an essential part of the political struggle (Gravers, 2007:5). As for the case in Thailand, ethnic labels surface when the political space needs to be managed.

The colonial period had a noticeable impact on the formations of ethnic groups in Burma. It was especially because of the need to map potential resources that an attempt was made at categorising the various groupings living in Burma. They were not categorised, however, on account of their relation across ethnic boundaries, but on their level of being civilised/primitive and on their basic characteristics; e.g. physical appearance and lifestyle. Yet, the colonial power, in the case of Burma; the British Crown, did not solely create ethnic

categories, the groups and their agency did also react to this classification. As Graves holds; "there can be no hegemony without counteractions" (2007:17). The classification process is anchored in an idea of ethnic identity being something primordial and a part of the natural order (Gravers, 2007:14). In the modern Burmese nation this became problematic as the ethnic label often referred to was synonymous to a territorial claim, threatening to rip the state apart (Gravers, 2007:14). These ethnic groups then needed to be mitigated and the state space politicised, something that may manifest in subordinate states or vassal kingdoms to a centralised seat of power. However, enforcing ethnic groups to conform to policies of a centralised seat of power is not possible without sparking some conflict of internal/external classification (Gravers, 2007:24).

In violent confrontations between ethnic groups, it is not a primordial inhabited characteristic that triggers it, it is when the ethnic identity become part of the inter-ethnic political relations (Gravers, 2007:229) However, it is the primordial notion that surfaces and represents the group, flattening differences and erasing individual agency (Gravers, 2007:229). This means that a suppressive power may officially gather numerous smaller groupings under one term, or ethnic identity, relating them to a common factor seen as traversing the minor differences. Such factors can be many things, but religious belief system and physical appearance is frequently used. On the other hand, it may lead a number of smaller groups to gather in relation to a common denominator to counter outside influence and resist assimilation. In the case of the Karen of Burma, the formation of a nation state had the effect that many of the various Karen groupings in the region flattened out their internal differences and at the same time depicted a common external group, the Burmese, "[…]as a deeply opposed entity and utterly incompatible with the Karen identity." (Gravers, 2007:229).

- The Karen position-

Now that we have established an idea of how ethnic labels in the Thai nation state became mainstream thinking, let us narrow in on the Karen population. There are few existing records of Karen history that date beyond that of the mid-19th century. And even then they surface in the literature as mere references to forest-dwelling people (Renard, 2003:1). Renard, who has studied the Karen since the 1970s, holds that the reason the Karen has gone through much of the pre-modern history of Southeast Asia uncharted is that literature and chronicles at that time often focused on the concerns of state centre, e.g. the kingdom of Ayutthaya. Records

were focused on the 'civilised' part of the state (Renard, 2003:2). Jørgensen notes that one reason for the apparently absent references to Karen population in historical records is that they posed no real threat to the emerging nations in Southeast Asia before the borders between Burma and Siam began to be contested in the 18th century (1998:218)

Renard wants to contest the concept of Karen; does it exist only in the thousands of academic dissertations on the topic since the mid 20th century? The word Karen itself, according to Renard, can be traced back to the word *Carianner*, mentioned in the records of Captain George Baker who served in the East India Company during the mid 18th century. He notes that "[…]these Carianners lives in the woods, of 10 to 13 houses, are not wanting in industry, though it goes no farther than to procure them an annual subsistence" (Renard, 2003:1). Carianner is a representation of the term *kariang,* used by the Mon people to describe a myriad of 'uncultivated tribes' living within the states effective reach (Renard, 2003:1). Kariang combines the words *Kha* and *Riang*. Kha refers to a class of human beings that lives within Thai space. Thai refers here to 'civilised' valley dwellers patronising Buddhism. Riang is a reference to various groups of forest people living around the Thai population speaking the same language (Renard, 2003:1). Language has, since the first records of the Karen people, been an important parameter for deciding who is included in this ethnic group. The Karen language is a part of the Mon-Khmer language family (Renard, 2003:2).

In the pre-modern Thai state, the Karen was by some Thai monarchs seen as guardians of the frontiers, much so due to the war with Burma. As mentioned earlier; the pre- modern states of Southeast Asia were dependent on their effective reach to define their state power, population on the fringes thus became, in spite of being marginal, an important warning mechanism for invading forces. Nonetheless, in the formation of a Thai nation state in the late 19th century, their position changed (Laungaramsri, 2003:26). National border represents a base of state power and clearly defines who is in charge, thus the need for a frontier 'alarm-bell' becomes less important.

The contemporary situation represents a certain tension between upland and lowland populations, a tension that can be traced back to the Cold War era. During this period, Thailand was under considerable pressure from Western powers to suppress any communist factions and movements, as they were seen as an indispensable brick in the domino effect-theory. This called into question the issue of national security and how strong the effective power of the state was. A consensus reached by the National Security Council was that the

upland population posed a threat to security both in political, military, economic and socio-psychological aspects (Laungaramsri, 2003:32). Shifting cultivation and along with it migrant residential patterns was, together with opium cultivation, actually identified as the three main threats to national security posed by the upland population (Laungaramsri, 2003:32). These potential threats to national security became entangled in the hunt on communist insurgents and in turn augmented the narrative of the Chao Kao as a people in contrast to the dominant Thai. No doubt, communist insurgents resided in the mountainous region of Thailand; however it is imperative to not simplify this to being the same as an upland farmer. Political and military campaigns against insurgency in the mountains targeted mostly the Hmong population, not the Karen (Laungaramsri, 2003:33). Even so, one should not underestimate the traction the popular narrative had at the time, and it easily smoothed out characteristics that differentiated the two groups, the Karen, too, suffered negative repercussion during this period. The long history of the Karen residing and showing allegiance with their Thai valley neighbour was not forgotten, but ignored (Laungaramsri, 2003:34). The label Chao Kao prevailed over the Karen identity.

Today as well, popular narratives triumph over reality regarding upland population, however, it is not the fear of communist insurgency that poses a threat but the exploitation of natural resources in relation to the spread of commercial agriculture. The mountainous uplands make out the headwater of several major rivers which flows all the way down to the central part of Thailand (Kunstadter et al., 1978:24). The ecological conditions of the upland was brought into the public debate due to concern in loss of inflow behind the largest dam in Thailand, the Buhmibol Dam which interrupts the primary river system Chao Phraya (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:7). The Chao Phraya makes out the main water and electricity supply to the central region of the nation and changes in ecological reward from the dam has thus led to a widespread anxiety among the general public, the finger of blame being pointed at the upland cultivators for their apparently selfish exploitation of resources not theirs by right (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:7). Furthermore, large international environmental organisations have amplified and justified this notion through putting pressure on protecting forest and water resources against human interference (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:8). In their celebration of biodiversity, they do however detach human agency from the nature, perceiving it to be two opposite forces rather than elements of a symbiosis. In turn, this depicts extensive human interference with nature, e.g. commercial agriculture, as environmentally destructive.

The concerns of ecological conditions have led to extensive politicisation of environmental knowledge. Laungaramsri claims that the popular mainstream thinking in Thai public discourse today is that forest destruction and the concept of Chao Kao are adjuncts to each other. In 1998 alone, there were more than 20 cases reported by the forestry officials of people being charged as 'illegal encroachers', all of them identified as Chao Kao. Further, in 1999 a group of H'tin, also labelled as Chao Kao, of Nan province was threatened with arrest due to their destruction of the forest (Laungaramsri, 2003:21). These cases reflect the new policy that the centralised government has projected on the upland population, and it is an unfortunate development for all groups, including the Karen, who fall within this simplistic and generalised category. Not only does it create a scapegoat for the problems with forest and soil fertility recess, but it also distorts the image of Karen so that they become, for a large portion of the Thai population an abnormality and a nuisance to the otherwise allegedly harmonic status quo.

The assumption is that deforestation due to expanding commercial agriculture has led to a decline of water flow as forests makes out what is perceived to be the main rain-catchments. Walker and Forsyth criticise this idea for simplifying highly complex hydrological processes and for failing to recognise the political and social implications of how environmental knowledge is constructed and used instrumentally (Forsyth and Walker, 2008). Environmental knowledge takes the form of a narrative. An environmental narrative is depicted by Walker and Forsyth as; "[…] simplified explanations of environmental cause and effect that emerge in contexts where environmental knowledge and social order are mutually dependent." (2008:17). A typical narrative would go; *environmental destruction is caused by extensive commercial agriculture.* Many of the contemporary narratives are more aimed at getting support and at being universal, rather than actually targeting solutions (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:11). Environmental science is not politically neutral but can be a tool for politicisation of state space.

According to a widespread narrative regarding Karen lifestyle, they are forest dwellers and exist both in social and spatial distance from the Thai population. The narrative says that for Karen, environmental conservation comes natural, as subsistence farming is assumed to lie at the heart of the genuine Karen identity (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:73). Subsistence farming, as will be seen in chapter five and six, is without doubt central to the way the Karen perceive themselves. However, they do not necessarily place it in opposition to the

commercial sector. The public narrative in contemporary Thailand does however dictate that the authentic Karen livelihood is based on 'forest friendly' farming embedded in their culture and that this way of life has been externally corrupted by exposure to commercial agriculture and socio-economic transformation (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:76). In fact, it is the shifting agriculture, previously abolished, that is seen as the remedy for the extensive commercial exploitation. In turn this has led to the idea that a return to a more subsistence-oriented economy in the upland is the solution to contemporary resource issues (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:76). For me, and certainly for the many farmers in Ban Pha Kwao who are dependent on commercial agriculture for a necessary cash income, this idea would seem futile and detached from reality. It is an oversimplification; one can just as well claim that the solution to the world's CO2 emissions is for newly industrialised nations to retreat to an agrarian mode of production. Forsyth and Walker underscore that there is a need to examine the contemporary environmental narratives regarding upland/lowland agriculture in its commercial and subsistence oriented forms. Complex ecological processes are being reduced to simple *cause-effect* equations to attribute selectively environmental blame (Forsyth and Walker, 2008:86).

If we trace back the relationship between the Karen and the valley dwellers, or Thai, it is noticeable that they have for a long time been interdependent through the exchange of services between up and lowland villages. Today, too, a good relationship, at least in my own experience, exists between Ban Pha Kwao and the closest Thai village; Ban Sam Lang. People are aware of their differences, but during my field work, this never seemed to lead to any problems. There may be conflicts, but a good relationship between the groups continues, with an understanding of cultural and social differences (Laungaramsri, 2003:35). When taking the Cold War-era into consideration, I do not try to project an image of the upland - lowland dichotomy as two opposite forces, but to put forth why and when the status as Karen and Chao Kao becomes an issue. It is when the state space needs to be politicised that being Karen, Hmong or any other Chao Kao is turned into a topic of discussion and concern. Politicisation of the state space may emerge when the national security is perceived to be threatened, e.g. during the Cold War, or if vital resources are contested. Politicisation of the contemporary state space in Thailand to a certain degree revolves around the question of resource competition and environmental politics (Laungaramsri, 2003:35). The politicisation have simplified complex ethnic relations, adapting to a narrative that puts the upland population in the position as environmental destructive and in turn needs to be exposed to

governmental control. The Karen social identity is, as during the Cold War, again included in an upland population group, flattening out any peculiar differences, as a part of the narrative concerning environmental protection and resource management. Although the upland – lowland dichotomy is in a limited degree evident in inter-village relations, as when farmers from Ban Pha Kwao stops for a chat at the trading point close to Ban Sam Lang, it is mainly through politicisation of state space and enforcement of government polices that this distinction exists. Before going in to analysis of what it means to be Karen in contemporary Thailand another implication to their livelihood and identity must be taken into consideration. As the national state influence how upland population is characterised in the demographic landscape, I will discuss in the next chapter how the work of NGOs in the northern parts of Thailand have implications on how ethnic minorities negotiate their identity in interaction with each other and the Thai majority.

4 NGOs and Ethnic Identity

- NGOs in Chiang Mai -

The NGO environment in Chiang Mai city is a broad-based one and during my stay as a volunteer in the NGO, I gained an intimate understanding of how local NGOs talk and think about development and furthermore, I had the privilege of getting a close look at the important work they do. The numerous NGOs in Chiang Mai cover different aspects of the contemporary development discourse. While one group may focus on farming and climate change, another may be preoccupied with legal rights. However, most of the vast amount of umbrella-organisations, sister-organisations and independent organisations have one thing in common; the concern for ethnic minorities in Thailand. The organisation I worked for is made up of a regional network of ethnic minority communities across national borders in Southeast Asia. The network consists of both representatives from smaller activist groups and village communities. Their aim is to protect and promote distinct 'cultural' traits of ethnic groups through training local representatives in identifying their diverse features. In turn, this organisation works actively towards an increased recognition by the general population in Southeast Asia for the ethnic diversity in the region. The preservation of central values and traditions in ethnic groupings have become the focal point for many of the organisations in the later years, and concepts like Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and Indigenous People (IP) have become part of the mainstream NGO language culture. IK, which is a concept I will use to illustrate my point later in this chapter, refers to the idea of ethnic groups inhabiting knowledge of an object or phenomenon particular to their group.

The concept of IP is widely used in the NGO environment in Chiang Mai to describe an ethnic minority group. In Western academics the term 'indigenous', although contested, is used to narrate something that is old and primordial. In turn, this is often related to a group of

people who have lived in a region since ‘ancient-times’. However, in the Chiang Mai NGO context the term IP is often used regardless of how long a group may have resided in a region. My experience is that the NGOs in Chiang Mai perceive IP as a term that conveys an idea of ethnic groups as coherent and distinct from the majority group, represented in Thailand by the Thai.

IP and IK are concepts frequently used during NGO meetings and conferences to underline how important it is to recognise ethnic groups in Thailand as unique and as having their own particular cultural traits and customs. The overall goal for many of the NGOs is to advocate for the recognition of ethnic groups as an integral part of the population in Thailand, but still retaining their ethnic identity. A feature for most of the NGOs in Chiang Mai is that their staffs are entirely or partly made up of representatives for ethnic minorities. The organisation I worked in had representatives from three different ethnic groups working full time at the office. Another overall goal for most NGOs is to train and educate the next generation of representatives to continue the NGOs work either in an official organisational setting or on a community level. A large organisation who worked closely with the one I worked in hosted a small group of students with minority background in an attempt to transfer knowledge between communities and NGOs. This was, as far as I could understand, done through including the students in the NGOs activities as well as facilitating educational sessions on how to identify IK. Identifying IK was often done by interviewing elderly members of village communities and conducting field trips to investigate knowledge of e.g. farming practices.

The relation between NGOs and state is somewhat blurry. Government agencies do not interfere much with NGO activity other than acknowledging their work, but they do maintain the role as an authority regarding development discourse through being the main actor in drafting and implementation of policies on agricultural practices. Also, their position of authority is clear in that they vigorously enforce polices on forest conservation to regulate upland agriculture. However, government agencies and NGOs have in recent projects worked in a joint effort regarding land use and forest conservation. The government is not, in my experience, seen as an opposite to the work of NGOs by NGO workers and activists, but they do have a somewhat different view of the upland population. Concepts like IK is often used by NGOs to press the differences between ethnic groups in the uplands and, in my experience, have become a tool for countering views of the upland population as homogeneous and

backwards. The perspective of the upland population as a homogeneous group is typically represented by government agencies in an attempt to regulate land use. As should be clear from chapter three, the upland population is often depicted as a group of farmers who incidentally happened to occupy the mountainous region and their cultural traits and customs are rather seen as curiosities than important social processes. A more heterogeneous perspective is represented by such NGOs as the one I worked in. In this view the upland population represents a mosaic of different groupings with their own sophisticated way of life.

The link between NGOs in Chiang Mai and donor organisations, often Western, makes out the financial foundation for NGO activities. Without support from donor organisations, much of the work done by NGOs in Southeast Asia would not be possible. In the contemporary Western development discourse, environmental questions of global warming and forest reduction is paid much attention, something reflected in the policies of NGOs in Chiang Mai. I experienced that NGOs take much consideration to align with aims of Western donor organisations when applying for support. An organisation may have the preservation of knowledge of agricultural practices, e.g. shifting cultivation as an overall goal. Furthermore, the organisation may campaign for recognition of a practice as particular for a certain population group. If the development discourse shifts towards a focus on global warming and forest reduction, the organisation may have to adapt to this in order to obtain support. To do this the organisation could for example decide to emphasis the forest conservational aspects of shifting cultivation. The idea of bio-diversity protection being a natural side-effect of shifting cultivation has indeed gained traction in the NGO environment in Chiang Mai. A contrast to this idea is often the view held by government agencies in that the burning and clearing of forested areas are outright destructive to the environment. I claim that the Western focus in development discourse is to a certain degree reflected in how NGOs in Chiang Mai adjust their immediate objectives in order to obtain support. Still, I did not under any circumstances get the impression that an organisation ‘betrayed’ its original goal in order to get financial support.

- NGOs and Upland Communities -

The work of NGOs and the concepts they use affects upland communities in various ways. During a field trip, as a part of an IK workshop facilitated by the NGO I worked in, I observed first hand how concepts and ideas in the NGO environment are transferred to upland

communities[12]. Hauy Som Poey is one of many upland settlements targeted as a suitable community to take part in ongoing mapping projects, partly facilitated by NGOs in a joint effort with the local Ampur office. Together with a small group of people from the workshop, I met village representatives in the communal hall to discuss land usage in the area. The physical map is a colour coded representation of forest and land use in the adjunct cultivation areas to the village. The categories coded are; rotational plots, paddies, residential areas, conservation forest and forest used for foraging[13]. Hauy Som Poey is a relatively remote Karen village and one of few who still employ large scale rotational farming. One of the representatives present claimed that large cultivation areas in Hau Som Poey are left fallow up to 12 years before cleared and used again to grow dry rice or vegetables. Moreover, the colour coded areas are further divided in segments to represent different plots used by different households. Hau Som Poeys official border is clearly marked out on the map by a red line which dictates where the cultivation area for that village ends and another begin. Most of the farmers in Hau Som Poeye chose to take part in the project and register their land usage. Land rights here, as in Ban Pha Kwao, are uncertain, so the mapping project is first and foremost an attempt at registering what the land is used for based on data collected from local informants. Thus, the project can be seen as collaboration between NGOs and communities. The few farmers who did not take part in the project and did not have their land included in the map, one of the representatives explained, are typically the ones who are unsatisfied with the current land right policy pushed by the government. That is, restrictions on use and expansion at the cost of protected forest. They are in a certain degree excluded from the village community. However, the representative remarked, this is on their part and they are not perceived by the community as a lesser part of the village.

The physical map refers to a manifest kept in the community hall, so that any farmer in the village may examine which plots are used for what and where the borders of protected forest in contrast cultivated land is drawn. Borders between protected forests and cultivation land are, as I will show in chapter six, a prominent aspect of the life in Ban Pha Kwao. Furthermore, the map clearly shows which plot belongs to which household as each of the segments on the map has numbers referring to rights to use in the manifest. The map also

[12] Out of respect for the autonomy the NGO rightfully has of own research and activity, the recollections mentioned here and below are reconstructions from separate occasions. Furthermore, they convey my private opinion and not necessarily that of the NGO.

[13] This term refers to forest used for wild poultry hunting and the collection of herbs, berries or wild vegetables.

takes into account inheritance of land as the reference in the manifest is changeable through reporting to the Ampur office. However, this may represent a tiresome bureaucratic process.

A similar mapping project was initiated some time ago in Ban Pha Kwao. One of my informants, Didi, who also worked on the project claims that it was initiated to solve increasing conflicts with lowland farmers regarding resource usage. Prior to the mapping project, Didi argues, the resource usage in the mountains was vague and notoriously targeted by lowland farmers as cause to water shortages. Didi explained that the initiators of the project managed to gain support from the NGO environment and in turn financial support to do village surveys and consult satellite images. This enabled the group to draw up a complete map of the resource use in the area. Now this map is one of the main tools in negotiation with the government when conflicts over resources occur. Furthermore, the map has become an important point of reference when campaigning for clearer land rights. Didi maintain that the map is a mean of communication between the village and government agencies. As with the map in Hau Som Poey, all sections refer to a manifest which indicates usage rights. However, in contrast to Hau Som Poey, all farmers in Ban Pha Kwao are included in this map. The Karen identity is expressed through the map in the village being referred to as a Karen village rather than as an upland farming village. Furthermore, names of places and persons included in the map are stated both in Karen and Thai.

In an interview session with a NGO based in Chiang Mai, a representative, Panihaiar, explained that mapping projects in areas as Ban Pha Kwao and Hau Som Poeys is an attempt by the NGO milieu to advocate for recognition of land usage in the mountains. The contemporary project is perceived as a pilot project being the spearhead of an extensive demographic mapping of the uplands. Panihaiar claims that the mapping project was initiated as a response to the need of formalising resource use in the upland, and the project have gained extensive support from foreign countries. However, the Royal Forest Department has put some restrictions on funding for the project, claims Panihaiar. Panihaiar explains that collection of raw data for the project is based on community effort, and thus ensuring that local knowledge of resource management and land use is taken in consideration. In other words, the project takes what NGOs conceptualise as IK into account when drafting the map. Panihaiar holds that this project may be of major importance in the future as conflicts over resources between lowland and upland may become fiercer. Panihaiar pointed out that if local knowledge of resource management is included in the mapping project, this would be of great

aid in resolving conflicts between lowland and upland in that it would show that upland cultivation is not solely resource exploitative. An example of this is the inclusion of large scale rotational plots in Hau Som Poey.

An important feature of the map is that it employs a bureaucratic language easily comprehensible by government agencies as well as it conveys the idea of IK. The NGO I worked in acted as a consultant on the mapping project in Hau Som Poey, and maintained that they acted as a part in the project to ensure the transmission of IK into the map. The Regional Coordinator in the organisation and head of office claimed that in projects like the mapping project, many different level of communication operates at the same time. In such situations, he argued, it is essential that NGOs acts like mediators between different language cultures, e.g. the bureaucratic and generalising used in government agencies and the more locally determined used on a community level. Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain a digital copy of the map, as the NGOs working on the projects were reasonably reluctant to distribute them without consent from donor organisations and government agencies involved in the project.

I claim that the work of NGOs have implications to the villages of Ban Pha Kwao and Hau Som Poey in that the mapping project presents the upland community with a mean to negotiate with lowland farmers and government agencies. The upland farmers do not need to consult a map in order to know where their cultivation plots are, the map emerges as a tool in how the uplanders perceive themselves in relation to the lowlanders. The map formalises use of land and in turn legitimises the use of resources. The implication of this is that upland communities become more aware of their rights as active farmers and in turn change how they relate to lowland groups in certain ways. I maintain that the work of NGOs position farmers as a part of a larger context where upland ethnic labels are politicised to campaign for increased rights to land and resources. Through the NGO work, upland villages as Ban Pha Kwao become part of the ongoing upland – lowland political discourse. The issue often pressed by my informants is that government agencies and lowlanders do not understand the intricate farming processes in the upland and the great amount of IK involved. The solution to this explained to me by Bun, an active farmer in Ban Pha Kwao;

> "The government is generally negative to Karen ideas about solutions; it is difficult for the government to adopt Karen ideas because they do not fully understand the way Karen does farming"
>
> (Bun 2009, author's field notes)

Bun continues to say that;

> "If the government doesn't adapt, the future of this village (Ban Pha Kwao) is dark. It is the locals who know about management"
>
> (Bun 2009, author's field notes)

What Bun means is that local knowledge needs to be communicated to the agencies that draw up policies on agricultural development and resource management. I claim that the mapping project represent an initiative to convey information this way and in turn affect how the villagers perceive themselves in relation to other groups.

At another workshop facilitated by the NGO I worked in, the transfer of ideas and concepts between communities and NGO work was also apparent. The workshop was located at a hotel in Chiang Mai city and the participators represented various ethnic minority groups in Southeast Asia. Some of the participators represented village communities, while others represented other NGOs or action groups. The overall goal of the workshop was to train minority representatives in how to utilise their IK to further campaign for their rights and recognition as a distinct ethnic group. The representatives present were members of a network between ethnic groups across national borders. This network had for some time been working towards enhancing the capacity for members to advocate for ethnic identity recognition in their respective countries. The workshop was intended as a forum to share experiences and exchange ideas of ethnic identity questions. Throughout the workshop, the idea of 'collecting' IK through surveys and research and further conveying it to the general public was central. This was, as remarked by several of the participators, perceived to be an important aspect of how the various ethnic groups of Southeast Asia was to gain recognition as coherent and distinct groups. One of the tutors at the workshop further pointed out that IK can be difficult to understand for the wider public and government agencies, for that reason it is essential that ethnic communities are able to convey their knowledge in an understandable way through capable representatives.

An aspect of the workshop I find interesting is the interaction between various ethnic identities through common concepts like IK. Much of the workshop was based on representatives from the various ethnic groups, Karen included, working in teams to present their IK. This was done by schematically drawing up pointers of what could be identified as distinct cultural traits of their ethnic groups. Further, these traits were discussed concerning how they could be applied to promote IK for the group in question. The result was a kind of gallery with wall posters representing the various teams' effort. In the case of the Karen who

participated in the workshop, as representatives for a smaller NGO, the idea of transmission of IK was emphasised as an essential mean of promoting it. They presented a case where they had collaborated closely with three village elders to retrieve local knowledge of Karen dance and music. This was done through conducting several field trips with the intent to train village elders in how to transfer knowledge to younger generations. The ethnic identity each group represented was clearly conveyed through physically labelling the wall posters according to what group it represented. Furthermore, the participants as representatives for ethnic groups were highlighted through presentation of dances and music particular to the ethnic group in question. Although differentiated in this way, the groups were also connected through the notion as commonly marginalised from the wider society and fighting a common battle for recognition. This was evident in how constant pressure was put on the importance of ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia to 'stick together' and share experiences across national and ethnic borders.

An implication to the upland communities due to the transfer of NGO concepts is how particular traits in an ethnic group may take on a higher degree of importance. At the workshop mentioned above, such traits were put forth as distinctive features of a group that was essential to embrace in order to maintain an ethnic identity. When talking to an elderly lady in Ban Pha Kwao, Pen, concerning Karen clothing, she claimed that the traditional weaved shirts is a significant symbol for Karen identity. However, in the recent years the interest in learning the weaving skills had declined and few young members of the community knew the intricate patterns and colour combinations today. After learning of the importance of IK through a NGO initiative, she had taken on teaching simple weaving techniques at the child centre every Friday, hoping to rejuvenate the tradition.

The NGO focus on IK also manifested in an organic farming group in Ban Pha Kwao. Lapho's brother, Dipho, is a part of a farming group who campaign for using local flora to substitute potentially dangerous chemicals in protecting the crops from rodents and insects. This group published in cooperation with other institutions (the Catholic Church has been the main financial donor to this program) a pamphlet where it was described in what way herbs and plants could be used in farming. One strategy that was promoted in the pamphlet was to plant trees in the garden, a normal practise in the earlier rotational plots, to naturally restore the soils nitrogen level. Another technique was to plant certain herbs mixed with the crops to both ward off insects and enhance the quality of the produce. These techniques had, as the

pamphlet stated, been in use by Karen farmers for a long time and was a part of their IK. The pamphlet used local knowledge in combination with NGO concepts to create a curriculum for how the Karen may utilise their indigenous knowledge to promote sustainable development. As Dipho told me, the farming group wanted to use Karen knowledge of the environment and apply it to farming. However, as he admitted, this idea is not potent for now. It is too little general interest in Ban Pha Kwao for this practice to take hold and people would continue to use chemicals until a better way becomes popular.

Another organic farming group case also serves as an illustration of how NGO work affect village life in Ban Pha Kwao. Jorthaworn grow red onion and cabbage on two separate garden plots, each one of 1 Rai, and rice for household consumption on paddy fields. Also, he grows a small amount of vegetables on a separate plot for own consumption through an organic farming group founded on a NGO initiative. This group has as an overall goal to substitute potentially dangerous chemical fertilisers with organic based ones, e.g. buffalo/cattle manure or other nitrogen rich substances. Jorthaworn states that he applies a fertiliser 'recipe' which is founded upon Karen traditional cultivation knowledge. This 'recipe' contains a special bacterial culture, leaf from the local trees and buffalo/cattle manure and droppings from poultry. This fertiliser is, Jorthaworn claims, applied to the fields in various stages. However, at the moment the fertiliser is only applied to a very small vegetable plot which is a part of the project and produces a minimal crop for own consumption. Jorthaworn explains that for his commercial plots, he still applies chemical fertiliser as his revenue on these crops is dependent on a certain quality. Also, Jorthaworn claims that chemical fertilisers makes the crops grow faster than the organic. This enables him to produce more than one crop each year and be competitive on the commercial market. Still, he hopes that if the NGO initiative proves more successful in the future, more farmers may employ this knowledge in favour to chemicals.

Local knowledge and initiative in farming practise is highly valued by many farmers in Ban Pha Kwao, among them Lapho. This was clearly evident in a seminar held in the communal hall facilitated by a representative for a large Chiang Mai based NGO. The theme of the seminar was how local farmers could take initiative in securing soil fertility and sustainable resource use. The participators were either independent farmers or representatives from organic farming groups. The seminar started out with a session where the participators both shared experience from farming and discussed how they could show initiative to improve

conditions of farming in Ban Pha Kwao. Great emphasis was put on the notion that it was the upland farmers who was most skilled in upland cultivation and thus had the necessary means of managing the resources in a sustainable way. After this session the participants were transported by pick-up to a garden plot approximately 3 Km away to observe alternative crops and cultivation methods. As far as I could understand, though I never obtained a clear answer to this, the plot was used by a joint NGO – farming group to try out new cultivation techniques. The NGO facilitator explained to the farmers about the qualities and advantages of the various crops planted on the plot. Some of the crops planted were coffee bushes, decorative flowers and small fruit bearing trees. After the tour the group was gathered to furthermore discuss farming practices and enjoy a meal at one of the participators household.

Projects like the organic farming groups presents us with an interesting implication to the farming practise in Ban Pha Kwao. Through the organic farming group and such seminars as the one mentioned above; a consensus is established on the potential dangers of using chemicals and the importance of local knowledge and initiative. The idea is that many of the health problems seen in contemporary upland farming communities can be avoided if local knowledge of organic fertilisers and pesticides is applied to cash crop production. However, as seen in the foregoing examples, the practise of organic farming is not yet competitive in villages as Ban Pha Kwao. I claim that in employing IK, as conceptualised by NGOs, Karen farmers creates a certain distance between their ethnic identity and commercial production. The knowledge of local herbs and fertilizers is seen as an integral part of their identity and distinctiveness. However, this knowledge is not easily applied to the commercial farming. As Jorthaworn states; cash crops is dependent on rapid growth, through chemical fertilizers, in order to make it economically feasible to produce them.

I argue that particular traits for ethnic groups, as distinct clothing or knowledge of cultivation practices, have become important in self-identification through the work of NGOs, as it represents the villagers in a context beyond that of the immediate village community. It represents them as one of many distinctive groups in Southeast Asia and thus politicises their identity. I do however not claim that transferring cultural heritage or being aware of IK is a new phenomenon due to the work of NGOs, but that ethnic groups, as the Karen of Ban Pha Kwao, use the concepts introduced by NGOs to communicate practices and activities they see as a mark of their identity.

The transmission of concepts is vital to understand how NGOs talk about the Karen, and in turn how the Karen perceives themselves in certain situations. Through influence from both Eastern and Western academic discourse and from international development agencies certain concepts like IK are picked up by local NGOs and put into context. The core meaning of the concepts is easily transmitted, but as the world is not a homogeneous place, they may be used in ways to fit in to the local context. I argue that the NGO environment in Chiang Mai adopt and construct certain concepts to build a bridge between the heterogeneity encountered when dealing with the ethnic minorities of Southeast Asia and the somewhat more homogeneous view shared by multilateral organisations and governmental agencies. Government agencies in Thailand especially often attempt to depict the upland population as one collective group, enabling them to draw up generalised policies for forest conservation and cultivation practices. Adapting to such generalised mode of thinking, as with the concept mentioned above, allows for communications between ethnic groups, NGOs and government agencies. Though, as I experienced working for a NGO what the concepts conveys may depend on who is using it. One person may perceive IK to be equal to 'backwards', while another may see it to be equal to 'distinctive'. Nevertheless, this bridge is a necessary one for the flow of information between different levels in the development discourse milieu.

I claim that as a result of this bridge of communication, NGOs is in some instances found to press the same goals and ideas as state agencies. Although NGOs has a certain different view of how the upland population is to be perceived, as distinct ethnic groups rather than collected in the label Chao Kao*,* initiatives like the mapping project clearly carries with it a need to control and register upland cultivation. Although the inclusion of local knowledge and identity is attempted in the mapping project it still acts mainly as a registration of upland resource use. The intent of this, as stated above, is to advocate for the rights of Karen in conflicts with lowland farmers. However, it is hard to ignore that this plays on the already established upland – lowland dichotomy established by government attempts to politicise state space.

5 Being Karen

The historical aspect of what it means to be Karen is not a subject easily described in few words, the quanta of literature on the topic serves as an indication of the vast different analytical approaches one may take, as well as of the myriad of issues one can study within the context. Still, I have attempted in the foregoing chapter to give an indication as to how important the role of the Thai national state and NGOs are and has been in construction of ethnic labels to classify and politicise state space. In this chapter I want to narrow this rather general and broad view to focus on the contemporary social life in my fieldwork village, Ban Pha Kwao.

For the Karen of Ban Pha Kwao the discussion of whether or not they are an integral part of the Thai society is more of an abstract backdrop in their community than a point of concern. One can discuss at length whether concepts used to describe the upland people is politically correct, and one can argue ever so hard who's the rightful receiver of such and such quanta of resources, but in the end; the rice needs to be planted and the family fed. This was the feeling I often got when taking part in the daily life of Karen farmers. Yes, it is an important discussion going on in contemporary Thailand, one that can ensure more rights to indigenous groups and promote acceptance in the general Thai population, but for my informants being Karen first of all was anchored in the daily chores of maintaining a livelihood.

In this chapter I want to put forth the idea that certain bases of values exist for the Karen in agriculture, especially so in rice, elevating it beyond that of mere nutritional substance. The value of rice is entangled in the complex realm of identity and self preservation that have implications to agricultural production in the village. As will be seen,

this thwarts any attempt to see the agricultural system of Ban Pha Kwao as simple means of production. Firstly I will present the reader with the notion of how rice share an intimate relationship with the household and drawing on the theories of Ohnuki- Tierney to illustrate how food often plays an essential role in how people perceive themselves. Furthermore, I want to exemplify the value of rice through a case study where rice served as a major link between a great numbers of participants, drawing on the renowned theories on dominant symbols by Turner. Maintaining an idea of dominant symbols among the Karen, I continue to present the theories of Gudeman to point out how rice as a dominant symbol also makes out a component in what Gudeman conceptualise as a *Common.*

- The Household and the Value of Rice -

Farming is not only an important physical feature of Karen way of life, some of my elderly informants claimed that in certain instances, farming was represented the very essence of being Karen. From my own experience, this is evident in how the whole village seemed to be both physically and symbolically organised around cultivation of land. The ox head, of water buffalo or cattle, nailed to the house entrance or granary serves as a case in point. The water buffalo, although replaced with mini-tractors in the contemporary context, is the mark of hard labour and working the soil. Traditionally, most household were part or whole owners of a buffalo using it to till the soil in rice fields or other tasks that needed the sturdiness and stamina that has come to characterise the water buffalo throughout the world. Although still in use today, buffaloes have by and large been replaced by the monotone humming of mini tractors in the fields. Still, the water buffalo heads is put forth as an emblem of the household, making the statement that the members of this home work hard and are provide sufficient rice. Agriculture is for the Karen a condition for maintaining a sustainable household and in turn a necessity for the continuous Karen lifestyle.

Rice is beyond any doubt a fundamental contribution to the Karen diet. It is always a part of the meal, and a meal is not considered a proper one if rice is absent. The Karen word for eating, *au-me,* can be translated to eat-rice. Thus, rice of course is prominent in the Karen agricultural practice. I want to note however that this is not particular to Karen, for the majority of Southeast Asian population groups; contemporary or pre-modern, rice holds a central place in the diet. The Thai word for eating, *gin-kow,* translates to eat-rice as well.

Rice is exclusively grown on irrigated paddy fields in present-day Ban Pha Kwao, but I was told that prior to the abolishment of large scale rotational farming; dry rice was grown on rain fed garden plots. Furthermore, in more remote Karen villages, such as Hau Som Poey mentioned in chapter four, dry-rice is still grown solely on garden plots or in combination with paddies. As stated in the first chapter, paddies are located at the bottom of the many smaller and bigger valleys in the area. Most of the paddies are left to bake in the sun during dry season; with water buffaloes grazing on the robust vegetation and supplying the soil with manure. Every household is more or less self-sufficient in rice production and store rice for planting next year themselves. However, a household may suffer a particular low yield one year or have stored rice infected. In the contemporary Ban Pha Kwao, this problem can be solved by making a withdrawal from the local Ricebank. The Ricebank is an institutionalised granary where one may make deposits or withdrawal according to needs. The granary is audited by a local committee who documents transfers. Also, previously to the establishment of this bank, it was not uncommon that farmers with a surplus donated rice directly to less fortunate households, especially within close family relations.

Ohnuki-Tierney debates in her dissertation, *Rice as Self,* how rice as a symbol inhabits a central value in the Japanese society. She holds that food plays a vibrant role in the way people think about themselves and organise their surroundings (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993:4). Food may be a part of the way one community differs themselves from another, not only through the food itself but also the broader cuisine culture. The materialisation of 'ethnic food' outlets in metropolitan areas may serve as a case in point. Food denotes an assumption both of how people live and how they place themselves in relation to others (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993:4). It is the value embedded in the food that dictates distinction, not the food itself. Food becomes a symbol of identity. The symbolic or metaphoric value of food is not necessarily a conscious experience on the community's behalf, but often comes to life in an abstract concept derived from those who interpret it, e.g. social anthropologists (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993:5). In Japan, food acts as a symbol in two senses; (i) in the way it holds a dominant precedence in the community and (ii) how it serves as a projection of base values in it (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993:5). According to Ohnuki- Tierney, a link is drawn from the growth of rice to the growth of the human body (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993:56). Rice is seen as inhabiting a certain energy fundamental in Japan cosmology in relation to reproduction and growth. Rice is seen as inhabiting divine power from deities, actually occupying its own soul, harnessed

through consumption (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993:45). Consuming rice thus acts as replenishing positive energy and in turn rejuvenates the human body (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993:55). This, Ohnuki–Tierney claims, facilitate in turn a reproduction of the Japanese collective self, celebrating key cosmological elements that is known throughout the Japanese society (1993:57). Rice then plays the role of an object in which ideas and beliefs of the collective society are inscribed and in turn elevate rice to become more than a part of the diet. In turn, rice is actively produced, as this is seen as a cornerstone in the maintenance of the Japanese society. Without it, the society would not be able to rejuvenate.

Rice is, for the Karen as for so many other agrarian population groups in Southeast Asia, a necessity for sustaining a functional household. To understand the importance of rice for the Karen, it must be seen in its intimate relation to the household as this is in most cases the basic consumption and production unit. The Karen household is a strong social unit and almost all affairs are referred to as actions taken by the members of the household rather than individual persons. The borders may seem somewhat fluid as persons of various affiliations move in and out of the household, also occasionally sharing meals. Still, in my own experience; there are never any uncertainties of who belongs to which household. On several occasions I acted as an English teacher for a small group of children. After the session I was usually invited to share a meal in the household where the classes were held. This meal was often accompanied by several people of unknown affiliation as many were curious of why I was living in the village. All who accepted would receive a plate of rice or be invited to share from the larger common plate. As far as I know, there was no distinction of who were allowed to eat from the common plate or received a plate of their own. Also, a small china cup used to drink rice-wine from passed seemingly random between the men present. Although it would indeed be difficult so separate household members from guests if not the present affiliations already were known to the observer, small signs of who were included in the household could be noticed. Firstly, the wife of the household clearly exercised her host position by constantly replenishing the rice in the common plate, stirring the hearth and making sure everyone gets a taste from the various dishes presented. Secondly, the husband exercised a position of authority in greeting and accepting guests into the house and showing them to a free space on the bamboo mat. Furthermore, it was usually the husband that time and again filled up the china cup that was passed around and also distributed tobacco to the male guests. Never did I experience Karen women enjoy alcohol or tobacco. However, the elderly women frequently

enjoyed betel leafs. The children living in the household also acted as hosts in brining around dishes and clearing away the food when the meal was finished. I hold that though meals are shared on several occasions, the host role exercised by household members clearly shows who is included in that household.

The household is the central unit for the nucleus family. Surrounding areas such as school, farming plots and the market are extensions on which the household operates and ensure support to the home. Supporting a satisfactory livelihood for the household depend in the first instance on a sufficient supply of rice. If the rice production fails to feed the household, it can not longer operate as a fully functional social unit. Thus rice becomes the foundation of the household, as the household in turn is the foundation of a sustainable Karen society. To my knowledge, there were no households in Ban Pha Kwao who failed to meet the demands for rice. It had however happened in the past, and I was informed that the community had a responsibility to help such unfortunate households out with rice. As I will discuss shortly, this is institutionalised in the Catholic ceremony of the Rice Merit.

Time and again rice was depicted as the backbone of Karen society when discussing the effects of commercial agriculture with my informants. In an interview with the political elite of Ban Mai, a Karen village not more than three our drive north from Ban Pha Kwao, the village's production of commercial crops and market connection was discussed at length. The partakers clearly voiced a notion of differentiation between rice and commercial crops in that they claimed that the village had in a certain degree mitigated many of the negative effect of commercialisation through a stern leadership that promoted the value in rice. The village Pujaban, also present during the interview, expressed this idea by saying;

> "Rice is the source of life, while growing for the market is a source of improving life"
>
> (Ban Mai Pujaban 2009, author's field notes)

This view on rice was not in any way particular to Ban Mai, through several interviews in Ban Pha Kwao I became aware of the same perception. Especially one of my main informants in Ban Pha Kwao, Bun, made a point out of commenting on how the contemporary young generations was loosing focus on the importance of rice. As many of the younger farmers continuously strive to accumulate more cash, the values of rice is not forgotten but falls in the shadow of a constant pressure to produce commercial crops. Bun claim that one of the most

marked results of this is that it is more common today to hire or sell labour than organise work exchange arrangements, especially so during harvest and planting of red onion or cabbage. However, this is mainly practised in the commercial realm, not in rice cultivation.

It should be obvious that rice stands out as a strong symbol in Karen society, a symbol that is close to omnipresent in that it is both a central physical object as well as an abstract idea of self perception. I maintain that rice as a symbol, although unquestionably central in the Karen way of life for a long time, has gained more value in the last decades adaptation to commercial agriculture. Also, the work of NGOs has contributed to an awareness of what constitutes an ethnic identity, something that supports the notion of rice as fundamental to Karen way of life. In his renowned dissertation on symbols, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors,* Turner states that; symbols are not static cognitive signs, but dynamic entities in that they are affected by shifts in paradigms and is adjusted to alterations throughout the society (1974:96). Due to constant interaction between actors; symbols, representing the identity of a community, is fluid and may change form and base of value over time. Turner holds that certain symbols in rituals and the wider society may be seen as dominant (1967). A dominant symbol appears in many different ritual contexts and would sometimes preside over the whole process as well as certain phases. Further, such a symbol would contain a high degree of sovereignty and dictates fundamental pillars of the society which is projected through ritual process. As the symbol puts forth central values it often overshadows smaller variations. In a ritual process, a dominant symbol may act as a uniting force, mitigating disparate meanings and differences (Turner, 1967:31). I argue that the Karen ceremony of Rice Merit, facilitated by the Catholic Church would represent such an occurrence.

The Rice Merit, Ngahn Khao in Thai, is a Catholic ceremony held annually in larger Karen settlements, often changing village each time. The main facilitator is the Catholic Church in a joint effort with the local village council. Also, there is no lack of volunteers to help organise the event. I am obliged to mention that even though it is a Catholic ceremony, it is an event open to anyone who wants to join. It is the value of rice and community that is in focus, not religious persuasion. The ceremony was established some 20 years ago as a result of an initiative by a young and well-liked priest. I was told that this priest wanted to combat the contemporary trend of valley Thai merchants capitalising on surplus rice in the villages. Surplus rice flowed away from the village and in turn jeopardising the livelihood for any household who had their rice-crop impaired in some way. Due to the increasing outside

pressure on consumer goods, traditional values in rice was in the danger of being lost, so the priest started a campaign which focused on the rice as a symbol for life and unity. Furthermore, the priest pressed that surplus rice should be donated to less fortunate household as all Karen are family and obliged to help each other in times of need. Although, I was told, this was not an entirely new idea, as rice had prior to the consumer pressure, been in some degree retained from commercial purpose. The priest was able to institutionalise the value of rice in such a way that it spoke to a broad base of spectators. He created a forum that celebrated rice in relation to Karen identity. It was this priest, with the backing of the Catholic Church, who established what today makes out one of the main annual events and point of congregation for the Karen in the region. One of the main deeds in the ceremony today is donation of rice to less fortunate households, made by farmers with a certain surplus. The appropriate amount to donate is loosely estimated by the size and production capacity of the farmer's paddies. I can mention that Lapho donated one bag of rice.

Before I go into an analytical approach, I want to describe the Rice Merit held at Ban Mai in March during my field work. The ceremony was initiated by a gathering outside the local communal hall where the participator formed a procession loosely organised according to gender and age. Most participators wore their traditional dresses, especially so for the women. The children made out the point of the line-up, girls clearly separated from the boys crimson red shirts with their brilliant white dresses embroiled with intricate cherry pink and green patterns. Further, most of the young girls also wore the traditional head cloth, usually just worn by older women. In front, the children carried a banner with slogans paying tribute to the Rice Merit. The writing on the banner spelled; "Lets promote the 20th Rice Merit" and furthermore "For supporting community activity and the poor". Behind that was a somewhat more elaborate bamboo standard carried by four men. The main piece of the standard was appropriately made out of three baskets often used to dry rice in. The baskets were arranged in a sort of triangular shape. Furthermore, the baskets had emblems and Thai writing painted on them. The top baskets emblem depicted two rice stems cresting a lit candlelight and a man and a woman. The writing on this basked stated that; "Rice Merit is the connection between tasty rice and good people" and "Rice is virtue". The lower right baskets symbol depicted a dying man and stated that "competition is death". The lower left baskets symbol was a circular figure, depicting the cycle of life. It stated that "cooperation is life". A third banner coming up behind the standard paid respect to what is considered as the nine virtues of rice, or

as it is recognised throughout Thailand; the nine rice seeds of life. I will not go into detail of all the nine virtues, but it is important to mention that they refers to pillars of fundamental value in the wider society of Thailand, not necessarily particular to any ethnic identity. The first virtue, *Rice for Family,* dictates the importance of supporting a household with rice. The seventh, *Rice for Guest,* dictates the importance of caring for ones affiliations and relatives and the ninth, *Making Merit to the Temple,* dictates that one should strive to sustain an ideal society with compassion and kindness. This banner may not directly celebrate Karen identity, but it is still worth mentioning as it celebrates how fundamental rice is for the society. Directly behind this banner followed a smaller bamboo standard carried by two men. The main piece was a large earthenware bowl of rice nicely decorated with flowers.

The majority of the participators were farmers living in Ban Mai, Ban Pha Kwao or other villages in the area. Still, some of the participants had arrived the previous day or same morning from valley cities to join. These were, as far as I know, Karen with some affiliations in the village who at one point had moved to the city. They clearly stood out of the crowd, carrying hand-held cam recorders as well as wearing long sleeved cotton shirts and suit pants under their traditional Karen shirt. They did however, in my experience, not command any excessive authority over the local participants.

After some deliberation the procession was initiated and marched, accompanied by more or less coherent singing and drum beats, the couple of hundred meters to the Church compound where it dissolved and the participators arranged themselves as spectators surrounding a makeshift stage. The stage was decorated in with emblems and writings similar to those found on the mentioned standard. Also, the backdrop depicted a traditional Karen compound in front of a lush valley of paddy fields. In front of the stage, bags of rice donated to the church by farmers were piled up in a neat display. After the Bishop had officially opened the annual Rice Merit, symbolised by striking a brass gong, various speeches was held both by local politicians and Church representatives. Although I had lost my translator in all the commotion, I was later able to extract the main point of the speeches through conversations with participants. In general, the speeches addressed the contemporary situation of Karen. They highlighted how it is important to retain a sense of ethnic identity in a time of pressing influence from the Thai, but at the same time remember that they are also a part of the national population. What made Karen a Karen was addressed and the ability to live of the land and take pride in supporting a family with rice was portrayed as a situation all Karen

should strive to maintain. There was no denying that commercial produce was an important aspect, however, it is rice that feeds the family.

The speeches were followed by a dance performance set up by local children, most likely facilitated by the local primary/secondary school. First, the children carried out a performance depicting the production cycle of rice, accompanied by brass gongs and other rhythmical instruments. The act illustrated the agricultural production cycle of rice, including the planting of seedlings and preparations of paddy fields. The Karen household was also depicted in the act by a young girl carrying a doll in her arms and a young boy carrying a hoe on his shoulder, both dressed in farmers outfit for the occasion. This performance was followed by the traditional bamboo dance, which is recognisable for so many population groups throughout Southeast Asia. Eight long bamboo poles formed a mesh of squares on the ground which were closed and opened to the beat of drums and gongs. The children, seemingly without regard of the safety of their ankles, leaped from one square to the next in beautiful synchronous movements. Even when the elder men, playing the rhythmic instruments, teasingly increased the beat, they barely showed anxiety.

After the children's display, the participants moved to the larger area outside the Church compound where a communal dinner had been set up. The dinner served was pork stew with glutinous and regular rice. At this dinner I met several people who had come from my fieldwork village, Bann Pha Kwao, to partake in the ceremony. As the food was served I joined several conversations and, even though again hampered by my language skills, I got the impression that for many, this was a chance to catch up on the latest news and cross village relations. Also, the local clergy and a priest who had come from Ban Pha Kwao spend some time talking to the other villagers during dinner. I was also fortunate enough to be invited back to a household, which had some unknown affiliation to Bun and Lapho, to enjoy some rice wine and rest before heading back to Ban Pha Kwao.

I maintain that throughout the Rice Merit, fundamental Karen values are communicated that embodies the identity of being Karen. In the beginning of the ceremony, rice is celebrated in the progression by emblems and slogans. The importance of rice and its relation to Karen way of life is further promoted through speeches addressing contemporary issues for the Karen population and how they should take pride in their identity. These speeches did not address a particular village, but the Karen as a coherent ethnic group, transcending geographical borders and inter-village differences. Rice is put forth as a uniting

factor that links all Karen together in one big family, also conveying the obligations and duties one has to the household, marked by farmers with surplus rice donating it to less fortunate households through the Church. The children dance, depicting the production cycle of rice, may appear in the first instance as a simple school display. However, it reflects how rice is of great concern for the Karen in the way that rice production is depicted as central to village life. The performance is a source of entertainment as well as it conveys an important message; a Karen household must produce rice to feed its members. As Bun explained to me on another occasion; no matter how poor a family is, they can always survive if they have rice. Although commercial agriculture is acknowledged as making out the economic backbone of the society, rice is put forth as central for sustaining a livelihood. Rice is by no means a particular to Karen way of life, but it is what it symbolises that is important, how it is elevated far beyond a nutritional contribution to a cherished icon of Karen moral and identity. I hold that rice in this instance makes out what Turner conceptualises as a dominant symbol, as it represents the axiom of how Karen perceive themselves. Furthermore, rice is clearly central in the majority of activities in Karen lifestyle, expressed in language, daily chores and ceremonies as the Rice Merit. To analyse the values of rice further, we now turn to Gudeman's theories regarding Commons.

- Sharing a common base -

Rice is something all Karen share a connection to, at least at a certain level. In the agrarian Karen life the connection can be seen in the consumption of rice as a staple food, in the everyday talk about the paddy fields, the constant worry about sufficient downfall of rain and the health of the rice seedlings. However, the connection is not only limited to the rural life. Through the work of NGOs, traits of the Karen identity has become part of the development discourse, with focus on preservation of their IK, as discussed in chapter four. My informants claimed that all Karen, regardless of geographical location or social status is connected to rice through the identity as Karen. I hold that Karen shares a common value in relation to their identity, and in this value central aspect of the Karen life, as rice, is anchored and maintained. The shared value becomes a point of reference that the Karen relates to in dealings with each other, other upland people, the Thai or other groupings. A shared value is, according to Gudeman’s view; a common understanding, conscious or not, within a group that there exists

aspects of their life that binds them together and represents them in interaction with other groupings (Gudeman, 2001).

When discussing the topic of the relation between the lowlands and the uplands, my informants often referred to the rich culture of Karen in the area, highlighting their ethnic identity. They often talked about the Karen identity in general, encompassing the whole 'family' and their constant struggle for a sustainable livelihood. As Lapho had previously worked in a refugee camp close to the Burma border, the struggle of Karen refugees surfaced more than once in conversations about the Karen situation in Thailand. Although few of the inhabitants of Ban Pha Kwao even had been to the borderlands, many clearly felt that they had moral obligations to support the refugees. However, when the discussion was concentrated on the topic of commercial agriculture, they often referred to themselves as upland farmers instead of Karen. Bun explained to me on one occasion when discussing the changes in Ban Pha Kwao due to commercial agriculture, that in recent years the farmers have to learn to see the world in a different view. He holds that one of the effects the increasing market oriented production have had on the village is that the farmer now have to see themselves in a business like manner as their way of life is highly sensitive to fluctuations in market prices. In the past, claims Bun, the people of Ban Pha Kwao were simply supporting their households, but now they depend on the lowland economy. Bun goes on to state that the contemporary Ban Pha Kwao is flooded by cheap commercial goods at the cost of important Karen traditions. The commercialisation relates to an increase in the need for cash, rather than the Karen identity.

As Fredrik Barth argues in his renowned introduction to Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, an ethnic group will use their identity to organise themselves when in interaction with another group (1969:13). Further Barth argues that the ethnic categories provides a vessel for organisation into groups, the factors that determine the nature of the organisation may differ according to situation and what the actor find significant (1969:14). When interaction occurs in the context of commercial purpose, my experience is that the farmers of Ban Pha Kwao play down their identity as Karen and take on the broader role as an upland farmer. They organise the situation as an interaction between the low- and upland farmers rather than between Thai and Karen. The reason for this can be linked to the general idea that the commercial agriculture is not a part of the Karen traditional identity. The farmers do not relate the purpose of the interaction to the Karen identity, and the situation is thus organised

as an interaction between farmers of different geographical location. However, there are certain traits or aspects of a community's social life that may be referred to when an individual, or a group for that, wants to represent their membership to the community in question. This trait is something that all members of the group have a connection to and creates borders to who may be included.

Gudeman consider this phenomenon in his publication; The Anthropology of Economy (2001). Gudeman has conducted extensive research on economic dynamics in Central America and through his studies discovered that a group of people who share an identity create and inhabit a *Common* (2001:27). Gudeman explain the Commons as a shared value of an object, which in turn creates the community around it. However, he also claims that it is the society itself that makes out the premises for a Common to emerge. The society creates a framework for shared value and belief. "Without commons there can be no community, without community there can be no commons" claims Gudeman (2001:27). The Commons can refer to anything that contributes to the material and the social continuity of the people who share this value and identify themselves with it (Gudeman, 2001:27). Further Gudeman contrasts himself to the way economists and political scientists use the term. For them the Commons is a real property and an accessible market good, and the actors in this environment agree on a Common to take part in a limited economic community. Gudeman argues that this removes the subject from the object and renders the social life as a mere tool for self-interest. For Gudeman the Common is not the isolated object, but the fact that it is shared (2001:27). The object is not necessarily a physical one, as implied by market economical language. It can also be knowledge of a ritual or a certain form of education (Gudeman, 2001:27). On the other hand; it can in fact be related to a physical one, for example rice. The Common exists in the sharing of such an object, not in the object itself. Further Gudeman claims Commons to act like support beams in the society in saying that taking away the Commons would be disruptive and destructive to the community; likewise, destroying the social relations within a community would demolish the Commons. The Commons can also be an alienating force, excluding certain people who do not share the base of the community (Gudeman, 2001:27).

When the Common is constructed, according to Gudeman, it is modelled as a part of community itself. The Common is a part of society, not a separate mechanically driven object (Gudeman, 2001:34). Furthermore, a constructed Common may be projected as means to

itself. Gudeman claims that in relation to agriculture, the Common is a mean to sustain a livelihood. The Common becomes an instrumental practice (Gudeman, 2001:36). Still, community value and ideas are often projected on to the Common so that it appears to be a mean to and end in itself. The instrumental action is veiled. This is not to say that social value is not a means to itself, neither a claim that a society has a 'hidden agenda', but that society projects their value on to practices and in turn reproduce Commons and ensure the continuity of the community. It is an act of self-preservation. Gudeman argues that the cultural models of Commons often are based on immediate experience (2001:36). Communities draw on family metaphors, the human body and the house to construct Commons. The environment may be described as something protected/haunted by spirits of ancestral mothers and fathers, and to ensure good crops it may be necessary to sacrifice or pray to this ancestor (Gudeman, 2001:34). Gudeman illustrates this idea through an example from the Nayaka people. For them the environment is a parent. It provides them with food and gives without constraints to their children, which is the living people themselves. They view themselves as all siblings and a part of a common household. However, this model only applies to the Nayaka. Because of their relation to the environment, exploitation of its resources is the same as disrespecting your father and mother. The Nayaka view on capitalising on the environment, in the form of plantations, thus becomes alien and strange. The Nayaka Common takes on a new meaning when encountering another value system. It becomes an important identity marker that clearly separates the Nayaka from the plantation owners and traders (Gudeman, 2001)

In agrarian societies, the Commons can be strongly marked in its connection to subsistence production. Gudeman claims that being self-sufficient help to create and maintain Commons (Gudeman, 2001). He explains that in the case of non reproducible goods, as heirlooms, self-sufficiency entails keeping this Common for oneself. In the case of reproducible goods, as crops, a loop in production may be created to retain certain produce from the market and channel it into consumption (Gudeman, 2001:43). The loop will go; *production → consumption → production,* rather than *production → market → investment →production.* Being a self-sufficient group marks borders and project the independence of a group (Gudeman, 2001). The separation of subsistence from the commercial agriculture among Karen will be discussed in detail later, but for now the idea above is sufficient. Being self-sufficient poses the question of why a group should trade. Economists attach the issue to the notion that trade lowers risk and secures needed resources, in other words; the rational

man. An anthropological analysis could show that trade established necessary bonds to keep peace pacts and express closeness (Gudeman, 2001). However, I share Gudeman view in that he sees communities as product of social frameworks that "[…] yield a measurement of certainty but produce boundaries that represent possibilities to explore and transcend" (Gudeman, 2001:44). A community would make and remake what it has, and at the same time be sensitive to outside impulses. The villagers of Ban Pha Kwao continuously reproduce the value of rice through such rituals as Rice Merit, however they also adapts a commercialised way of life from the lowlands.

For Gudeman the Common provide the foundation of a self-sufficient community. This he illustrate through an example from the Kekchi Mayas of southern Belize, where a meal is only considered a meal if it contains corn (Gudeman, 2001:44). Among the Kekchi corn is highly respected. A household's quantity of corn is seen in direct relation to its wealth and security. Gudeman explain that even though a man may have an important source of cash to the household through trade, he will still raise corn for the household. In addition to be consumed, corn is presented to the house altar and used in ritual trade between households (Gudeman, 2001). The base of self-sufficiency, corn, is elevated from its nutritional value and becomes a Common in the Kekchi group that represents mutual understanding of certain traits. Corn provides the base of the household and is grown for the sake of maintaining the livelihood of its members. The corn as a Common is thus embedded in the core social units of the community, the household, and in turn is continuously supported and reproduced in the community in general. It is obvious that the removal of this Common would have a devastating effect upon the community, and likewise, uprooting the social relations among the members, as could happen in a physical displacement, would perhaps eliminate the means to produce corn, and in turn corn as a Common. To repeat what Gudeman argued; there can be no community without commons, and no commons without community (Gudeman, 2001:27). I would like to remark that removing a Common not necessarily entails the downfall of a community; a community might have a mosaic of Commons. Commons is in constant flux. They are created, forgotten, eliminated and reinvented (Gudeman, 2001).

It should be obvious that rice makes out a Common in the Karen society. As mentioned earlier the Commons exists in the idea of a shared interest or value. Gudeman goes on to argue that what happens to a Common is therefore not simply a physical incident, but also a social event (Gudeman, 2001:27). Following this idea I maintain that rice makes out a

Common in the Karen society as it is a physical object, intertwined with identity, on which general feelings and needs of the society is inscribed on. However, rice will only remain a representation of the Common as long as the mutual understanding of it as a representation exists. I do not claim that the Common would somehow manifest itself in a physical object, as this denote the absurd idea that a Common has consciousness. The communities that share the interest or value find representations for this, as with rice, and project it as a mark of their cohesion as a group.

The rice as a Common is at a certain degree manifested in rice as a physical object; however, a more abstract Common also exists in contemporary Ban Pha Kwao. As the duration of my stay among the Karen went on, my understanding of how they perceived the worlds around them progressed. It came to my attention that in several of my conversations regarding agricultural practice, the notion of the Karen as economical and social subordinate to the Thais became apparent. First I interpret this as a simple reaction to the radical difference in living standards between the low and upland population. A difference that has been augmented in the last decades as the realm of a consumer good oriented society spreads. However, as I observed, this feeling went beyond shallow jalousie and rooted itself in how the Karen perceive themselves as hard working and in a constant struggle to sustain a household. This was clearly expressed by Lapho, discussing my chores in the household while making dinner at the hearth. He made a note of, and rightfully so, my apparent lack of ability to keep up in the field, and further pointing out that.

> "[…] we (Karen) always have to work to survive, we can not quit after completing one task, we always have to continue."
>
> (Lapho 2009, author's field notes)

Although I interpreted this as a direct insult at first, I came to understand that this was an expression of how life is for the contemporary farmer in Ban Pha Kwao. With the pressure of commercial agriculture in combination to the social expectations of producing rice, time is of the essence in the present-day agricultural production cycle. Some of my informants uttered, with an air of nostalgia, a certain more relaxed image of the past. As Bun puts it:

> "Before, we had more time to relax, now we work all the time so we can afford to buy new things, we also had many different kind of food before, now we have to buy what we do not grow ourselves"
>
> (Bun 2009, author's field notes)

I hold that over time, this feeling has become something most Karen farmers of Ban Pha Kwao relate to their identity as active upland cultivators. Similar statements as the one expressed by Bun, was not uncommon to surface during conversations and in many instances the issue was referred too as *the struggle* or *our struggle,* conceptualised by me as the *Constant Struggle.* This does not necessarily refer only to the Karen, but the broader category of upland cultivators. This Constant Struggle do not only refer to how the Karen, in general is economically and socially subordinate to the Thais, but also to the idea that Karen work hard to maintain a satisfactory living, while in the lowlands life is more easy. As the narrative go; Karen work all day to provide a sustainable household, while in the city money can be made without much physical effort. The concept of a Common Struggle is a multifaceted and highly sensitive one, still I want to highlight the issue and its relation to the agricultural practise as this is important for understanding how binding the relation between farming and Karen identity is, and in turn; the value inscribed in rice.

My informants explained the Karen life as a constant effort of being thrifty and to make the most out of the crops and other pursuits. The returning statement in my conversations on the topic was that the Karen have learned to live of marginal resources and, even though subordinated socially to the Thai, morally superior in the sense that they work hard for their revenue. Even though the lowland population, especially the Thai merchants, are inevitable an important part of the Karen society, they are effectively excluded from it as they do not share the hardship of the everlasting agricultural work and struggle for survival in the mountains. However, Karen who had moved to the city and been economically successful did not suffer from this exclusion. An example of this is an acquaintance that moved from Ban Pha Kwao to work in a NGO. He had a relatively good salary in his job, but I did never experience him to be perceived as less Karen by the villagers in any way. As an informant, Natti, expressed in another occasion; a Karen remains Karen indifferent of where he is or what he is doing, in the same way as a Thai remains Thai. I claim that the concept of a Constant Struggle is more related to the identity as a Karen, rather than the actual physical farming in the mountain.

Even though rooted in the abstract idea of ethnic identity, the notion of a Constant Struggle is evident in the ongoing task of creating a sustainable livelihood on marginal resources in the mountains. Through working the paddy fields and garden plots the Karen are able to support a household in providing it with necessary rice and cash. As sustaining a household is dependant on a sufficient supply of rice, this becomes the core symbol of hard work and in turn the Constant Struggle. As resources are scarce, loss of grains or produce makes a sever impact on both the household economy and its social position, this creating an axis which all productivity evolves around. The recent adaptation to commercial agriculture, as mentioned above, augments the pressure put on the productive unit as it severely limits time and in turn make every decisions that more crucial. During an interview session with Bun regarding the contemporary situation for upland cultivators, he claimed that farmers in Ban Pha Kwao have to fight harder these days to make ends meet as the desired lifestyle demands a higher degree of cash accumulation than before. During another session with Bun, he underlined this in saying that Ban Pha Kwao today is more exposed to price drops in cabbage and red onion and that this has led to an increase of competition and workload in the village.

Although a household may produce the same amount of rice today as before it adapted the commercial model, the present day demand a higher level of productivity as cash has become a necessity for the household. In all practical sense, the commercial agriculture is more present in the farming cycle than the subsistence one in that it needs more attention to details of investments and profit. Even so, it is rice production that is put forth as the main effort for sustaining a livelihood, due to the central value inscribed in it.

I maintain that the Karen of Ban Pha Kwao create a Common through the negative trait of being subordinate in the wider demographic landscape. Through the fact that they live in a society with agriculture at the foundation, a Common is created. The Common is the Constant Struggle for survival in an economy where the lowland people are, as my informants claim, getting the better end of the deal. Through the Common, a bond of solidarity across geographical borders is created that includes certain members of the wider society and excludes other. The idea of a Constant Struggle also certainly conveys an air of deep traditional roots in agriculture that traces back for generations. However, I hold that it is especially in the contemporary context that this feeling has been amplified by the pressure put on the agricultural and furthermore how the Karen manages their identity in relation to this.

- Managing Karen identity in a new context -

The Commons in Ban Pha Kwao is, as elaborated above based on self-sufficient agriculture, in the form of rice production. Farmers in Ban Pha Kwao has in the later decades become more and more entangled in the market economy due to the rapid expansion of commercial agriculture in Thailand. The Karen farmers have adopted various new production techniques and crops to boost their accumulation of cash. For Karen, as should be clear by now, agricultural work is a pillar in society and as their identity is tied up to their life as farmers, the new production form represents a challenge in managing the way they recognise themselves. The population of Ban Pha Kwao needs to find a way to manage this new aspect of farming in relation to their own identity. I maintain that being Karen in this context involves finding ways to cope with outside influence and including it into how they think about their own identity.

When encountered by a new impulse, the Karen identity is negotiated and defined in new ways. Even though the Karen probably did define themselves as rice farmers a long time before adapting to the modern commercial agriculture, I argue that it is the way they define rice as a part of their identity that may change. I maintain that in the contemporary Ban Pha Kwao the Karen identity is put in contrast to commercial production through rice as a symbol for what being Karen entails. In this way the contemporary Karen identity can be seen as in opposition to commercial production. However, it is still connected to it as it emerges as a reaction to the new regime. Farming practise in general, both subsistence and commercial included, is the arena on which the Karen identity is formed and transformed. We again return to the village of Ban Mai and my group interview with the political elite to give an illustrative example of how Karen identity is connected to commercial agriculture.

As we talked about the situation for the population of Ban Mai it became clear that the village in general had a weaker connection to the market economy compared to that of Ban Pha Kwao. There were obvious logistic reasons for this, as the village was located farther inn to the mountains than Ban Pha Kwao, also the soil fertility, according to my informants, is lower in Ban Mai than in Ban Pha Kwao. However, my informants claimed that ideological reasons for this weak connection existed. Several of the participants in the group I interviewed argued that the people in Ban Mai is less interesting in producing cash crops because growing rice is more strongly tied up to what is central for the Karen identity. It was a general

consensus in the group that it is the strong feeling of unity in the village, and experience from neighbour villages, that make Ban Mai able to, in a certain degree, withstand the negative effects of the commercial agriculture. The current Pujaban explained to me that the commercial agriculture with all its monetary aspects has a spreading effect on the village, and thus is in stark contrast to Karen way of life. He recognise especially the mounting debt problems of many farmers as damaging to important social relationships in the village as paying back loans becomes first priority. The Pujaban acknowledges the penetration force of money in that he says that he does not judge commercial agriculture as positive or bad, but is clear in that he do not wan to risk the disintegration of the strong feeling of unity in Ban Mai. The point he wants to make is that as the commercial agriculture takes more hold, the village farmer needs to be protected against exploitation by lowland Thai merchants. The group argues that because of globalisation the outside influence, in this case in the form of market economy is hard to resist, but it is important to remember what it means to be Karen and the value of rice. Rice must always be planted; it is the source of life. I want to argue that the representatives for Ban Mai draw on the connection to commercial agriculture when speaking about their identity as Karen. To show that they value the idea of togetherness and the importance of growing rice as a foundation for a Karen community, their weak connection to the market economy is underlined. Even though logistic and environmental aspects may be at the base of this weak connection, it is an important tool for the villagers in showing that they value their identity as Karen.

In the contemporary Ban Pha Kwao, management of identity is situated and, as explained above, carries a strong connection to the practise of agriculture. I argue that the farmers of Ban Pha Kwao see their identity in a new context when relating to the commercial realm. When talking to my informants I became aware that they often shifted between describing themselves as upland farmers and Karen. When conducting interviews focused on traditions in farming, household and general Karen life, the identity as an ethnic group was elevated and differences in lifestyle between Thai and Karen, both positive and negatively charged, was more than often remarked. It was, as I experienced from a conversation with one of my older informants, Natti, especially evident when talking about knowledge of the body, environment and the transmission of local knowledge. The transmission of Karen knowledge often takes the form of *Hta,* which is a melodic chant sung by elders, mainly men. Natti explains that Hta takes many forms and is commonly chanted during important ceremonies

such as weddings and funerals. Hta is chanted regardless of the religious context a ceremony is set in. Hta is notoriously difficult to translate as the core meaning often is conveyed through vague metaphors. Natti commented that the vital knowledge in an Hta would most likely be lost in a translation process. Natti preformed several Hta for me, though the translation is at best sketchy, in spite of Laphos great effort. I order to illustrate how an Hta is conveying Karen knowledge, I therefore find it useful to describe an Hta obtained on a different occasion. This Hta had already been carefully translated and subjected to analysis.

"P' dau puj mux dau puj mux, P' dau waij mux dau waij mux
Laiz le hsgif pooz p' laiz qux, laiz le lauj pooz p' laiz qux
Htof lwij meij pgeiz htauf kukru, Dau puj waij htuv laux p'cu".

|

"It is really good we are brothers and sisters
We are going together in a farming land; we are going together in harvest land
While we hear the sounds of the dove crow Ku Kru, our brothers and sisters give hand to each other and return home."

This Hta attempts to teach that all Karen is fundamentally brother and sisters and that it is important to hold together. It underlines the significance of confronting any possible situation together as brothers and sisters.

Natti holds that Hta has traditionally been the main way of transmitting important knowledge of farming, religion and morale codes in Karen society and although most youth today do not know the chants, it is still recognised as an important part of Karen life. Hta acts as symbol for Karen identity. In such cases the idea of being part of a separate group and with it its excluding and including Commons becomes central.

However, when investigating the currently low cabbage prices the idea of the producers being a group of upland cultivators rather that a different ethnic group from the lowland population was evident. My informants, many of who had lost considerable amounts of money due to the low cabbage prices, claimed that the upland farmers, in general, had a disadvantage to the lowland producers and merchants. They claimed that they had a less information about price fluctuations than the lowland farmers and Thai merchants often had leverage in negotiation to the upland farmers. In these situations I clearly got the feeling that my informants saw themselves as a part of a group of upland farmers rather than an ethnic

group. In my experience, the farmers also maintained a more competitive attitude against each other in such instances. In theory, the upland farmer label may work across ethnic boundaries and include other groupings such as the Hmong, Akha and Lahu, but this was not directly pointed out by any of my informants. I argue that the relation to the lowland through commercial agriculture creates a new space for managing identity. The commercial agriculture, as explained earlier, do not share an intimate connection to the Karen ideology, and thus in relation to trading commercial crops; the Karen farmer may take on the identity as a upland farmer as a part of the wider market economy realm in Chiang Mai province. I do not make this point to generalise in any way the interaction between Karen and Thai, but to illustrate that for the people of Ban Pha Kwao, the Karen identity is a fluid one that may take on new forms, but it is still connected to the cornerstone in any upland Karen community; the farming.

6 Agricultural Practices in Two Regimes

As elaborated in chapter two and three; communities on the fringes of economical centres often find themselves in the crossfire between covering their basic needs and the increasing demand for consumer goods, conceptualised as a peasant society. On the one hand the farming unit needs to ensure that a yield from the subsistence harvest is sufficient to feed all household members until the next crop is ripe, on the other hand the household may want to avoid stigma attached to the lack of certain material standards. Often, the way to enrich the material life in rural communities is to produce some form of cash crop in addition to subsistence farming and thus be able to accumulate cash. This creates a strain on the household as a choice of where to put in labour and land has to be made. In the community, two sides of agriculture are formed. In my numerous evening interviews with farmers, a topic of conversation was often what they were growing for the market and how many Rai of rice fields they owned. It was clear in how we talked about it that two realms of practice existed. In this chapter I seek, again with the help of Gudeman's theories, to show how producing for the household and for the market can be seen as two separate practices in a system as a whole. Further, I present a comparative study, mainly extracted from the work of Kalland on opium production among the Hmong population of the Golden Triangle. My claim is that even though commercial and subsistence modes of agriculture are separated in many aspects, they are inevitably connected through the fact that they share the production unit; household labour.

- Two separate practices in a system as a whole -

As stated in the previous chapter, the agricultural environment in Ban Pha Kwao can roughly be understood in terms of two realms of practice; the commercial and the subsistence agriculture. I will refer to these as the commercial and the subsistence regimes of agricultural practice. These two regimes operate together in a greater system of farming which all Karen in Ban Pha Kwao in some way are a part of. Furthermore, I claim that a connection between the regimes exist, a connection that can be observed in the way values of agriculture and identity is managed

Gudeman claims in *Economy's Tension: The Dialectics of Community and Market* (2008) that universally, people have two coping strategies for producing and engaging in trade with others. On the one hand, Gudeman argues, we have the *impersonal trade* where people seek to transform what they have into something else through exchange of goods, services and money (2008:4-5). The trade is in this realm anonymous and impersonal, operating on the conditions of a competitive environment where consumers and producers seek to get the better end of a deal. On the other hand we have the realm where "[…] people […] live from goods and services that make, meditate and maintain social relationships" (Gudeman, 2008:5). Gudeman argues that through this realm, which he conceptualises as *community* or *mutuality,* things and services are secured and allocated by means of continuing ties (2008:5). Such ties may include; bride wealth, reciprocity and self-sufficient activities like; agriculture and keeping a household (Gudeman, 2008). Impersonal trade and mutuality represents two domains of value which are dialectally connected. The two domains oppose and overlap each other and create a tension between producing for one self (impersonal) or for community (mutuality); the *economic tension* (Gudeman, 2008:14). This tension represents how an actor has to make constant decisions of how he wants to spend resources he has at hand in the two realms. Gudeman goes on to offer a model for the different spheres of economy which include three transaction domains. The first deals with the concept of mutuality, which encompass mutual sharing of goods in the community, the second deals with the impersonal trade which encompass the market commerce and the exchange of things and services. The third deals with the finances of trade with money, that is; a situation where money is omnipresent as a mean of exchange. Across these spheres we express different values and identities, Gudeman claims (Gudeman, 2008). In the contemporary global economy, the second sphere has been known to cascade into the first, leading to groups capitalising on their base, and thus, as

Gudeman argues, debasing themselves and jeopardising their own existence as a coherent group (Gudeman, 2008:14-15).

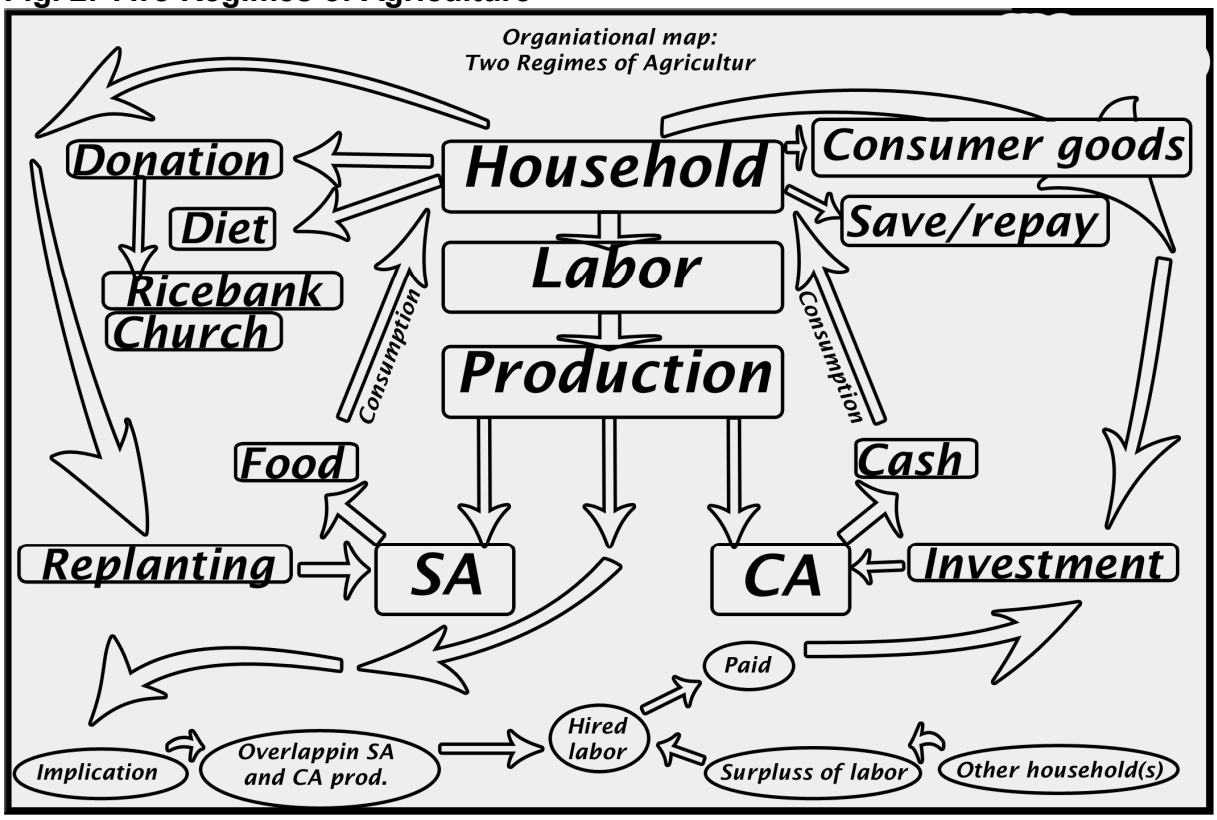
For Gudeman the base of a community is constituted by how people share materials and services (Gudeman, 2008:28). Further, the base is exemplified with the house in that a household is dependent on the return of agriculture and thus keeping the base becomes a concern for everyone in the household (Gudeman, 2008:29). As discussed in the previous chapter, rice in the Karen community makes up such a base and the effort of maintaining it contributes to the idea of a Constant Struggle.

Through the realms of mutuality and impersonal trade, different values are conveyed. Through the impersonal trade, the value of maximising profit is expressed. A farmer and a merchant will always negotiate the price of the crop, either before the harvest or during the trade action itself, to get the most out of it. The skills of negotiation or being a thrifty entrepreneur in finding new ways to connect to the market is valued in that it gives, in many cases, good cash return. In the realm of mutuality the value expressed is often a base that identifies the community. Part of the base may be typified as an essential good on whose existence the community relies (Gudeman, 2008:35). In relation to the Karen of Ban Pha Kwao, this may be the production and consumption of rice, as discussed in the previous chapter.

- The two regimes of agriculture in Ban Pha Kwao -

Before we move on describing the subsistence and commercial agriculture in detail, I have drawn up an illustrative model (fig.2), depicting agricultural practise as two regimes based on the household as a production unit. My intention is to show that the regimes are in fact separated, while at the same time sharing common elements. Furthermore, an implication in the model demonstrates the situation when time is pressed during harvest or planting. I must stress that this model is a highly simplified version of the real situation as it does not fully account for the many pragmatically adoptions to non-ideal situations. SA is short for subsistence agriculture, and CA is short for commercial agriculture.

Fig. 2: Two Regimes of Agriculture



The model clearly draws a picture of the two regimes. The main factor of separation is what is gained from production and how it is used. On the left hand side we can see that through subsistence production food for the household is produced. After a certain portion of this is retained for replanting, the surplus could be donated or put in the rice bank. Note that, in the contemporary Ban Pha Kwao, rice is rarely a source of cash income. On the right hand side we observe that though in all practical sense food is also produced here, it is for the farmers not perceived as food for the household. Rather, it is a source of direct conversion to cash that could be further consumed in goods or reinvested. The implication scenario at the bottom of the model illustrates an important contemporary aspect of agriculture in Ban Pha Kwao. As will be shown, the preparation of paddies prior to rice planting overlaps with the red onion planting and thus poses a major stress on the available workforce. In this period, it is common to hire labour from other households.

The commercial agricultural regime in Ban Pha Kwao is driven and motivated by the goal of accumulating cash. The main crops produced for commercial purpose is cabbage and red onion. Some other crops such as lettuce and carrots are also cultivated in a lesser scale. However, my informants cultivated mainly cabbage and red onion and I will focus on these

crops as representative for the commercial production in Ban Pha Kwao. These crops are cultivated on the same fields; the garden plots covering ridges and slopes surrounding the valley floors where the paddy fields are located. Cabbage and red onion are however cultivated separately and follows different agricultural cycles. It is not uncommon for commercial farmers in Ban Pha Kwao to both produce cabbage and red onion simultaneously on different parts of their land. Many of the farmers have access to irrigated garden plots and can thus use these to produce crops during the dry season through the use of portable water sprinklers. However, loss of water pressure is a natural constraint to the use of such systems on the ridges and they are therefore mostly in use on the lower slopes. Furthermore, not all farmers who have a plot on the lower slopes have access to irrigation, as it represents a costly investment. If the plot is not close to a stream which carries sufficient water during the dry season, large cement cisterns to capture rain during the wet season has to be bought from the lowlands. Even though one has access to a nearby stream, the extensive amount of PCV pipes needed, demands a considerable amount of cash. Most of the plots now have a small road or path leading to it in order to load the produce easily onto pick-up trucks.

One of my informants who produce both cabbage and red onion, Jordidi, claims that cabbage production started in Ban Pha Kwao 20-25 years ago. The most common practise of cabbage cultivation is to produce two crops in one year, as Jordidi does. One crop is produced during the wet season and one during the dry season using irrigation sprinklers. Thus the plots on the lower slopes are favourably used for cabbage crops and utilised more than once every year. Jordidi points out that it is possible to produce up to three or four cabbage crops each year if the budget allows it and if one has access to sufficient irrigation. Cabbage seedlings are usually available for purchase all year around from the Royal Project or the lowland. The work load in cabbage production peaks during planting and harvest season. Jordidi argue that in the contemporary Ban Pha Kwao it is normal practise to hire paid labour during planting and harvest to ensure a sufficient workforce. As a result of a drop in cabbage prices on the market, Jordidi and many other farmers had decided to let the previous cabbage crop rot in the field rather than transporting it to the market. The main reason was the loss of profit, but Jordidi explains that the rotting crop also makes out a good fertilizer for the soil. Jordidi holds that his typical investment in a cabbage crop is about 10 000THB, and with the contemporary price level he must reckon a near 100% loss on the most recent crop. During my fieldwork, the cabbage prices was lower than ever before, according to my informants, and was

estimated to 0,6THB\Kilo. When I asked whether or not the household would supply their diet with the lost crop, Jordidi responded that it is too contaminated by chemical products. Jordidi and other cash croppers admitted occasionally that the amount of chemicals used may represent a serious health threat to the lowland consumers. Still, the general consensus was that an upland farmer had to use chemicals in order to be competitive on the market. Jordidi explains that although he does not agree with the increasing adaptation to commercially oriented production in Ban Pha Kwao, he started cabbage production in order to put his kids through education.

As mentioned, many farmers combine cabbage with red onion production in their commercial venture. Red onion crops are produced once every year and the planting usually starts the first week of May, when dry season is coming to an end. The planting overlaps with the preparation of paddies. The preparation of the field is started in mid-April or so with tilling the soil and making trenches for the seedlings to be planted in. The harvest starts in the middle of July, but this may vary according to rainfall during the wet season. Bun planted his red onion crop on the 6th of May, and harvested it about two months later. Red onion is mostly cultivated on the plots on the ridges, as the coming wet season supplies sufficient watering. These plots are left fallow during dry season. Also, the irrigated plots are likely to already be occupied by a cabbage crop. The red onion production is dependent on the purchase of seedlings from the lowland, as the upland climate does not allow farmers to store seedlings themselves. Additionally, the red onion seedlings and crops are generally more sensitive to climatic conditions than cabbage. From mid-March to the end of April, the racks used to store and dry purchased seedlings is a prominent feature in village life. As with cabbage, the peak of labour need in red onion cultivation is represented by the planting and harvesting season. Furthermore, paid labour is the most common mean of acquiring a sufficient workforce. Several farmers have in the recent years chosen to switch from cabbage to red onion in the places that allows it, due to low cabbage prices. However, this is only possible during the time window determined by climatic conditions

The commercial agricultural cycle in Ban Pha Kwao is represented by two main products; red onion and cabbage. While cabbage is readily available for production several times each year, red onion is only produced once due to climatic conditions. The cabbage is often found on the lower slopes where irrigation is possible, allowing for a crop to be produced during the dry season. However, due to the dropping cabbage prices, many of the

plots on the lower slopes are currently used to grow red onion when the climatic window allows it. If irrigated, these plots are switched back to cabbage production, or any other suitable crop, during dry season. Jordidi claimed that many of the farmers would continue to produce cabbage during the dry season in spite of dropping prices. He explains that they have no alternative.

During my stay in Ban Pha Kwao, I got the general impression that a good amount of the money accumulated from commercial agriculture was spend on improving the material desires of the household. Especially for the families who lived in the modern concrete houses with electricity; satellite TV-sets and refrigerators were in high demand. Lapho expressed on many occasions a wish to buy a computer for his house. However, the financial situation did not allow it at the time. Furthermore, the hope of putting the next generation through a good education was also an important motivator, especially amongst the older farmers who had already established a steady economy and in many cases had grandchildren. For the youth growing up in Ban Pha Kwao, and their parents, obtaining a degree in theological studies is highly desired. Since the educational system in Ban Pha Kwao does not offer education beyond that of junior high school, such degrees can only be obtained in the city. Unless a student is covered by some scholarship, obtained by very few, a household needs a certain amount of cash to cover living expenses and school fees for the student. Laphos oldest son, Porwapa was attaining theological studies at the high school in Chom Thong during my fieldwork.

The produce from a commercial crop is counted during harvest, and estimates of profit are in some cases done during this stage. The crop prices are in general governed by its aesthetic qualities, not nutritional. Texture, freshness in colour and size is by far more important than the nutritional value and conveys the idea of a successful crop, ignoring the large amount of chemicals and pesticides used to obtain the favourable quality. During the red onion harvest, I spent some time in Buns garden observing and helping out. When asking Bun about the crop prices, he told me that he would probably get about 10THB/kg for this crop, which is a fairly good price in the current market. I was told that the price depended on if it where a class 1, 2 or 3 product. As with almost everything grown in the area, this classification system is applied to estimate the price, depending on what product, per kilo or piece. Looking back, Bun told me that some time ago the red onion price was a good 18THB/kg. That year he produced about 3500kg, he only got 15THB/kg though, as the crop

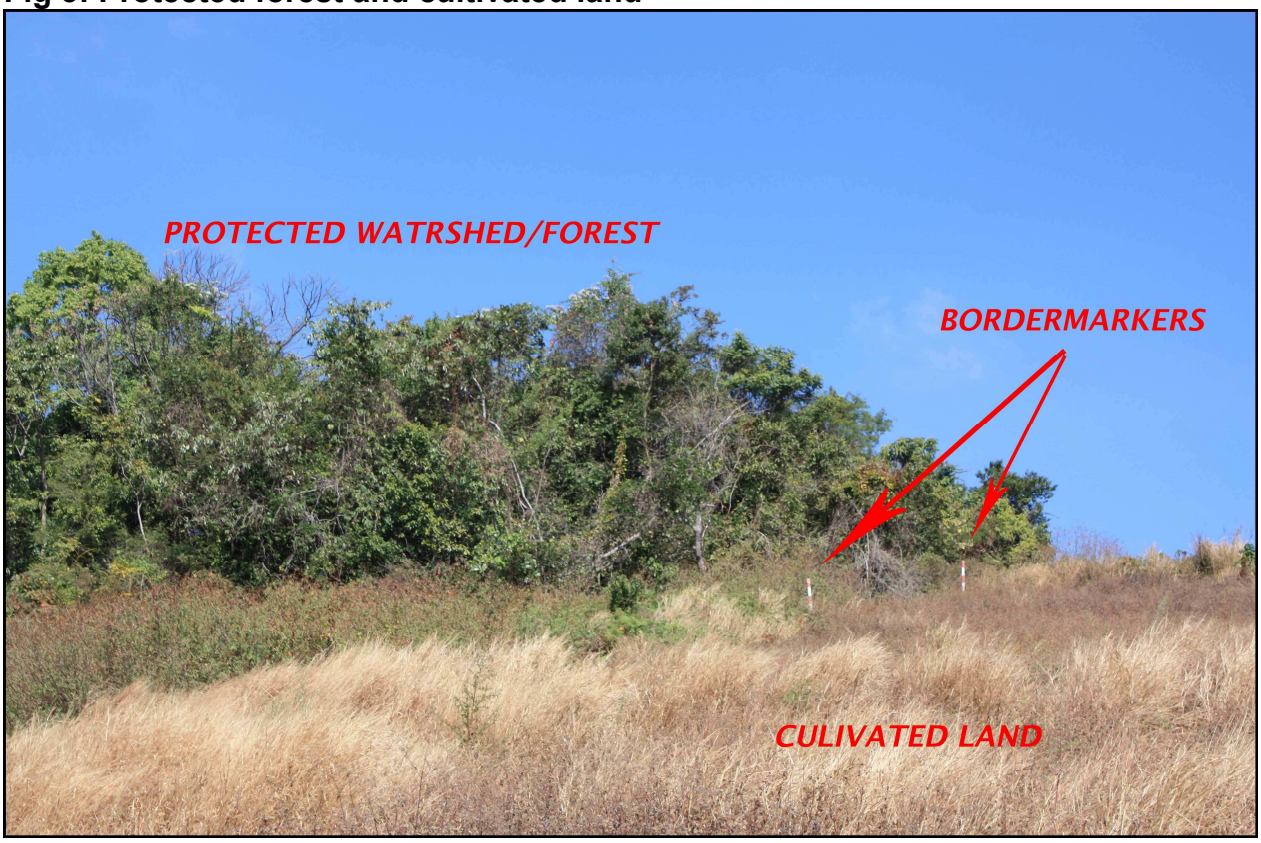
was classified as a 2, 3 being the lowest paid. Bun claims that during his 25 years as a red onion cultivator, crop prices have varied greatly. The lowest crop price he could remember was 5THB/Kilo. Still, he maintained that the red onion prices are by far more stable than cabbage prices.

Concerning labour in the commercial regime, a large work stock is often needed during planting and harvest. As most men are preoccupied with their own fields during this period, the majority of the work stock is women. In Buns case, he paid a work stock of about 15 people, not counting the children, 100THB for each day they participated in the harvest of his red onion crop. Bun told me that the harvest is relatively quick when using such a large workforce, so the profit of hiring workers is large. In Bun's case, all the 4000kg (an estimate) of red onion was harvested in 1-2 days. The red onions are tied together at the stem in bundles of about 20 and stacked in neatly on the back of a pick-up. The bundles are arranged so that as much of the crop as possible can fit and thus cut down on transport cost. Bun owned his own pick-up and thus provided transportation himself, but the several long hauls down the mountain to Chom Thong and back again consumed a lot of gasoline. It is unknown to me how many trips Bun had to take, but estimating from the capacity of the pick-up and the amount of produce, I would guess two or three trips.

In the planting phase, too, red onion crops require a large workforce. The tilling of the soil presupposing the planting is hard work. However, the planting itself is relatively easy work, and it is common for both women and unoccupied men to participate. I learned that Bun had planted 1300 kg of red onion seedlings on a plot of 1 Rai this year, investing about 12.000THB, not counting the labour costs. The investment, he explained, include chemicals, seedlings and mini-tractor if needed. Bun explained that in the past, one could trust on work exchange both for planting and harvest. However, in contemporary Ban Pha Kwao time has indeed become a commodity as the planting of red onion overlap with the preparation of paddies. Thus, Bun makes clear, he currently has to pay for labour more frequently than he used to in the past. He goes on to say that they always had more time before and that free labour was always available, but now the pressure of commercial agriculture has absorbed this labour. As mentioned, the planting of onion overlaps with the preparation of paddy fields As the preparation involves tilling of soil and in general heavy work it is mainly a task for the men, and the women are free to be hired as workforce elsewhere. In this way, the women can boost the household economy by selling their workforce to other farmers.

Land rights to garden plots, where commercial produce is dominant, reflects the position of Karen as marginal to the general Thai population. A repeated statement from farmers interviewed was that official documents that legitimised the rights to land were highly indecisive and did not give any clear indication of direct ownership. Pho had, as almost all farmers in Ban Pha Kwao, several plots on which he cultivated commercial crops. His documents gave him usage rights to a certain degree; but did not entitle him with full ownership of the land. Pho told me during one afternoon interview session that this was a source of great concern for the large scale producers in the village, as this meant that new government policies could deprive them of these vital fields in the name of forest and watershed protection. The documents also severely limit extensions of the fields as they refer to land areas which are not to be cleared for cultivation. This is physically manifest in markers separating cultivated plots from protected forest, illustrated in the picture (fig.3) below.

Fig 3: Protected forest and cultivated land



Conflicts between farmers and government agencies of where this marker should be put have occurred. Lapho explained that several farmers felt cheated. The marker having been placed too close to their cultivated land, meaning that their possibilities for expansion were eliminated. In other instances, the markers were put more or less on the tree line, making it

possible for other farmers to expand their field. However, these conflicts did not go far beyond general murmuring and small remarks aimed at the increasing government control. It did happen that these markers were illegally moved by farmers, but it was a rare occurrence, since it could trigger a government investigation, naturally unfavourable for any farmer with ambiguous land rights.

As Pho, Bun also lacks clear documents for ownership of garden plots. Bun has a couple of garden plots on the ridge just east of the village centre. He goes on to explain that he is cultivating and managing these plots almost unaffected by the unclear documents, however, it is a definitive source of unease. As Pho above, Bun does also underscore that the future is uncertain since his land in theory could be reserved as protected areas if the government intensify their forest protection policy. Another element for uneasiness was experiences from other regions, where government agencies had physically 'moved' the areas available for cultivation, or in some instances actually resettled entire villages. During another interview session with Bun, he asked me why the government would not give him clear documents. Although I could of course not give him any clear answer, I sincerely shared his frustration.

Although the documents are a source of unease, it also gives hope for the future. The documents today are a direct result of earlier government actions to map the land use in the region and are seen by many upland farmers as a step towards actual full rights to land. Lapho explained to me that before the official registration took place, it was mainly the task of the Pujaban to collect information of land use and relay it to the local government office, the Ampur. The farmers then had to be constantly prepared for government inspections to confirm information. The registration process was based on former tax papers and government surveys. The perhaps most striking physical result of the process, was the border markers that separated plots and rights of use. In the contemporary Ban Pha Kwao each farmer's land for cultivation, including both paddies and gardens, are separated from other farming plots by a cement brick inscribed with a number registered in the land documents held by the farmer. This brick has become something of a hallmark of the current farming in Ban Pha Kwao and almost given a sacral meaning as a symbol of hope for future land documents. The cement brick is depicted below (fig. 4). The Thai writing on the brick can be translated to "landmark" and the number refers to the farmer who has rights to cultivate the plot. The two last digits are hid to ensure anonymity.

Fig. 4: Border markers

As mentioned, this marker legitimises rights to use and the register is in theory available for anyone to read at the local Ampur office. However, Lapho claims that for Karen, it is still quite difficult to obtain information. When land is passed on from one generation to the next, the same marker is used, but it needs to be registered anew at the Ampur office. The current Pujaban in Ban Pha Kwao, claimed that 90% of the farmers in the village had these markers to indicate their rights; the remaining was waiting for their paperwork to clear and would in time also receive the markers.

Considering the subsistence farming as a separate agricultural regime, I argue that the link to the household is the main governing factor. Rice is grown by the household, for the household. The paddies of Lapho's household were located some distance from the compound. He, and his brothers, one of them deceased, inherited the land from their parents. During my time in Ban Pha Kwao, I helped out with the work associated with preparing the paddies for rice planting. The following account illustrates the agricultural cycle of wet rice cultivation in Ban Pha Kwao.

The first phase starts a month or so prior to the wet season with the planting of grains to produce rice seedlings. A small garden plot adjacent to the paddies is cleared for vegetation with bamboo knifes[14] before tilling the soil with hoes and removing any large stones. This phase and the preparation of paddy fields in general, is considered heavy physical labour and in commonly done by men. Traditionally, women and children often accompanies the men to the paddies when they have the time and prepare meals in the lunch hut or do odd jobs, e.g. preparing bamboo fibres to use in fence building. However, as mentioned above it is now more common for the women to sell their labour to red-onion producers. Laphos seedling plot had been left fallow for 10 years while he used a small plot next to it, so a great deal of vegetation had to be cleared. Especially rooting out the dreaded Imperata[15] grass took a lot of effort. I estimate the plot to be 10 square meters. After tilling the soil, a bamboo fence around the plot was erected. Lapho bought some amount of bamboo poles from another farmer some time ago which had been left to dry in the sun, he paid 3THB for the long poles and 2THB for the shorter ones. Many farmers grow bamboo themselves for such purposes, however, Lapho does not. The poles were cut to suitable lengths of fence posts and girders. They were tied together at the cross-sections with bamboo fibres. Lapho explained that the fence was to keep cattle and water-buffalos out as they roamed free until the wet season started. A new fence is erected every year. The soil is tilled once more before the seeds are spread out evenly on the plot. As depicted in fig.2, the seeds are stored by the household, reserved from the previous crop. The seeds are measured in old metal cocking oil cans which I estimate to hold between three and four litres. Lapho used 1 ½ cans for his plot. After spreading the seeds, the plot are 'brushed' with large leafs to cover the seeds with a thin layer of soil. Lapho ends this stage of the crop with a small Catholic prayer before leaving it to grow for about a month, though the time span may vary according to rainfall. As this is in the end of the dry season and beginning of the wet season, the downfall of rain is somewhat unpredictable.

The next stage is the clearing and damming of irrigation channels just before the wet season fully sets in. Although this stage of the process is discussed below, I want to mention that the main purpose of this stage is to start flooding the paddies and repair/build temporary dams to guide the water. Lapho states that while in the uplands the dams have to be

[14] Large utility knife used for all-around purposes. It resembles the South American machete.

[15] The Imperata is a type of grass often found growing on plots that have been left fallow due to low soil nutrition. It is recognized by its long and though roots and has been planted actively to combat mud slides. However, it easily spreads and for the farmers of Ban Pha Kwao it is a considerable time consuming task to remove the roots when preparing garden plots.

constructed anew every year, the lowland farmers can trust in more permanent dams. The damming and clearing is hard work and, as will be seen, additional work is often drafted from men in the immediate family. All paddies have small drains in the dikes to ensure even distribution of water to the downstream paddies and a steady water circulation. Two or three paddies are partly filled with water by half opening the drains. This is repeated so all paddies in the valley, or a section of the valley, are semi flooded. Small repairs and maintenance on the channels is done throughout the cultivation process. However, as Lapho pointed out, too much tempering with the cannels and sand residue from the river would be carried with the water onto the paddies and cause loss of soil fertility. A method used to stop dead vegetation from the jungle to end up in the channels is to put up a mesh-like fence of bamboo where the channel is connected to the stream.

The next stage involves preparation of the soil in the paddy. It is often this particular phase that overlaps with the planting phase of red-onion. Firstly; the soil is tilled with the use of a plough pulled by either water-buffalo or mini-tractor. As mentioned in chapter one, it is more common today to use mini-tractor as it cuts ploughing time considerable. Although mechanised, ploughing requires hard physical labour. For those who do not possess their own mini-tractor, it is possible to hire it from other farmers in the village or from the lowlands. Lapho paid approximately 400THB to hire a mini-tractor from his brother, Dipho. After this, the drain is completely opened to flood all paddies to the edge of the dikes. When a field is completely flooded, the wet soil is used to reinforce the paddy by packing slabs of mud onto the dikes.

The next stage involves planting of the seedlings which now has been growing for a month or so. The planting phase usually starts in June. Regretfully, obligations in the NGO required my return to Chiang Mai and I was not able to observe the planting process. However, Lapho explained the stage to me at a later point. The seedlings are harvested from the small plot and gathered in suitable bundles before they are meticulously planted one by one in neat rows in the paddy fields. It is a time consuming work, but as this presupposes the ripening of red-onions crops, most farmers have time to concentrate on the planting. It is normal practise for family who share compound or have adjoining paddies to plant at the same time. Lapho and Dipho planted at the same time and shared their workload. The harvest stage is in the cold dry season, also a stage I unfortunately was not able to observe, as I had come to the end of my fieldwork and had to return to Norway. However, I was informed that

rice is usually harvested in January or the beginning of February. The crop of households sharing compound is harvested at the same time and the workload is often pooled without monetary payment. Although harvested together, the crops are not shared but separated by household. The rice is either shelled on the compound using a manual beating contraption or, if the financial situation allows it, sent to the lowlands to be shelled in a processing plant.

It is mainly the household that makes out the labour base for rice production. Additional labour may be needed for certain tasks, e.g. the mentioned clearing and damming of irrigation channels. However, such additional labour is rarely paid and often drafted from the close family if someone has time to spare. Although the paddies are prepared and planted at the same time, I experienced less feeling of urgency and taking half a day or a day off from ones own paddies rarely presented serious loss of productivity. Many of my informants made a point out of mentioning that it was uncommon to pay off labour in the paddies. Although Lapho paid for borrowing a mini-tractor, he paid for the machine, not the labour. During the preparation of Laphos paddies, the corporative effort of clearing the irrigation channels and directing the water from a close by stream serves as an illustration of how labour is managed in the subsistence regime. Laphos paddies are located just upstream of his brothers, Dipho, not more than 50 meters from the closest stream. One morning a work team of four persons was arranged to clear the irrigation channels and lead the water to the paddies. The team included me, Lapho, Dipho and one of Laphos cousins. We started our task inside the dense forest where the creek flowed out from the jungle to the valley floor. The main task was to dig out sand and dead vegetation of the channels, also the clearing of vines and smaller trees with the bamboo-knife had to be done. Another task which required a certain amount of manpower was reconstructing the dams intended to guide the water. Large synthetic fibre bags, that I estimate to hold about 40 litres, were filled with sand and soil to make out the main structure of the dam. Stones and bits of peat were added to stop leaks. One of the main motivators for Dipho to take part in this work party was the fact that this also benefited his fields as he was located downstream; however, it was Laphos paddies which was the focus of work. Although Lapho told me that he would help out Dipho on a later time in return, I was unfortunately not able to observe this.

Land rights to paddies are in general more established than for garden plots. The reason for this being, according to Lapho, the paddies have been in use for a longer period of time. As far as I could understand, the use of paddies in Ban Pha Kwao could be tracked at

least four or five generations back. The garden plots on the other hand are relatively new as they earlier were parts of large scale rotational farming. Although the ownership of paddies were rarely a topic of discussion, as it was rather seen as granted, it was sometimes put in contrast to the rights of ownership to garden plots. One farmer went as far as saying that the garden plots are a kind of temporal project that in time would lead to concrete ownership. However, rights to use of paddies are also clearly market by the mentioned cement bricks, illustrated below (fig.5).

Fig. 5: Border markers in paddy fields

Land rights to paddies are legalised in two aspects. The first and mostly used when discussing the topic is that of inheritance. As elaborated in the introduction chapter, the transfer of land between generations depends on situation. Still, empirical data suggest that there is a certain tendency that newly-weds attains land from the groom's family. In the case of Lapho, Dipho and the deceased third brother, land was transferred to them from their ageing parents when they established households for themselves close to their parent's house. It is unclear to me what happened to the land of the widowed sister in-law, but my impression is that she kept the land and is helped out in cultivation by her family and in-laws. In the case of Bun, his present land was inherited from his parents although he initially moved to his wife's residential area. He had no sons and all of his seven daughters had moved to the city

for work and education. However, he explained that he would give the land to those of them who decided to move back to the village. During my fieldwork, Bun started work on a new house on the compound of his household intended for one of his daughters and the coming son in-law. Furthermore, the rights to paddies are legalised by the mentioned cement markers that institutionalise inheritance through the process of transfer registration in the Ampur office. As pointed out by some of my informants, not all farmers choose to register their paddies, non-registration being possible for those fields located in the more remote areas. However, most of the farmers in Ban Pha Kwao see the land mark registration as a progress towards increased rights and recognition in the wider Thai society. The regime of self-sustaining agriculture is in Ban Pha Kwao the production of rice and maintenance of the household. The rice production represents a loop in the farming system of Ban Pha Kwao in which produce is retained from the market because of its central value to the Karen lifestyle and identity. The planting, harvesting, and consumption are all done by the household as a unit of production. This follows the concept of unity that holds such high value in the Karen life, and makes out a cornerstone in the community. Rice, being consumed by the individual household, is, through the value inscribed in it, produced for the preservation of the Karen community. In contrast, the commercial regime relies on price fluctuations and ability to negotiate a good price with the merchants, not the social value of the produce.

I do not claim the two regimes to be isolated from each other, as should be obvious from fig.2; on the contrary, a close connection between them exists as they operate together in a greater system and always influence each other. A farmer does not put aside all thoughts about his red onion crop when going to the paddy fields. The Karen farmer of Ban Pha Kwao is constantly working, making adjustments and choices of how and where he wants to put in labour.

Talking to some of the elders in the village, it became apparent that it is perhaps in the annual cycle of farming that the connection between the two regimes is most evident. While conducting an interview session with Pho on his farming practice, his daughter and wife was present, weaving traditional cloths in the background. When discussing the annual cycle of production, his wife, Pen, leans over to comment and exemplifies the relation between the commercial and the subsistence regime.

> "[…] before, cotton for the Karen shirt, we grow around the house. Now we always have to think about earning more cash, so we have to buy the cotton from Chom Thong."
>
> (Pen 2009, author's field notes)

What Pen means is that the farmers of Ban Pha Kwao no longer have time to take care of additional production as the commercial regime takes up all spare time and labour. Several of my informants maintained that they had in general more time to relax and do odd jobs around the compound in the past, but that this time is now consumed by the commercial regime. It was especially the period from February to April that my informants referred to when speaking of this. In this period the paddies are left to bake in the sun and gather nutrition as the weather is too dry to continue producing another crop of rice. During this period, the household could focus on crucial repairs on the house and so on. This was not considered to be a free time, but a more tranquil phase of the production cycle.

Pen went on to tell me that it was in the preparation phase of plots used to grow cash crops like cabbage and red onion that the increase in workload was most noticeable. It was not only the direct preparation of the soil that needed work; it was acquiring of investment resources like chemicals, fertilizers and workforce as well. Also, the whole process needs careful calculation of accumulated cash and the output needed to be managed and planned for future production. The whole process put a lot of stress on the household to 'be on top of things'.

The increase in workload affects in one way or the other the organisation of labour. Towards the end of my fieldwork I observed the intimate connection between the two regimes of agriculture through how the household handled its workforce. As mentioned above, the preparation of the paddy fields and the planting of red onion overlap, the two regimes share time and workforce. The paddies are dependent on heavy shifting of soil, while the cash crops are dependent on quick planting. The preparation of the paddy fields requires a lot of hard physical work, thus not considered suitable for women. However, the red onion planting is easy work and I observed several women who had brought their children with them to the garden plot. These were not necessarily women who were part of the producing household, but women who worked as paid labour. During Bun's red onion planting, the women who were not directly related to his household were paid 100THB a day, while most of their husbands worked on the paddies. I claim that the women represent in this period a free group

of labour, creating the possibility for boosting the cash income of the household. However, this is not as much a bonus as a necessity to make ends meet. Paying off the labour becomes an easier solution to reciprocity in this period as a lot of labour is needed for the planting and the whole village is already tied up in the preparation of the paddy fields. Work exchange between the farmers would be complicated as they do not all produce on the same scale and because they plant at the same time within a fairly small time window. Labour paid in cash would tempt a cultivator to put off his own work for a day or two in order to boost his cash income. Also, as mentioned above, women present a workforce in this period. Odd jobs related to commercial production was also often paid off in preference to work exchange. One incident while building a new greenhouse for Lapho's flower crop illustrates this. Lapho hired a man from the village to help carry wood from the jungle which would make out the girders of the roof. This is not a common task as the roof of a greenhouse lasts for several years before being replaced. The two men carried large logs of wood out of the jungle all day, but instead of returning the favour by one day of work; Lapho paid the man by giving him an old cellular phone. The farmers of Ban Pha Kwao view themselves as isolated and competitive producers in the commercial regime. Thus, offering payment for labour creates an opportunity for anyone able and interested to earn extra cash and making the farmer able to plant his crops without tying up himself in future work responsibilities.

Therefore, the two regimes of agricultural practise clearly overlap and affect each other in both social value and plain physical effort. The social overlap is due to the fact that certain social expectations of producing rice need to be met, as well as the expectations of accumulating cash to meet demands from a consumer oriented lifestyle. The physical overlap lies in the fact that the actual production cycles overlaps and thus puts strain on the household. As Gudeman claims, this makes out the tension of an economy (2008). The consumer/producer has to make choices. Not only based on the profit maximising behaviour, but also based on the social values in his community. Regarding the village of Ban Pha Kwao; the farmer must produce rice for his household due to social expectations, being Karen, and at the same time he must pay attention to the main source of cash income; the commercial regime. The farmer produces on two fronts and is always working to get the most out of the two regimes. I hold that this has contributed to the idea of the Constant Struggle, as elaborated in the previous chapter. In the next part of this chapter I will put forth the idea of the Constant Struggle to emphasise the connection between the two regimes of agriculture. Furthermore

this trail of thought clearly connotes the long-standing question of peasant economies and dual choices, elaborated in chapter three.

- Connecting the regimes -

Returning to the concept of a Constant Struggle, or the idea that my informants referred to as their struggle, I want to use this notion to pinpoint the connection between the commercial and subsistence agricultural regime. I want to show that through the household the two regimes are both connected and set apart. The relation between the two regimes shows us that the mutuality and impersonal trade realms are not disconnected, as it would seem in a plain economical view.

The commercial regime and the subsistence agricultural regime are connected through the household, which act as a hub for available labour. The household supply labour to the commercial agriculture as a way to enrich the household with cash and in turn invest in education, material improvements or other goods. At the same time it also supplies labour to the subsistence agriculture for producing rice. This may be a rather mechanical view of the household, but it is still necessary to understand the connection between the regimes. The household makes up what can be called the producing unit in Ban Pha Kwao. Whether in commercial or subsistence agriculture; the household is the producing unit.

The adaptation of commercial agriculture has, as mentioned, tied up much of the available workforce in Ban Pha Kwao and has had a major impact on the agriculture cycle of the village. Commercial in combination to subsistence agriculture, and adding all the other tasks a normal peasant life entails, creates a constant need of labour and, as my informants said, no time for relaxing. The contemporary way of life in Ban Pha Kwao do not necessarily produce more rice than before, substantial information about this is however difficult to obtain. What is clear is that the previously tranquil period is spent maximising the potential output of the commercial regime. This feeling of never being sufficient, I argue, creates an idea of being in a constant struggle for sustaining a household. I do not claim that the farmers only imagine to be overworked, having spent some good time in the farming plots myself, I can honestly say that there are few people I have met elsewhere that are under such constant pressure to work as the Karen of Ban Pha Kwao. The adaptation to commercial agriculture also brought with it, especially amongst the younger generations, the demand for material standards, much because of the model lowland city life with shiny motorbikes and brick

apartments. According to some of my elder informants, this is one of the reasons why many Karen today feel that they are at the lower levels of the ladder that makes out the demographic landscape of Thailand, both socially and economically. This leads to my argument that the idea of the Karen population being in a Constant Struggle is not a new phenomenon, but already existing traits that have been emphasised by the commercial agriculture.

The household needs to cover two bases; accumulation of cash and the self-sustainment. At the same time as there is a need to produce enough rice to feed the family, there is also a need for certain material goods that can only be bought for cash. These are not necessarily luxury goods, but also take the form of farming equipment and other necessities. To these bases, certain expectations are connected. According to the social expectations of being Karen; it is expected that the household can provide sufficient rice to feed itself, it is also expected that the household acknowledge the value of rice and the contribution it makes to the continuity of the Karen way of life. This idea was stressed time and again during interview sessions on the traditional Karen life. However, in contemporary Karen life, one is also expected to maintain a certain material standard. Amongst the youth this may entail having a motorbike or a cellular phone, among the adult farmers it may be to have a pick-up, a TV-set or a refrigerator. Lapho commented to me that one time he had a dispute with a former Pujaban regarding the use of government funding. Lapho explained that the Pujaban did not take his opinion in consideration as he did not own a pick-up truck and thus had no saying in the matter. The point here is that enriching the household with material goods is not only to improve the life of the members of the household, but it also to a certain degree expected by the community. Not unlike the situation in the Western consumer society. It is not necessarily a social stigma not to have this and that of material goods, but it is clearly a need that most farmers seek to cover.

This double set of expectations creates tension in the community, and with reference to the previously mentioned group interview at Ban Mai, has a splitting effect on the Karen community. The issue of always covering expectations has its pull on the household, it leads to a constant pressure on maximising the output of the farming and thus creating a feeling of always struggling to make ends meet. A Karen farmer has to not only make sure the household has a sufficient base of rice, but also work to supply the household with a cash income. What can be conceptualised as the Constant Struggle is more than a struggle for

survival, although this of course very much a part of the reality, it is also a struggle to meet expectations of the community.

I claim that the pressure of meeting expectations cascade into all layers of Karen life. In addition to the pressure of maintaining a certain way of life the Karen population is always reminded that they are an ethnic minority in the demographic landscape of Thailand and have by far not the same rights and opportunities as the majority. This reminder is often represented as the Karen being the receiving end in any government development scheme or NGO activity, discussed in chapter three and four. The result is what I have conceptualised as the Constant Struggle, which in short is the notion that the Karen farmer always has to struggle to meet demands and expectations from the immediate community as well as the pressure of the consumer culture in general and outside agencies. The two regimes can not be seen as two disconnected modes of production. Such a view would oversimplify the complex social aspects certainly entwined with the farming practice. If we are to consider peasant farming systems as pure mechanical systems, a view often pressed by conservative economic thinking, impacts on social aspects of a community as a result of changes, becomes mere bi-products of a superior scheme. This notion is unfortunately common among government agencies and policy makers in Thailand, as distinct cultural traits often is perceived as backwards and obstructive to efficient economical development.

As the Constant Struggle has become something Karen identify with the Karen way of life, I maintain that it draws in part on the situation of the upland population as marginalised in comparison to the lowland farmers, in turn uniting the uplanders. This is a fact in spite of the consensus that the splitting effect it has on the village is a damaging result of commercial agriculture. The ongoing hard work with the commercial agriculture to accumulate cash has flowed into the realm of subsistence production in the notion of the Constant Struggle. When speaking about their hardship as Karen farmers, my informants rarely pointed out a certain aspect of their life that was particularly hard, it is the never ending work covering the needs of the household that entails the Constant Struggle. Commercial agriculture thus becomes a central part of the Karen social life, continuing beyond the role of a simple investment/output entrepreneurial effort. In other words, even though commercial and subsistence agriculture in Ban Pha Kwao operates on a different base of value, they are connected through the household and the Constant Struggle. Different commons exists in the two regimes that both sets them apart and brings them together. In the subsistence regime the value of rice serves as

dominant symbol of what it means to be Karen and in the commercial, the common position as marginalised upland farmers in contrast to the lowlands act as a symbol of their Constant Struggle. From chapter three we can understand that the Thai government's need to politicise state space through pressing schemes of development and conservation has contributed in a large degree to the upland – lowland dichotomy, and in turn to the idea of a Constant Struggle. Furthermore, as I discussed in chapter four; the work of NGOs in the region have put upland population groups in a larger context through politicising their ethnic identity. The ethnic label of a group, e.g. Karen, is seen as essential by NGOs for the recognition of the ethnic diversity of northern Thailand. Commons, such as the value of rice, then becomes fundamental to how a community perceive themselves as a coherent ethnic group.

- Rice and Opium -

A separation of commercial agriculture from the self-sufficient due to a certain base of value is not a phenomenon limited to the Karen society. I mentioned shortly in the previous chapter how the Kekchi Mayas valued and respected corn and separated it from the realm of commerce (Gudeman, 2001:44). To further support my concept of agricultural regimes I want to put forth an additional ethnographic example of communities where a similar phenomenon has occurred. The ethnography is mainly extracted from a dissertation of Arne Kalland on the opium production in the Golden Triangle and focus on the production of opium in relation to rice among the Hmong people (1985). Again, I must emphasise that I do not intend to establish a rule of what happens to an agrarian society when adapting commercial agriculture. However I use the comparative material to illustrate a point; that the adaptation to commercial agriculture may create loops in the agricultural production where certain products is more or less retained from direct commercial forces, that is; if a sufficiently strong Common exists. These loops, drawing on the theories of Gudeman mentioned in chapter four, refer to reproducible goods (e.g. agricultural) and often take the form of a good central to maintain living conditions.

Opium was introduced to the Asian trade market through private British actors and the East-India Trading Company in the 19th century (Kalland, 1985:134). During 1767, 1000 crates of opium exported from Bengal to Guangzhou in China, no more than six decades later British merchants exported about 40 000 crates, equalling a staggering 2000 metric tons (Kalland, 1985:134). As opium production and trade took hold in Asia, the production

practise was soon adopted by the people living in the mountainous regions. Most nation states cracked down on production in the late 19th and early 20th century, however, the production in the uplands continued due to the difficult task of controlling and monitoring the vast mountainous areas (Kalland, 1985:137).

The Hmong is an ethnic minority living within the highlands in the area described as the Golden Triangle. The Golden Triangle encompass the northern parts of Thailand, including Chiang Mai, the north-western parts of Laos and the north-eastern parts of Burma, including the Shan and Kachin states. The triangle also covers the borderlands between the previously mentioned nation states and Yunnan province in China (Kalland, 1985:12). The Hmong are considered to be one of the larger groupings within this area and are perhaps the group who has most frequently been accused of being opium producers (Kalland, 1985:29). This has led to the popular belief that the Hmong is intentionally boosting the underground narcotics economy, rendering them stigmatised and branded in the broader demographic landscape. In my own experience this was evident in how many of the backpackers I talked to during my fieldwork who were rather disappointed after visiting a Hmong village, they had expected large areas of poppy fields, instead they just had encountered plain old boring rice production. Even though the Hmong are one of the most renowned ethnic groupings in Southeast Asia they have a rather short history in the region. Their emigration from China to Vietnam, Burma, Laos and Thailand occurred in the beginning of the 19th century due to the aggressive expansion of the Chinese nation state (Kalland, 1985:91-92).

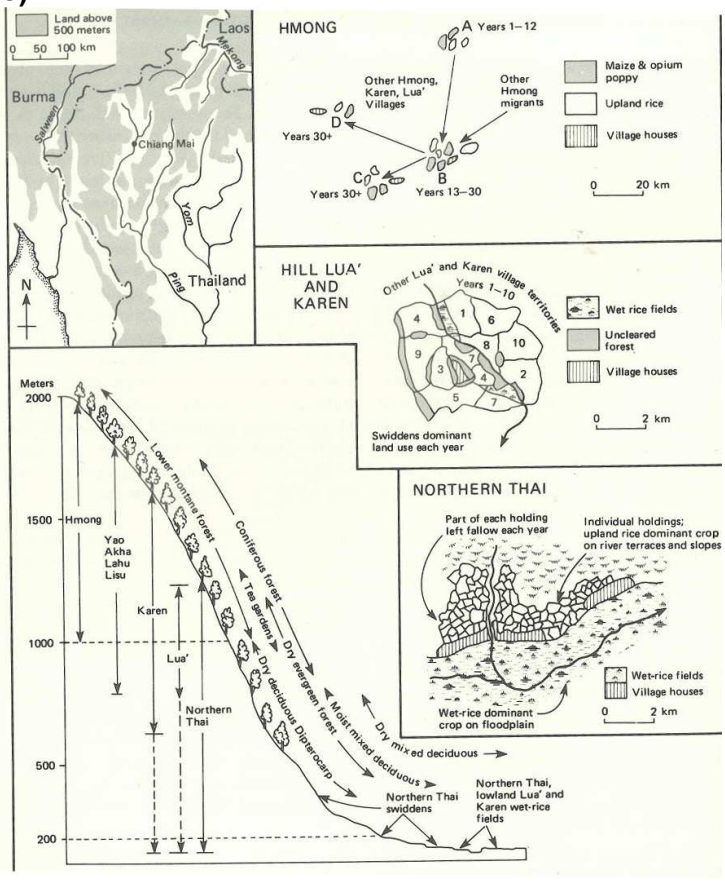
As for the Karen, rice is the staple food for the Hmong and is the main subsistence agricultural produce (Kalland, 1985:99). However, even though in minority, it has occurred that villages have become net importers of rice due to opium production. A reason for this phenomenon is not clear, but Kalland draws on an idea of land shortage as poppy fields is immensely less land consuming than rice production. While a farmer needs about 0.6 acres for producing enough rice for his household, the same amount of rice could be bought for 215 THB (1985). If the farmer chose to cultivate poppies and buy this amount of rice, poppies selling for 750THB/Kg, he only needs the produce from 0.08 acres (Kalland, 1985:99). In strict economic logics, it would make no sense continuing producing rice. In spite of this however, the majority of the Hmong population continues being self-sufficient in rice.

Kalland claims that it is not only due to its position as a staple crop, but due to rice also holding a ritual value. For the Hmong the rice god is still a prominent feature in the

community, an opium god does, on the other hand, not exist (Kalland, 1985:99). In Chinese sources dating from 1820 the Hmong agricultural practise is described in detail without reference to opium production, thus we can with some certainty assume that the opium production is a fairly new phenomenon among the mountainous farmers, discrediting, according to Kalland, the popular belief that opium production holds a strong traditional value for the Hmong (Kalland, 1985). Sangas work on the opium traffic in northern Thailand confirms this notion. He claims that even if opium has been used as pain-relieving drugs for some time, the large scale growing and trade is an activity of recent date (1978:207). Kalland holds that if opium production had an older history among the Hmong, it would perhaps take on a more abstract value, but the reality is that it is an economical adjustment (Kalland, 1985:137). The poppy fields can, in theory, therefore be substituted by another crop with the same economical value without disrupting central values, or in Gudeman's words; Commons (2001), in the Hmong community. However, as Sanga claims, in practice, many of the opium producers have become very dependent on the economical contribution from the poppies and an elimination of the illegal farming need careful consideration of the financial needs of the farmers, including taking land shortage into the equation (1978:206). This is unfortunately not often a direct, but subordinated goal in the attempt by various agencies to close down opium production. Rice can however not so easily be substituted, due to its central ritual value (Kalland, 1985:137). In the late 1950s a switch from poppies to other cash crops was enforced on the mountain farmers as a result of a development scheme that focused on three goals; (i) to eradicate the illegal opium production, (ii) to abolish slash and burn farming and (iii) to enhance political security in the region, the subordinate goal was to enhance living standards in the mountain (Kalland, 1985:182). The campaign had mixed success. A big problem identified by Kalland was that the project was more or less enforced upon the ethnic minorities without taking local parameters in consideration (Kalland, 1985:183). Another important reason is that the new technology was met with scepticism by upland farmers. Especially many of the Hmong farmers already had a broad knowledge of how to maximise profit of poppy fields and few were motivated to start a new and uncertain method of production (Kalland, 1985:186). Cash crops other than poppies are in many cases in conflict with rice production, both in land and labour, lest they are seasonally and soil demandingly different. The opium production minimises the conflict with rice production due to its compatibility with production cycle and demand for a different soil than rice (Kalland, 1985).

An obvious question to ask is why the Hmong have been particularly branded as opium producers, why have not the Karen adopted this method of production when they have so easily adopted the commercial agriculture in the form of cabbage and red onion? The narrative and general explanation is that the poppy fields ideally grow at an altitude of 1000 meters above sea level. However, Kalland points out that while it is true that this excludes most Karen villages, there are several known villages to fall within the ideal altitude for opium production (Kalland, 1985:161). According to a schematic presentation found in Kunstadter and Chapman's dissertation on the ethnic minorities of South East Asia, *Problems of Shifting Cultivation and Economic Development in Northern Thailand,* depicted below (fig. 6), the Karen villages range from the valley floor up to about 1700 meter above sea level (Kunstadter and Chapman, 1978:8).

Fig. 6: Schematic presentation of upland populated areas (Kunstadter and Chapman, 1978:8)



It is in the social organisation we can identify a reason for the lack of poppy fields around Karen villages. Production of opium is very labour consuming, especially during harvest. It does however not demand broad based knowledge of the production or physical strength, so

women and children are often a part of the workforce (Kalland, 1985:163). A large household is therefore ideal for this crop. The Karen however, as deliberated in the previous chapter, consist of small household, in most cases only the typical nucleus family. The typical Hmong household, on the other hand, often consists of several married couples as the household tries to hold back the married sons and daughters from moving out (Kalland, 1985:163). Even though this clearly contributes to labour for opium production, Kalland argues that it is not a sufficient reason for the Karen not to take part in this production. He claims that moral principles in the Karen social system also prohibit such farming. Moreover, he points out that while the Hmong practise shifting agriculture by migration, the Karen practises sedentary agriculture (Kalland, 1985).

I maintain that the opium production among the Hmong do not have the same traditional roots as do rice. The poppies are a favoured crop due to their high economical yield in relation to input and that they are easy to store and transport, in the end an economical adaptation, as with the cash crops among the Karen. I will not elaborate on value of rice for the Hmong here, as I myself have spent very limited time in a Hmong village, but it is clear from the ethnographic dissertations on the ethnic group that the rice plant and production holds a value beyond the nutritional and thus is to a large degree retained from being consumed by the opium production. For the Hmong as for the Karen of Ban Pha Kwao, a Common leads to a loop in production. This loops maintains and reproduces central values in the community and at the same time retain the subsistence crop from the market economy.

7 Concluding Remarks

When agriculture is such a central and fundamental way of life as in a Karen community, bases of value emerge that have implications on how the people act and relate themselves to farming. If we analyse any farming village in depth, patterns of behaviour presents itself that stretches way past that of simple maximisation of economic output. In this thesis, we have seen how food production takes on fundamental role as symbol of identity. The abstract notion of a common identity is negotiated in the Karen community and projected onto the main subsistence crop produced; rice. Rice stands as a pillar in the community and dictates what it entails to be Karen and how a Karen household is to maintain a livelihood. That is, a Karen household should endeavour to recognise rice as a source of life and not as source of personal enrichment. Furthermore the household should always maintain a sufficient base of rice for all its members. The value in rice unites Karen to a coherent ethnic group, mitigating internal competition and differences. The competition seems to be put aside when talking about the endeavours of the Karen people and how they must struggle to make ends meet in a society where they are socially marginalised to the Thai majority.

My aim for this thesis has been to challenge the idea that agricultural systems simply are mechanical driven aspects of society that is easily substituted with a more refined and improved method of cultivation. The commercial agriculture has indeed gained traction in Ban Pha Kwao, and has without doubt increased the cash flow for many of the farmers. Still, it has not led farmers to abolish their rice cultivation to focus all labour and input on cash crops. Rice has through such initiatives as the Rice Merit been elevated to a level of symbolic value, making the notion of abandoning it absurd to most Karen farmers. To be Karen is to produce rice. The agricultural practise in a peasant community is not so simple as to part it in subsistence and commercial, the link between them and what sets them a part needs to be

investigated if one is to understand how the flow of resources takes certain paths. The value system shared by participators in the community needs to be taken into account. In Ban Pha Kwao we can understand the two regimes of agricultural practise to be separated due to values of ethnic identity. Through the need of constructing a coherent ethnic identity, rice is perceived as a fundamental value in Karen community. Subjecting rice to commercial activity would be to undermine the very identity of the group. As discussed in chapter three and four, the construction of an ethnic identity is highly influenced by the work of NGOs and the governments need to politicise state space. The commercial regime is separated from the subsistence in that its cultivation and produce, such as red onion and cabbage, holds no social value related to the Karen ethnic identity. For farmers such as Bun, a crop of red onion is first and foremost a mean of accumulating cash. Still, the regimes are connected. As the farmers of Ban Pha Kwao feel that they constantly have to fight to make ends meet, the commercial and the subsistence regime is united in the idea of Constant Struggle. The Karen of Ban Pha Kwao perceives themselves as a part of a larger marginalised group as upland cultivators, in contrast to the lowland population. In the contemporary political context in Thailand, the upland – lowland situation poses an important question. If this question is to be addressed, I hold that it is important to take into consideration what makes out the foundation of identity management in such villages as Ban Pha Kwao. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the work of NGOs and government agencies have major implications to how population groups relate to each other and in turn where potential conflicts may arise.

List of Figures

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