

CHAPTER IV

BORDERLAND FILMSCAPE 1

Usually excluded from studies of the field of film production are (digital) films from the borderlands, although they constitute a distinct part of Thailand's filmscape. Private, governmental and non governmental organisations, social activists and artists are producing digital films independently from the film industry. Such films are made for academic research purposes, education, advocacy work, social empowerment, trainings, serve as general information, and as a resource.

“Paying attention to the accessibility of video technology means taking note of how audiences have now turned into media-makers.” Sudarat (2007: 251)

Differing from commercial productions, these independent films usually do not serve the sole purpose to sell and yield economic profits. Their value is defined also in terms of cultural, social and symbolic capital. However, to gain such value, these films are, in as much as commercial films, dependent on channels of distribution and exhibition. The logic of Bourdieu's field of cultural production only applies when a network of agents and an appreciative audience are linked. The kind of value to be gained depends on the producers' objectives, the probability to be able to achieve this aim, however, depends on the structure of the field.

This and the following chapter are studies of the field of digital film productions from communities in Thailand's northern borderlands. The questions asked are: What are the structural mechanisms regulating and the socio-political dynamics shaping digital film productions? Four case study films serve as example to study how the imagery of digital film productions differs from the Thai film industry's? What are the images produced in the borderlands? And how are decisions made about the films' storylines, form and style.

4.1 Significance of the structure of the field

Previous chapters have shown, that dominant social forces in the field of commercial film production use their position to legitimate power over and monopolise modes of representation. It has also been established that 'independent' films rely entirely on transnational capital for their films' trajectories. This regulation extends to the borderlands, where different dynamics enable digital film production. The following chapters study the structures of institutions and organisations in the borderlands, which involve ethnic communities, filmmakers, editors, directors of programs, and stated and less obvious objectives of the different parties, especially the funding organisations. The negotiating processes over the power of representation are traced along these structural lines. This study encompasses the regulation of production and distribution by the social agents involved. The power of manipulation is traced by deconstructing the ways films are produced to find out about the processes of negotiation or imposition of legitimate modes of representation. These dynamic processes were investigated by locating and interviewing, where possible, the social agents involved in the production (the community and its individual members, videographer and family, editor and family, anthropologist/research project leader, translators, other project members, technical and administrative staff, peers etc.) The specific local field is, however, also understood as a sub-field of the national, and where global capital is invested of a transnational field. I inquire into the structural mechanisms regulating and the socio-political dynamics shaping digital film productions from the northern borderland. And ask, how the imagery of digital film productions differ from, is it conform with or contesting predominant imagery from the national film industry? Finally, it is relevant to understand how decisions are made about the films' storyline, form and style?

4.2 A history of borderland ethnography: The Tribal Research Institute

The Tribal Museum in Chiang Mai is a local government organisation under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Office of the Permanent Secretary. Its history is longer and more complicated than the nine-sided pagoda housing the museum in the midst of the Rama IX Park suggests. The former Tribal Research Institute (TRI) established under the Ministry of Interior, dates back to 1965, when it was called the Tribal Research Centre (TRC)¹. Since the Bureaucratic Reform Act in 2002, the TRI was suspended and its official function reduced to 'Tribal Museum'. The most experienced research institute studying Northern Thailand's ethnic minorities has been dissolved and not replaced, although it was used as the centre for applied anthropology, and agricultural, geographic as well as health surveys. This is either a very post-modern move reflecting rejection of discrimination on racial or ethnic grounds, or it is pretentious. Given the former research institute's vast archive and international standing, its transformation into a museum seems to be putting ethnic minority affairs literally *ad acta*. The TRI's efforts in aiding government authorities' integration efforts of ethnic minority peoples into Thai society are no longer appreciated. Instead, this move seems to signal, as anthropologist Kwanchewan Buadaeng points out, that this process is officially regarded as completed (Kwanchewan a 2005). This is in conscious disregard of the fact that many borderland communities continue to struggle to obtain Thai citizenship and/or rights for land tenure. Sustainable development for the communities in the borderlands has persisted as a major challenge since the TRC was initially set up 52 years ago.

At the time, Village Welfare Assistance Centres were set up in the borderlands and mobile units employed for their respective missions. Border Patrol Police was helping to fulfil the task of offering welfare to 'people far from road access' *prachachon klai khamanakhom* (Kwanchewan a 2005: 2) as members of communities in the borderlands were officially called before their stigmatization as 'hill tribes'. To centralize the diversity of envisioned development plans drawn up for the region, Hans Manndorff, an Austrian anthropologist working in Northern Thailand at the time, conceived the idea of a research centre. Its tasks and status as an organization was kept

¹ Chiang Mai University was inaugurated the same year the TRC was established. The centre was for long housed on the CMU campus.

ambivalent as the TRC, and later as TRI, was never directly affiliated to a university or other research institute. In their analysis of the former institute's work Kwanchewan point out that the "conflicting role and affiliation of the TRC existed from the beginning" (ibid.: 11): From 1965-1971, a commitment to basic ethnographic research, demographic surveys and other specific research prevailed; while from 1972-1983, a more applied anthropological research approach focusing on issues of land-use, cash crop substitution, and aid for international cooperation in agricultural projects was pursued. And, more action research was conducted with the rigorous oppression of opium growers since 1984. A government organization, its foremost *raison d'être* was first of all to advise, then monitor and evaluate state policy. The research centre's first external advisor, the Australian anthropologist William Geddes, was concerned about the TRC's ambiguous status and function. Both Manndorff and Geddes argued in favour of a more independent role of the research centre and its eventual affiliation with Chiang Mai University (Wakin 1992) Such wishful thinking was left unreciprocated, possibly due to a misunderstanding as to the meaning of its advisory role to the Thai government. As Kwanchewan, and Wakin show, its inception was a means expected to generate knowledge of people and a region the Ministry of Interior, and later the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare, was gearing up 'welfare and development' programmes for. Theirs' and their international counterparts' programme implementation, crucial research, information collection and data-base building *and* personal engagement and trust building were amongst the services aiding Thai government and international interventions. In the course of the TRC/TRI's work, an impressive collection of multi-media resources was created, which includes "81 reels of 16mm film, videos, 300 black-and white photos and more than 2,000 colour photographs and slides"².

The central role and invaluable expertise of TRC/TRI research staff in advising national policy concerning the so-called "hill tribes" is unquestionable, and its ungraceful closure in 2002 a dilemma not only for former research team members. Kwanchewan generously gloss over almost a decade of the institute's history during the Cold war, when the people inhabiting the borderlands of Burma, China, Thailand and

² The figures do not correspond with the ones communicated in person. Films made by anthropologists Manndorff, Scholz, Volprecht and Kauffmann in the early 60's about the Akha, Hmong, Karen, Kachin, Lahu and Lisu are not available in any of Thailand's anthropological research institutions.

Vietnam were ostensibly falling like dominos in the hands of communists. Its service to academic research purposes has always been stressed, and, indeed, the timely coincidence of its founding with an increased presence of North American researchers and advisors in Thailand did foster interdisciplinary work. Associations of institutes of higher learning with government agencies to foster a more effective relationship between national security and scientific learning were created in North America at the end of WW II. Their agencies worked (not only in Thailand) on the premise that 'welfare and development', which was equalled with 'modernization', would positively effect (inter-)national security. The Academic Advisory Council for Thailand, for example, was established by the U.S. Agency for International Development Aid, and cooperated with the University of California "to AID programs "dealing with development and counterinsurgency problems" in Thailand" [ibid. Wakin's footnote indicates the exact title of the contract AID/fe-267 enacted on 6 September 1966.] Other well known Northern American universities applied for participation in research activities, which normally covered the social sciences, especially anthropology, but project proposals included natural scientists as well. To be sure, these projects were not administered through the Tribal Research Centre, which was a base-line structure. The Report of the UN Survey Team, 1967, describes the TRC's mission and initial structure as follows:

The Future of the Tribal Research Centre, a sub-section of the Hill Tribes Division of the Department of Public Welfare working closely together with Border Patrol Police.

"The Centre has adopted a plan for coordinated series of socio-economic studies of the six main tribes- Miao, Yao, Lahu, Lisu, Akha and Karen – The studies will take two years and will be conducted by qualified anthropologists, most of them recruited overseas, each assisted by a Thai junior research worker employed by the Centre. The junior research workers will be trained in field methods by the anthropologists, and will, if possible be given scholarships for further academic training overseas and will, eventually, become expert on the tribe with which they have been associated. The socio-economic studies are expected to yield scientific information on

the Hill Tribes of a quality never previously achieved. Three of the studies are already well under way – those of the Miao, the Yao and the Lahu.

Finance for the three overseas anthropologists so far engaged has come in two instances from the Australian Government and in a third from the British Government. The Australian Government has provided advisors for the Centre and transport, the British Government gifts of books and the United States Government gifts of photographic and recording equipment.

Independently financed foreign anthropologists are making studies of the Akha, Karen and Miao. Another anthropologist studied the Lisu for a period before sickness interrupted the study. These anthropologists have cooperated with the centre. It is planned to hold a seminar in a few months time in which all the anthropologists working in tribal areas as well as some working in Thai Communities will participate.” (Report of the UN Survey Team 1967: 114)

Little is known about a discussion amongst Thai academics concerning the nature of social science research projects in Thailand at that time, or indeed, to which degree these activities were transparent. As a matter of fact, external researchers from renowned North American and other universities were aware of the fact that the identification of ‘problems’ amongst borderland peoples issues included ‘counter-insurgency’ and the opium business as Wakin’s seminal work ‘Anthropology Goes To War’ (1992) amply testifies. A Thailand field office of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) had been established in Bangkok as early as 1961. Wakin (1992: 81) cites Gen. Robert H. Wienecke describing the advantage of the Thai testing environment to be that it was “similar to Vietnam’s but nobody’s shooting at you.” An in-depth description of the agencies multiple activities exceeds the purposes of this paper, but it should be mentioned that it was known as ARPA Research and Development Centre, and its research was effectively conducted under the auspices of the Joint Thai/U.S. Military Research and Development Centre (MRDC). To be sure,

“[a]lthough MRDC was officially a joint undertaking, most of its research was primarily American both in concept and execution.” (ibid.: 83)

Amongst the ARPA/MRDC projects were the “Ethnography of the Akha”, authored by Kickert, “Examination of Popularly Held Images: prerequisites to Political Integration of the Thai-Islam” (Thomas), “Social Structure and Shifting Agriculture in a Meo Community” (Binney) and “A Social Anthropological Study of Yao People in Thailand” etc. (ibid: 82). “Hill tribe handbooks” and “counterinsurgency manuals” produced by ARPA essentially stigmatized people such as the Akha, Hmong, Lisu, Yao and others as ‘traditional opium growers’ with the habit of destroying the environment as seasonal burning of patches of swiddens for the land’s fertilization were called. As the remaining staff of the TRC readily admits, little did they or their counterparts understand at the time about rotational cultivation or swidden agriculture³. One of ARPA’s stated objectives was “[h]elp to develop Thai Ministry of Defence capability to define, manage and perform military research, development, testing, and evaluation.” (ibid.:81). What has become known as the ‘Thailand Controversy’ concerned implications and the ethical legitimacy which was questioned by a few American anthropologists (namely Keyes, Moerman, Phillips and Sharp), and resulted in a memorandum to the Academic Advisory Council for Thailand. The accounts of their discussions with the director of “Project Agile”, Deitchman, and press reports, Embassy statements etc. as summarized in Wakin (1992: 86-94) show points of views differing from acceptance of being employed as ‘consultants’ by ARPA to mild scepticism towards such a role. Although it was denied at the time, links with CIA projects were given as it was “funding and directing the intelligence division of the Thai National Police Department to conduct the same types of surveys that ARPA was funding, explicitly to locate communist and communist sympathizers among villagers” (ibid: 93).

The University of Sydney anthropologist Geddes, the first advisor to the TRC, was aware of the existence of U.S. funded ARPA projects and “allocation of Australian funds to the SEATO aid programme” for the TRC. The SEATO Report for 1967-1968

³ This fact has been pointed out to me by Dr. Heng L. Thung, whose expertise is in agriculture, but was in charge of aerial photography over Thailand’s Northeastern Provinces for ARPA in the early 1960’s. He also indicted that some foreign expert anthropologists had little technical understanding leading to erroneous cartography of the northern borderlands. (Personal communication 26.06.07)

explicitly notes on “communist subversion” and a year later on the relevance of TRC studies of borderland peoples in Thailand (ibid: 192-193). Anthropologist Hinton succeeded Geddes as advisor to the TRC and refused closer “coordination”, but ARPA’s head of mission, circumvented the TRC’s opposition by founding the Lanna Thai Research Centre at Chiang Mai University⁴. According to Geddes and Hinton, The Tribal Data Centre (TDC) seems to have been established as a joint ARPA – Faculty of Social Sciences project, although ARPA declared it to be a “cooperative project between the Faculty [of Social Sciences] and the Tribal Research Centre” (ibid: 195). Wakin’s archival research of the logistics of administration and financing are impressive and show, in brief, that ARPA *was* funding the TRC, and that this was obvious: The meeting at which this was announced on January 14, 1970, to which the then Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences had invited eighty people, was by no means a secret: Representatives of Christian missions, anthropologists, SEATO, the Thai Ministry of Interior, the Border Patrol Police, the Thai National Security Council, individuals from Chiang Mai University, and the Communist Suppression Operations Command amongst others were present to discuss research methods and use of the data (1992: 195).

Seeking to identify ethical regulations for anthropological research, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) decided to investigate the Thailand Controversy in November 1970. The resulting Mead Committee Report, which ultimately did not find ethical faults, was, however, rejected by the vast majority of its members during the AAA’s 70th annual meeting, and the issue remains “unresolved”. Not as business-as-usual, but research activities were continued in the borderlands with the first Bennington-Cornell Survey on ‘Tribal Peoples in Chiang Rai Province, North of the Mae Kok River’ conducted in 1964 was followed up from December 1973 – May 1974 by a second one concerning ‘Upland Villages from the Valley of the Mae Kok to the Burma Border’. While the TRI was involved in national research for the Royal Project, the Royal Forestry Department, Chiang Mai Province Administration, but also for US AID, FAO and others, including, in 1992, for example, the first research on AIDS/HIV among the ethnic minorities (Kwanchewan a 2005: 12)

Research in the field of cultural anthropology largely stopped after the TRI was dissolved in 2002, however, specific projects by individual researcher are continued

⁴ Personal communication with Dr. Heng L. Thung 26.06.07

especially in the field of audio-visual recordings to document the material cultures of the so called 'hill tribe' peoples, an initiative by the late Ajarn Jantaboon Sutee, who was convinced, their cultural heritage would vanish. With a grant from the Japanese International Cooperation Association (JICA), Jantaboon Sutee became the first trainee by the volunteer JICA Aturi. In 2001, the Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs donated a Media Production Room and equipment bearing stickers attesting it to be Official Development Aid (ODA). The Media Production Room consists of two editing suites, a digital camera and sound equipment as well as a 'dry-room' as the equipment, digital footage and the abovementioned archival material would suffer during the humid rainy season. Unfortunately, Aturi's written appeal to the JIAC to stay for an additional year after his initial 2-year term, was rejected. The second and current volunteer, Mr. Nagasawi, will stay until October 2007 and has trained one Thai cameraman. The JICA volunteer acts as supervisors of the digital film productions, although his advice is mainly technical, i.e. in the field of editing. All films are subtitled into Japanese, English and Thai. The agreement is that by the end of each fiscal year in March two digital films must be finished. No distribution system is in place, although the budget includes a limited amount of VCD/DVD copies. Apparently also with ODA funding, sixteen of the "approximately 70" (I was told) reels of 16mm film have been cleaned and digital copies made by a local film expert in Lamphan, who used to run mobile screenings from his van with a film projector, as The Tribal Museum could not afford professional film restoration by companies based in Bangkok. The current research team attempts to record and film mainly life-cycle events particularly of Akha, Hmong, Yao and Karen communities. Unless informed consent with the village is given, i.e. unless the museum team is invited to film, it will not be produced. The script will be in the hands of the research most familiar with the people or community, and a proposal is sent to the Chiang Mai City Hall for extra-ordinary financial resources and allowances for the logistics and other material needed. The envisioned target audience for the digital films is a not clearly specified general public. "The films should try to reflect the every-day hardships of tribal people and/or traditional lifestyles and modern lifestyles", I was told. Films produced with official Japanese ODA and JICA volunteers include general introductions of the ethnic people of northern Thailand, but also topics such as architecture, traditional healing methods and medicine and ritual ceremonies.

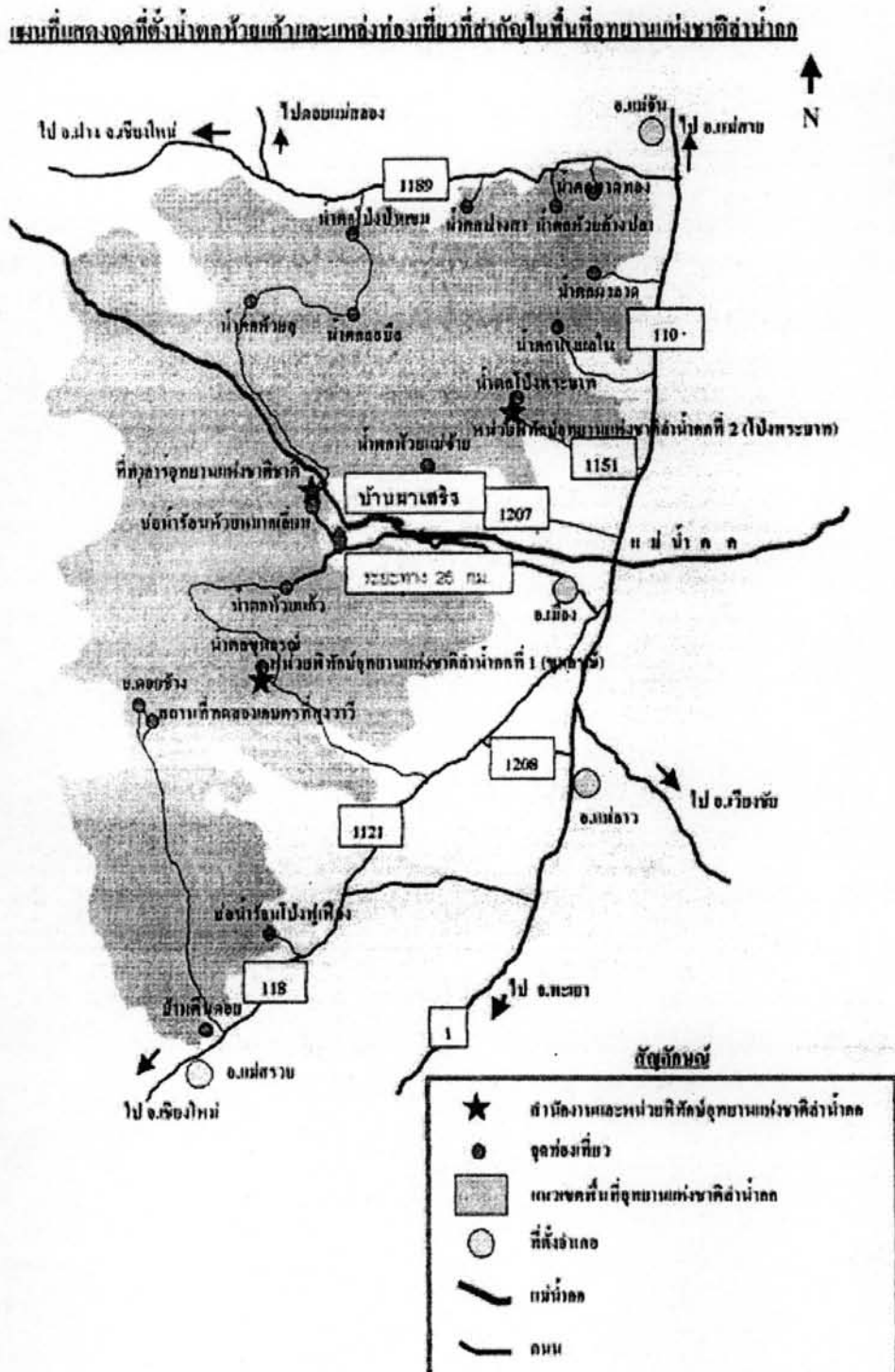
In December 2006, the Tribal Museum in cooperation with the Border Patrol Police organized activities held in honour of H.M. King Bhumibol's 60'th ascension to the throne in the adjacent Rama IX Park in Chiang Mai. Delegations of nine ethnic groups showed their respect by means of traditional ceremonial rites staged in traditional housing and dressed in traditional attire. Buddhist and Christian public prayers were also held. The three "new" groups in northern Thailand, according to one researcher of the Tribal Museum, are the Lua, the Dara'ang and the Kachin (from Thailand and Burma in different dress!). About 5000 people attended the event which had been announced through networks with non-governmental organizations and contacts from the 35 stations encompassing the Royal Project's Highland Agricultural Research Stations. The Social Development and Human Security Office of Chiang Mai Province had provided an allowance of 15.000 Baht, 10.000 of which were spent for filming and editing the entire event. The museum team has proposed to become a 'Centre for Hilltribe Information in Thailand' with a web-site, a magazine and producing more media. To create such a centre is the objective of an initiative of ethnic activists and officials from China and Burma together with Thai and international scholars and experts. They pooled ideas for 'Mekong Ethnic Media' in July 2006. It is planned that the center will be based in Chiang Mai and will be managed by two committees of ethnic peoples who live on the Chinese and Burmese borders. Its content will vary from archive material of ethnic-languages (texts, recordings, videos), and will cover multi-media resources to enable ethnic peoples to create multi format media in their own languages. To achieve these aims trainings for ethnic activists in research, archiving and audio-video technologies are planned. Initiated by a research institute at Chiang Mai University, Asia Catalyst helps "incubate independent, locally-controlled institutions", assists with fundraising efforts, and trains local staff to take on these responsibilities and to become self-sustained. Concurrently, Chiang Mai University Library is building the Living Library Project.

4.3 Background of video production - The Mirror Art Group (MAG)

The administrative village, to which the premises of MAG belong is Huay Mae Suai in Mae Yao sub-district of the provincial capital (*amphoe muang*) Chiang Rai. The Akha make up 25 percent of the total population of *tambon* Mae Yao. It lies in the midst of the 732.98 square kilometres Lam Nam Kok National Park, which the Anurak Thailand Tourism website (ATT 2006) describes as one of the “Six Most Popular National Parks of Thailand”. The distance from the Burma border and Tambon Thaton is 85 kilometres. Yet, the park only has a few official entrances, and notably communities South of the Mae Kok River are contesting its demarcations and usage of land.

Chiang Rai city is excluded from the park although situated in its centre. In a similar way, cultivated plots on lower elevations are exempt from National Park rules. A local Shan villager explained to me that cultivated fields serve as borderlines. But none of the land along the Nam Mae Kok is legally owned. He claims that only Thai lands are located “outside”, while everybody else is merely tolerated for the time being. The Highland Hilltribe Welfare Agriculture and Forestry Development Project stipulations, I was told, stall ownership of land above 100 meters of a stream level. In theory, higher elevations should be reforested, in practice, certain coffee and tea plantations and settlements are left untouched as they generate income and substitute previous cash crops. This does not impede land sales or construction although strictly speaking this would have to be considered encroachment on the National Park. Villages of Doi Hang District, South of the Mae Kok are meticulously dissected and only in *mu* 7, Baan Pong Nam Ron, 68 families have obtained a *soh cho* (the lowest of the various levels of land right certificates, provided if cultivation of the land can be proven for the last 10-20 years). Some Karen in *mu* 5 have *noh so sahm* titles for the land their houses are built on, but the fruit orchards of the Lisu and houses were burnt, according to local accounts, when they refused to resettle. Accordingly, the land for a holiday resort is being expanded to overlook the valley. Some maps do not have the National Park marked as such.

Figure 5: The Lam Nam Kok National Park



4.4 The Mirror Art Group (MAG) / The Mirror Foundation

The Bangkok based Komol Keemthong Foundation's philosophy of Buddhist economics aims at fostering sustainable development (Phra Dhammapitaka 1995). In cooperation between activist journalist and social critic Sulak Sivaraksa and Puey Ungphakorn, The Komol Keemthong Foundation was established in the 1960s to commemorate a young rural teacher who was killed while trying to educate poor and underprivileged people. It was a time in Thailand when social activist organisations and NGOs were founded in rural areas of Thailand, especially in the North and Northeast. Despite large-scale anti-communist campaigns by the Thai government, a number of activist organizations and anti-capitalist campaigns have been continuously working towards a just economy, and have grown to become an anti-globalisation movement in Thailand (sparked by the battles in Seattle in 1999 at the 3d World Trade Organisation's ministerial meeting). Among them are the Assembly of the Poor and The People's Network of 38 Organizations; the Thai Civic Action Network for civil rights, land ownership, and economic growth and the Eleven Peoples Alliance: stop FTA, stop privatizing Thailand campaign. Policies and practices by transnational organisations such as the Asian Development Bank have been criticized for large-scale infrastructure development projects as profiting the urban upper class at the cost of rural people's development. According to Phongpaichit and Baker (1995:385), The Komol Keemthong Foundation is "dedicated to the promotion of Buddhist values, community education, social welfare and the preservation of Thai art and culture" (cited in Encarnacion Tadem 2003). Its cofounder Sulak was known as an engaged Buddhist fostering non-violence, but also for his anti-Americanisation point of view.

With the foundations' support, the Mirror Art Group (MAG) grew from a Thai volunteers' initiative in 1991 (Training Institute of the Activists for the Constructive Innovation of Social Development) to become a registered foundation in 2004. The Mirror Art Foundation Project is funded by The Rockefeller Foundation (USA). MAG has an Office of Tsunami Volunteers working in Phang-nga in the South and a volunteer centre in Uttradit (also in the field of natural disasters). The headquarter office in Bangkok is responsible for public policy and legal work as well as being responsible

for the recruitment of volunteers. The Foundation's Chiang Rai Office constitutes of the biggest project. It addresses a number of social issues facing specifically ethnic minority community children in Baan Jalae and Baan Ya Fu (Lahu), and Baan Apa, Adu and Aja (Akha) as well as Baan Bukao (Mien/Yao) – all part of the administrative village of Huay Mae Suai in Mae Yao sub-district of the provincial capital Chiang Rai. Among the other projects MAG engages in are the 'Anti-Drug Community Network', 'Bannok-E-Commerce Project', 'Volunteer Teacher Project', 'Rights Protection and Status Development of Stateless Children in Thailand', 'Project To Combat Trafficking', 'ICT Development Project', 'Eco-Tourism Project', 'Bannok-TV: Media for Social Development', 'Right to Know Project' and the 'Hilltribe Museum Online' project amongst others.

The digital film production unit of the Mirror Art Group is Bannok TV with four Thai staff, of whom two are full-time and the other two are part-time concomitantly working for hilltribe.org. Besides having produced, edited and subtitled documentary films for the Hilltribe Virtual Museum, Bannok TV, Jamu and Jakatae (two Lahu filmmakers) have also produced films for the International Labor Organisation (ILO) to document state-less people and trafficking issues in the borderlands.

Other opportunities for media production (music CDs) are created through short film and (song) composition competitions "to mirror the lives and souls of tribal people". To encourage digital productions, MAG media units launched an ethnic film festival in 2005 in Chiang Rai, only to enlarge the scope in the next year in cooperation with the Thai Shortfilm Foundation: A documentary film workshop was held for the fifteen competing teams, whose films were screened at the Pridi Panomyong Institute in Bangkok on June 3, 2006. Two Hmong from Payao District in Chiang Rai participated and a Lahu team working with a foreign assistant, the other members of the 15 teams were Thai. MAG's media production also includes ethnic minority karaoke VCDs intended to promote ethnic songs as equivalent to other mainstream pop. Notably the locally famous Aqdui Aqkaq (Akha) performed for one of these VCD productions. The music is written by Gong and lyrics magically include the Akha genealogy. The project involves mainly young members of ethnic communities and aims at stimulating their initiating their own community activities. The MAG proactively creates and uses every

opportunity to exhibit the films at public events in the North, and has launched a similar competition in the music media section The First Akha Singing Competition at Saen Jai Mai Village, Mae Fah Luang District in Chiang Rai Province from September 3 - 4, 2005.

Their broadcasting program is limited to a radius of three kilometres, when it is not interrupted for 'technical reasons'. As programming should focus on local contributions, basic camera trainings (3-4 days) were provided for Mien, Lahu, Akha and Karen children and adults (15-20 people). The communities could thereafter request a camera for filming ceremonies or other activities they considered important for their village based data base to be screened and archived at hilltribe.org. The director of Bannok TV notes, however, that none of the Mien (Yao) requested a camera, while these have been provided for Akha and Lahu film projects. The general lack of participants is considered to be due to increasing rural – urban migration as access to arable land is getting scarcer and school children stay in Chiang Rai during the week or even the entire semester.

Of relevance for my research is MAG's approach to integrate ICT technology into their multimedia platforms. The Komol Keemthong Foundation received funding in 2002 and 2005 especially for the creation of an internet server "to educate the public in Thailand and beyond about the rapidly vanishing languages and cultures of tribal people living in Northern Thailand". The 'Hilltribe Museum Online' (hilltribe.org) and 'Bannok-TV', in particular, add further to the production and distribution of digital films from the borderlands. Launched in 2003, The Hilltribe Museum Online is funded with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation to educate the public in Thailand and beyond about the rapidly vanishing languages and cultures of tribal people living in Northern Thailand, and offers ICT training for local communities. With the initial help of Jonathan Morris who built the website, six local digital content managers are now continuously adding a diversity of audio and video data about Akha, Lahu, Mien, and other peoples' cultures and other issues of relevance to their communities. Hilltribe.org is conceived as a virtual cultural meeting place and social classroom with multi-media 'text books' for ethnic minority peoples and interested individuals. The use of digital technology is considered a powerful tool to draw the younger generation in the ethnic

communities, who are familiar with the basic uses of personal computers, to playfully learn about their own culture.

“It is quite a novel approach, I have seen in other places where there is a fascination with the sexy quality of the Internet,” David Feingold, an anthropologist specialised on the northern borderlands in Thailand, is quoted as saying, “[...] we must wait to gauge how the highland people gain.”(Marwaan 2003)

Knowing the challenges facing ethnic minority peoples in the region after many years of innovative work in the field of social development in the northern borderland, the producers of the films are working with various media and a variety of audiences. Television broadcasting, music videos, photographs, digital films and the internet as a local source of information raises questions of styles, formats, visual storytelling and narratives. According to Parisudha Sutthamongkol, the Thai coordinator of the virtual hill tribe museum project, life stories, ritual and other knowledge are collected and formats for their multi-media productions are discussed by members of the hilltribe.org team. Thai staff of Bannok TV is responsible for the scripting, and conduct the filming in cooperation with a Lahu and a Lisu videographer. Interestingly, some of the training was provided by Thai Short Film filmmakers. The script is double-checked with team members from the virtual hill tribe museums who conducted the research in the villages, and update the digital content for the internet. The Internet is considered a powerful way to disseminate stories about ethnic peoples' cultures to local communities as well as to a wider public. But The Learning Pack, a special collection of footage, is equally intended for a Thai or other general public, and for educators. The objective, here, is mainly to improve lowland people's understanding of ethnic peoples' cultures and ways of life, and to eradicate misperceptions. To this end, films are shown at local festivals and at the Pridi Banomyong Institute, Bangkok. Given that The Mirror Foundation released The Ethnic Group in Thailand Learning Pack in November 2006 only, little could be said about its reception by the public. Films are also exhibited in villages and during The Mirror Art Group's local Ethnic Film Festival in November 2006. The group also organises screenings in villages beyond Huay Mae Suai. According to the activity coordinator, locally made productions are shown and are intended to raise self-esteem,

pride and knowledge. To the same end their production of music videos and karaoke VCDs aim at encouraging ethnic minority people to learn songs in their own language. Some of MAG's research data are supplied to local schools and the organisation advises volunteer teachers to make use of the '30 percent local knowledge' regulation in local curricula.

"The record of their tribal life, tradition and wisdom in form of writing, photography and video are regarded as the textbooks for the people of next generations" (Film No. 1, 00:13:23 – 00:13:34).

4.4.1 *The Ethnic Group in Thailand - Learning Pack* (2006)

By: The Mirror Art Group, The Virtual Hilltribe Museum Online

“Earth is a planet market by the diversity and harmony of its living creatures. The existence of humans in this harmony requires a system of thought and belief, which in turn creates a culture and a way of life which allows each community to prosper within its environment”. (00:00:00 – 00:00:32)

The introductory trailer (10'43) of the twenty short films comprising Learning Pack expounds the main argument, that hill tribe peoples' cultures are formed by and adapted to mountain environments, which sustained them. We are then introduced to the geographic location of the seven satellite villages belonging to the administrative village unit Huay Mae Suai, Mae Yao sub-district in the provincial capital's district of Chiang Rai. It seems in proportion to their relative population in the sub-district, the series of eight short films are about Akha (all filmed in Baan Apha); six films about Lahu from Baan Ya Fu and Baan Jalae; four films show the Mien (Yao) in Huay Mae Suai and two films S'gaw Karen from Baan Ruammit and Huay Khom.

The film explains the discriminative element of the Thai term *chao khao* or “hill tribe”, which reflects a stereotype of a single group of ‘highlanders’, about whom generalisations are often “lumped together” (00:02:09)*, and Huay Mae Suai's Akha, Lahu, Pakake-yaw and Mien (Yao) cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity pointed out. The virtual museum's project coordinator, Parisudha Sutthamongkul, as well as digital content manager Attee Chue-mue, an Akha from the surrounding villages in Huay Mae Suai underscore the significance of MAG's cultural revival projects. The boosting of self-esteem is, indeed, one of the objectives of these multi-media productions. The challenges are two-fold, however: On the one hand, the young generation of ethnic minority communities needs to learn about their culture and develop a pride for it, and decide which aspects to preserve. On the other, mutual respect and understanding requires society at large to learn about their cultures and ways of life. This idea is represented in The VCD Learning Pack ‘The Ethnic Group in Thailand’ (hereafter *The Learning Pack*), which includes a sequence with film clips of commercial Thai film productions depicting ethnic minorities inserted against the background of still photographs of local communities. The voiceover runs as follows: “Though their

cultures were acknowledged in society, there is no understanding of cultural differences or cultural respect. Thus the tribal cultures are regarded as old-fashioned, superstitious and ridiculous... this can be seen in real life and in drama.” [ibid, time code 00:10:10 – 00:10:42]. Additionally, *The Learning Pack* booklet provides background information about commercially produced media and their relation to erroneous perceptions and images of ethnic minority peoples - especially the Akha. Arguing that these ethnic peoples’ cultural roots “run deeply in the hills”, and noting on recent government policy of forced relocation of upland villages to the lowland for ease of administrative control, the trailer furthermore underscores the importance of the nature-culture nexus.

To address the dual problems of cultural erosion and lack of sustainable sources of income near the village, MAG and the Lahu villagers of Ban Jalae chose to create an income generating venue, the Ban Jalae Hilltribe Life and Culture Center, where handicraft are sold and their films shown.

In stark contrast, the last three minutes of the trailer show nocturnal city lights, have a piano music sound-track and narrate the other side of the same coin, i.e. the devastating link between economic development, exploitation of natural resources and the deforestation in Northern Thailand. It is pointed out, that not only was the blame erroneously assigned to the people who have lived in harmony with the forest for centuries, but the resulting policy of upland to lowland relocation also destroys what is left of the cultures of the ethnic minorities. “For to uproot a society from its environment is to destroy the very base on which that culture and way of life was built.” (- 00:09:04) The current transition is characterised being marked by rural-urban migration, a market and money based economy, and in fervour of Christian missionaries, who’s belief system “has long since reached harmony with the capitalist environment in which tribal people now find themselves.” (00:09:30) Concluding that many have been quick to adapt and that decisions are not for others to make for them, we are assured that not all “of the exquisite cultures and ways of life”, “mindset, values and beauty of the tribal culture” are lost in Huay Mae Suai.

Of the stories about the administrative village’s four different ethnic communities, I have chosen to further analyse two Akha shirt films since it is impossible to describe all. General topics of the Akha, Lahu and Mien (Yao) films include the village they live

in, religious practices or particular ceremony, and the introduction of a special craft. In this series, 75 percent of the Akha films concern religious practices or practitioners, while none of the Karen films do, but 40 percent of the Lahu, and 50 percent of the Mien films. The Lahu are portrayed as skilful musicians plucking, blowing and hitting various instruments (*tersiku, kaen, khlui, knor*, etc.) used as mediums of communication between gender, but also with the other world. The Pakake-yaw (Karen) from Ruammit and Huay Khom are introduced gender specifically: One film is about the mens' relationship and care for their elephants – used for tourism toady – and the other shows women explaining the intricacies of dying thread, constructing the weaving frame, and the patterns and colours of weaving.

The eight films about the Akha concern 'keun sip mala' (building new village gates, 4.42'), 'haum su haum mee' (New Year, 8.11'), 'ya-swa' (ancestral ordination for youngest or eldest child, 10.56'), the swinging ceremony (8.5') and an introduction of the spiritual leader, 'yo-ma' (also as: *dzoeqma*⁵). Given the significance the producers attach to the spiritual activities of the Akha, I picked two of these films for further analysis.

The opening clip of *The Swing Tradition of the Akha* has three different script fonts for the Thai and English title of this short film and the transcription into Thai of the Akha festival name, a background image of deforested hills and inserted portraits of three people (a woman, a girl and a man). The latter are still, while in the centre another image of people dancing is moving, and eventually, a man and then a woman swinging are distinguishable. When the central image enlarges to full-screen size, the women's singing in the background ends, and the female narrator (of almost all the films) explains: "Echoing sounds of singing in the mountains is a sign of the end of the planting season." A black frame ends this paragraph, and for the split of four seconds,

⁵ The Akha have no self-devised script, but it is generally held that this has fostered the extensive memorisation of the Akha genealogy as well as ritual texts through the diverse spiritual leaders of a village. Spoken languages differ, but, more like regional dialects such as central and Northern Thai. The protestant missionary Paul Lewis introduced the first transcription of the Akha language (in Burma), a movement which had its parallels in Thailand in the 1960's. Few Akha's use the system, according to Akha researcher Aju Dzoeqbaw. Dr. Leo Alting van Geusau, a former catholic priest, however, invented yet another script, which was used for the transcription documenting annual Akha ritual practices. The former script is recognised by organizations such as the Akha Kinship and Holistic Alternatives Foundation, funded by Diokonia (Thailand), and certain powerful Christian Akha leaders in Chiang Rai Province. In China, a transcription system is based on the Chinese pinyin was created for the Hani... The Learning Pack films have terms spelt out inconsistently, i.e. 'Yoma' and 'Joma' in the subtitles and the handbook.

we see a man from the back splitting a piece of wood, and an elder man pointing at two high poles. Black. An Akha woman is pounding, others are carrying baskets. The narrator meanwhile notes that after the planting season, now it is the time to wait for growth and pray for a good harvest. The upcoming ceremony is not explained as a fertility ritual, but as the Akha celebrating and giving thanks to the women “since they are the main contributors to the crops”. Various images of the bamboo pole dance and children swinging underlie the continued narration explaining that the festival is held in honour of the women. We subsequently see women walking to a sacred well to fetch water for cooking on this first day of the ceremony “because they believe that the water is clean and pure” (00:02:51 – 00:02:58). In this way, we are introduced to the food prepared for the festival, notably “*Yee-ba-yee-su*, alcohol in the bamboo trunks, these are traditional to the tribe and have been kept by the households to ferment since the past years. These things are also used for offerings” (00:02:08 – 00:02:30). In chronological order we are guided through the festival, which begins on the eve of the first day sharing sacred food, the gathering of all men of the village at the *doeqma*’s house before fetching the wood to build the swing the next morning. We see the *dzoeqma*, responsible for the correctness of the ritual, walking back and forth in deep concentration and learn that the spirits are being informed about the destruction of the old and the building of the new swing. Then, we see him gesturing over a large hole in which one of the poles for the swing will be set and later, breaking an egg and sprinkling rice into the hole with the pole in it. The only time that there is a soundtrack of people’s voices, besides singing or playing instruments in *The Swing...*, is when the men carry the pole and combine their forces to insert it into the hole. The narration continues as we watch technical details of the swing being built, and finally, the *dzoeqma* swings before others may follow. At the end, rice fields are shown and a little girl swings on in slow motion, as reference is made to the crops of this year.

Joma: The Religious and Spiritual Leader begins with the sun rise and crowing of a cock to literally tell us that all humans are equal, including the Akha. During the introductory narrative, which underscores the relevance of the relationship between natural environments and culture, and Akha genealogy’s role in passing on traditional

knowledge, images from *The Swing* reintroduce us to the *dzoema*, i.e. the religious or spiritual leader who is “keeping the traditions of the people alive” (see Appendix D.2). His authority is visually emphasised through a sequence from *The Swing*, in which we see him on the mount where the swing will be built as villagers are looking up to watch his movements or the camera’s. As the narrator tells us that his successor has to be his eldest son, we see some village youth playing a ball game. Then a few still photographs of different *dzoemaq* are inserted before we return to the *dzoema* of Baan Apha. The villagers believe that peace is not possible without him dispelling evil spirits, we are told. Images from the village gate building ceremony then bring us to his house as the narrator says that upon founding a village, the *dzoemaq*’s house is built first by the community. The films’ imagery (moving and still) strives to deliver visual information supportive of the narration. It is mentioned that the *pirma* is an assistant of the *dzoema* in case the latter is incapable of dispelling evil spirits. In his home, the *dzoema* speaks to the camer: “I am not a Yo-ma that was chosen by the villagers. But I am a Yo-ma because my father was a Yo-ma” (00:04:23 – 00:04:33). It is thus not necessarily a patrilineal line of descendants. The *dzoema* asserts us that he is happy in his role as initiator of ceremonies such as the swing festival, and the village gate building ceremony. His words confirm what the narrator had already established and are accompanied by similar images. That spiritual consultation and divination rituals to avoid calamities and to ensure good harvests among other things are commonly held against the Akha, is then explained as a tradition structuring their lives lived in respect of the environment and their ancestors.

The film series’ title marks these films’ purpose as instructive and the booklet containing the CD further tells of especially “the Akha’s fictitious image to appeal to the mass” (87). The reference made points out the creation of an internal negative image on the one hand, and the promotion of Akha women as attraction for transnational tourism on the other. This perception is the general structuring element of the film series. The longest film in the Akha series (20’32”) showing three generations of an Ahka family consciously chooses to create a distance by placing the camera in the wall. Moreover, nobody is moving during the interview of the women, and the structure of the interview does not change. To say, the use of motifs and especially the repetition of

imagery and narrative are a conscious element used in a way that makes an audience think “why?” In this way, *The Learning Pack* aims at deconstructing specific bigotry, especially the rehabilitation of Akha peoples’ relationships to the environment and their ancestors. Such editorial freedom can be made use of especially to avoid new prejudices to replace old ones.

The minimal use of other sound further emphasises the narrators’ external voice. Repetition of identical visual sequences suggests that an audience of the age group of the films’ editors is targeted, i.e. who might just ‘zap’ through the VCD. In that case, they would still be able to catch part of the message. This would explain some of the title sequences’ complex design to create attention. There is no sign of self-reflexivity of the narrator as the filmed subjects do not interact with the camera or vice versa. The voices of the people of Baan Apha are hardly ever heard in any of the eight films (the Lahu and Karen films include some speech) in their stead is a voice-over. The English language narrator’s exuberant formulations of arguments for a better understanding of distinct cultures tend towards underscoring the ‘uniqueness’ of ‘vibrant cultures’, thus at times approximating allusions purportedly to be obliterated. Continuous commentary, extensive use of editing effects and disjunctive informative sequences, leave little space for people.

Although an Akha was involved in the making of the films about Akha for *The Learning Pack*, the films do not reflect his relationship with them. Instead, he is dressed in Akha attire standing above village level, which we see behind his shoulder. He expresses uncertainty about the impacts of modernity. Such a framed position as authoritative commentator is familiar from television broadcast representations and appears in other short films in the learning pack. Since the structure of the films was discussed by the Virtual Hilltribe Museum team, the intention of copying such patterns must then be understood as symbolic empowerment, but these sequences are very short. The narrative’s construction of a different meaning through continuous reference to the negative model and there being the same dynamic to the stories is expressive of resentment towards the outside world, which would be even more powerful, if told by the community.

4.4 The Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development

Set up in 1994 as a research group under the auspices of the Social Research Institute (SRI) of Chiang Mai University, the CESD engages in a diversity of ethnological research activities in the North of Thailand. The rationale of SRI research is grounded in the transformations caused by “rapid and profound changes due to increase of international trade, labour migrations, ‘ethnic tourism’ and new regulations enacted by the States” (Social Research Institute n.d.). The CESD is conducting thirteen research projects including issues of child protection, natural resources, ritual and tradition, globalisation, IK and education systems, health and tourism research.

The SRI and CESD are government funded institutions, but have a special status which allows for international cooperation. In this way, The Rockefeller Foundation contributed funds for specific research programmes in 2004-2005. Since the initiation of a project to develop a data bank and ethnic media in the northern borderlands, part of the ‘Living Library Project’ initiated by Chiang Mai University’s main library, the government has allocated special funding for the collection of data and recording of material in the period 2006 – 2007. The financial support serves to generate activities serving not only academic purposes but also the public, including the nurturing of knowledge among ethnic peoples’ communities. The SRI’s Lanna Studies and Ethnic Studies Group recordings of oral accounts of local history, folk-tales, belief and religious practices, lullabies, etc. are currently being digitised and data from stone inscriptions, palm leaves, as well as arts and architecture of Lanna edited (Kwanchewan 2005:2). This project is one of international collaboration between the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRA - Unit 107), the Social Research Institute (SRI) and the main Library of Chiang Mai University to create an “electronic database on ethnic groups and interethnic relationships in Northern Southeast Asia” (IRA 2005 - 2006). The joint project has generated research opportunities and income for new staff to increase the capacities of the Ethnic Studies and Development group at SRI (IRD Teaching-Training, n.d.). The resource centre will contain bilingual bibliographic material concerning ethnicity in the northern borderlands, as well as making available to scholars, ethnic organizations and communities electronic e-learning materials, including still and moving images through a search engine and a website (IRD Research,

n.d.) Currently, four researchers (including one external) and five assistants, as well as four technical staff are working on the digitalization of texts and photographs, etc. and the design and content management of the web-site. Funding is provided bilaterally from the Ethnic Studies and Development Group at the SRI, and from the special “Research Unit 107: Ethnicity and Globalization” of the French IRD (Social Research Institute n.d.) The IRD (formerly ORSTOM) is a French public science and technology research institute under the joint authority of the French ministries in charge of research and overseas development under an agreement of the DTEC (Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation) (IRD, About US, n.d.) Its predominant work is in the fields of research, consultancy and training. Between 1986 and 1992, two ORSTOM (IRD) experts were posted at the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) in Chiang Mai for an anthropologic project and to contribute to upgrading of research capability through training and to identify new issues for scientific activity of the institute, the TRI-ORSTOM project phase II, with the title ‘Research as tool for development’ (IRD, History, n.d.)

Prasit Leepreecha, the director of the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) confirms the general objectives of the research institute remarking that the scope of the centre’s research publications is extensive and befits academia, but is not benefiting local people. “Ethnic minorities are becoming more and more Thai. They should maintain and learn more about their own culture and ritual knowledge”⁶. He adds, “It is a stated objective and the university’s policy to service local people and local communities.” Besides raising public awareness for the value of diverse ethnic cultures and their knowledge, CESD research also aims at reaching and informing policy makers to recommend development project implementation strategies. These means are intended, ultimately, to benefit ethnic communities. On this premise, the proactive participation of ethnic community members in research projects and in building national and international networks signals a significant change from prior research and development programmes. Research trainings and seminars for students, ethnic NGO workers and ethnic communities are held regularly.

⁶ Personal communication on March 22, 2007

The CESD researcher team includes Kwanchewan (Thai), Prasit (Hmong), Jak Kum (Pwo Karen), Bua-chum (S'gaw Karen) and Chibom (Thai) have released four digital documentary films in 2006 and four more are planned this year (2 Hmong ritual films, 1 film about Tai Yuan collective historical memory, and the film *Hermit Worshipping Karen in Tak Province*). In preparation are 3 films about Karen religious cults and 1 about hemp production of the Hmong. Kwanchewan Buadaeng, who heads the video project, points out that the decision about the topics and people about whom films are made depend on the research and information (footages, knowledge, data etc.) of the CESD researcher team. The researchers are well connected with their fieldwork communities, and work on the basis of informed consent for their films. They moreover consult with individuals from the respective communities about the film's content. In this way, two of the Hmong films were conceived by Prasit. He says, "We had talked to the village leaders and consulted them. They had the same feelings as us: 'The young people do not understand what the elders do.'" ⁷ The script for *Hmong New Year* was written with the helpful input of Prasit's Hmong friends. The film has been integrated in tourist activities promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand through its media channels. This has encouraged a revival of other 'traditional' activities, which, interestingly includes go-cart-racing. Accordingly, this sport is now considered to be a 'traditional Hmong game'. The film by Prasit shows preparations, the ritual and changes of the annual ceremony. "We had to limit our film to 45 – 60 minutes and needed a focus, otherwise we would trouble the audience, [so] some procedures of the ritual were overlooked." The target audience of this film are young Hmong, "but also for non-Hmong people". The intention was to produce these films specifically for teaching in local schools, although the promotion and preservation of intangible cultural heritage is not a topic in any given curriculum. Prasit points out, however, that a government policy issued by the Ministry of Education, allows for as much as 30 percent of a week's coursework to be spent on teaching local knowledge. "This regulation has been around for a decade, but practically, few local communities are involved in such activities," he says, and adds, "local community school teachers are used to creating a curriculum based on the regular requirements" without looking for exceptional clauses or stipulations. Local schools' joint curriculum committees, however, consist of

⁷ Personal communication March 22, 2007

teachers *and* village leaders, i.e. with the goodwill and interest of the local village leader, a decision about the implementation of this exceptional rule can be taken. What's more, "[t]he government has a budget for local knowledgeable people to teach." According to Prasit, "it derives from a section of the budget earmarked for education in sub-district administrations."

The film *Kariang lathi le sri djang wat Tak* was conceptualised by anthropologist Kwanchewan Buadaeng, who began researching millenarian movements for her M.A. thesis in 1987. She continued her studies on religious practices among Karen people for her Ph.D at the University of Sydney (2001), and recently concluded her work on "Traditions and Development of the Cults of Forest Monks among the Karen in Myanmar and Thailand". Kwanchewan focuses on cross border movements especially of the Karen. In the context of modernisation's and globalisation's transformations of the northern borderlands including Thailand's neighbouring countries, she has been studying especially the construction of ethnic and cultural identities, religious practices and movements as reactions to these changes. She holds that in the struggle over material resources, cultural resources are used to memorise and symbolically realise legitimate claims. I understand the theoretical argument of her research project for the ACLS collaborative research network to be grounded in the concept that religious movements (and the practices it involves by using space and cultural capital) are a response to unequal social and ethnic relations and serve as a sign of symbolic power. Her research projects have identified millenarian movements of political and religious character. These emerged in the North and the Northeast of Thailand as 'phi bun' (Holy Man) movements linked to movements of armed resistance at the turn of the 20th century. The Karen millenarian Ywa and Telakhon sects in Western Thailand, which are distinct movements in opposition to the Burmese government and related to the myth of origin claiming the return of the lost Karen Golden Book. A third, the Khuba movement in Northern Thailand is associated with Khuba Siwichai. The movements, Kwanchewan writes, have developed specific local practices and sub-movements have emerged. Ethnic minority peoples participation in movements such as the Khuba Khao Pi Movement⁸, Karen, Lua but also Hmong, Lahu, Mien and Tai Lue have been the focus

⁸ The (*khru ba khao*) 'revered teachers' movement challenged the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand.

of Kwanchewan's comprehensive research predominantly in Thailand's and Burma's borderlands. In 2002, she studied specifically Telakhon movements among Karen communities in Umphang District, Tak Province on the border of Thailand and Burma and the Khuba La movement among Karen and Khon Muang (Northern Thai) in Omkoi and Chom Thong districts in the south of Chiang Mai Province. It is the former area where the film about the local hermit or ascetic (*ton bun*) was filmed.

4.5.1 *The Hermit Cult of Karen in Tak Province* (2006, Video No. 3)

By: Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development

Set in Le Tong Khu, a Pwo Karen village in Chiang Mai Province, Amphoe Umphang in Tak Province, *The Hermit Cult of Karen in Tak Province*⁹ is not merely a portrait of a leader of the Khruba Khao Pi Movement among "peripheral Karen" (Kwanchewan 2001: 174) and other hermits venerated, the story is intertwined with past and present transnational situations of the Karen: myths of origin, legendary heroines, histories of warfare and spiritual traditions. The comprehensive narrative ends on the note that contemporary warfare is only part of the threat to the community, *karn phattana khong lok duk mai* (development of the modern world, civilisation) being the other.

In classic style of ethnographic writing and filmmaking, the introductory text and establishing shots of the film serve to introduce the geographic and demographic situation of Le Tong Kruh village in the borderlands between Thailand and Burma. It concomitantly contextualises the position of Karen as people who speak a Tibeto-Burmese language, constitute the biggest ethnic group in Thailand, and predominantly live in Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Tak and Kanchanaburi provinces. The narrator then deconstructs an ostensibly homogenous image of the Karen through clarification of distinct sub-groups: The S'gaw (*Pga gan yaw* in Karen), Pwo (*Phl'o* or *Phl'ong*), Bwe (*Kayah*) and Pao (in Thai: *Toongsu*), and by telling of there being Christian, Buddhist

⁹ Hereafter the long title is abbreviated to *Hermit...*

and animist beliefs practiced among the Karen. Their belief in spiritual essences (*k'la*)¹⁰ is visually presented through still and moving imagery of a spirit house in the fields, a child with red and white marks on his/her frontelle, and a wrist-tying ceremony, but Karen-Mon relations, i.e. the influence of Buddhism, are emphasized in the narration. The imagery in the film (blinking lights of a shrine in a blurred dark scene with Buddhist monks, later the bright inside of a spacious Christian church) work to underscore religious denominations and adaptations.

In the following, the sound of the narrator's voice seems to be echoing from the image of a dark blue mountain scape backed by a setting sun (an image used three times as visual transition) indicating to the viewer that the narrative switches to the past, here Karen legends. Sound is hardly used as a structuring device to this end: Almost half of the film's musical soundtrack is an acoustic guitar, which eventually gives way to a different guitar sound-bite and a wind instrument, a *koy* (Karen trumpet?), but the initial guitar is picked up again at the end. Karen do not speak in this film. Their voices are reduced to an ambient role as we faintly hear young boys cheering at the end of a ritual ceremony, the singing of Karen songs related to rituals and ceremonies) and one sound bit towards the end of a hermit not resident in Le Tong Khu.

A legend relating to the Karen's mythical ancient capital in Karen State is preceded briefly with the statement that centennial Siamese/Burmese warfare is the cause for their migration from Kwae ge bong or Gao gebong [Karen] – not far from where the Mon lived¹¹. Then an elder Karen from Le Tong Khu is quoted as telling of their traditional worshipping the Hindu-Buddhist pagoda Phra Chedi Inkhwaen (in Thai) or *Zai-di-yo / Zai-do* (in Burmese), which was built 2500 years ago and is located between “Muang Hongkawadee” and “Muang Sathorn”. We are told that the Karen believe that the legendary Queen Shwe Nanjin, the Karen wife of King Dith-sa, went on a pilgrimage journey to the pagoda, and encountered a tiger on her way. Miraculously, she was not attacked since she was on a meritorious journey. The Karen queen – shown depicted in a mural painting – died instead of exhaustion as she had to cross a river and climb a hill to get to the hanging pagoda. We learn of other legends and related

¹⁰ Karen scripts differ, terms are spelt according to the pronunciation of the Northern Thai translator of the narrative of this film, and this author's further research on conventions in transcribing Karen words in accordance with Kwanchewan Buadaeng's Ph.D.

¹¹ According to Kwanchewan Buadaeng, the Burmese term for this place name is 'Sui ga bin' (personal communication 31.08.07).

practices by Karen in Chiang Mai province, when the acoustic guitar music changes into a song telling of the Karen-Mon relationship:

“When the world hadn’t been born,
 there was only water and wind.
 Birds fly and perch on the fish
 An old man puts his brass hammer down
 An old woman puts her brass hammer down
 The hammer’s head is so long,
 you have to walk one day to its beginning
 The Mon came to meet the Red Karen (Kariang Daeng)
 What did the Red Karen tell the Mon?”

(translated from the VCD by Kwandome Thawornsuk)

The complex and contradictory changes of belief systems between animism and Buddhism and millenarian movements are summarised and explain Buddhist Karen awaiting the advent of the reincarnation of the fifth Buddha Phra Sri Ariya Metreya (*Tha-la-khu* or *Tha-la-kong* [in Karen]). We see a young Pwo Karen in a long dress and traditional hairdo making an offering of a *th’dong* (‘umbrella staffs on sticks’, Andersen 1981: 257) in a local ceremony, when the acoustic guitar stops and we learn about De-dja-mae [Karen], a supreme deity encountered upon death before Phra Sri’ Ariya Metreya. The sound of a flute sets in, when we see Christian Karen and the narration tells of historical Karen involvement in Burmese - Siamese warfare, forced resettlement and colonial rule visually underlined with a series of still photographs of young Pwo Karen men squatting in the dark and unmarried Karen girls smiling innocently in their white dresses. As the film returns to young Pwo Karen men participating in a ceremony, the narrator tells us that the hermit in Le Tong Khu is a medium able to communicate with deities of either worlds. The hermit cult and the significant role he represents is further accentuated since the Pwo Karen reference him as *proh djae* (‘grandpa’, a ‘supreme deity’). The current hermit in Le Tong Khu is believed to be the last in a lineage of ten reincarnations, of which we are given all the names as images show a

hermit in meditation posture behind a pair of elephant tusks with Buddha images and other worshipped sculptures.

As the flute is joined by a drum on the second sound-track, the film's storyline turns to communal religious practices and the strict rules and taboos adhered to in Le Tong Khu. Women are not allowed in the vicinity of any one of the seven holy sites in Le Tong Khu, particularly the *bùh* (symbol of purity and brightness), which is exclusively the hermit's dwelling, and also not at the *dha-la-ae-muh* (the symbol of birth). Men are allowed there, although only those from the village. The issue of taboos is well reflected as the cameraman is forced to keep a certain distance: Ritual objects are shown in close-up, 'before' and 'after' rather than during the ceremonies conducted, and the hermit and Pwo Karen men (mainly young men) are often seen from behind as they are lighting candles, making offerings and praying. The seven holy sites are named and some shown: A notable example is the *jeth-tho-song*, the pillar of the Three Principles, consisting of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. One of the holy sites is taboo for the hermit. These are the sites where a regular village ceremony ends, i.e. two wooden poles symbolising *saphan din* (the bridge of heaven) and *saphan fah* (bridge of hell).

By way of conveniently comparing the dates of the lunar calendar marking Thai Buddhist holy days and the Pwo Karens' in this village, we are told about their celebrating 'the equivalent of the Thai Songkran' (New Year) although it doesn't fall on the same day. This is an occasion for which women prepare sticky rice and we see them gathering in the village. Exceptionally, young Pwo men are allowed to enter the site of the *chedi* on this day, another realm otherwise especially reserved for the hermit. The festivities end with a familiar, but spectacular image for Thai audiences: a huge float on the river. Another annual collective ceremony, the grain festival, is only briefly glossed over with a beautiful shot of a *bue ko*¹² and showing women making grain offerings at the village grain container as well as images of nocturnal celebrations of the harvest. Another well-known 'text' for Thai audiences is the initiation of three novices and their producing the required number of paraphernalia for the ritual performances of the beginning and end of Buddhist lent.

Where ritual ceremonies elsewhere include animal sacrifices, there is no image of an animal in Le Tong Khu as at least the hermit is an ascetic and vegetarian.

¹² "Rice stalks bound together in the shape of a *stupa* and decorated with flowers"

In contrast, and acoustically amplified through the sound first of a Karen trumpet, then several other wind instruments, and culminating in a post-pop electro sound, is the last of the ceremonies: It involves a huge bon fire in commemoration of the hermit *Pe Zhai Djong You*, who had sacrificed himself to save other people' from further suffering and to bring peace to humankind. Such belief is universal, and not a local invention, the narrator tells us, as concepts similar to that of the Karen Telakhon movement along the Thai and Burma border exist as *Messiah* (Persian), *Galkin* (Hindi), and the Buddhist *Phra Si'an*. In the face of city lights, urban imagery and non-Thai faces, we learn that the movements' leader embodies spiritual and political power.

However, beyond Le Tong Khu, other hermits exist, as in the neighbouring village, and may even marry and have children. Being involved in society and politics may include going on a hunger-strike. The first hermit in Le Tong Khu's lineage is believed to be Le Sri Gwo-wae. A leader of the Karen in Burma more than 150 years ago, he brought the Karen out of the war zone¹³ in Burma to Le Tong Khu, and later stopped his political activities to become a hermit so the village would not suffer from attacks from the Burmese military government, the Karen Buddhist Army or otherwise. According to Karen belief, the saviour, the person who will drive away the darkness, will come from the East.

An analysis of the structure of *The Hermit Cult of Karen in Tak Province* shows that the film has been scripted in accordance with academic writing: It begins with a general introduction of the geographical environment, the Karens' situation in Thailand, and their history of migration and their historic relationship with Buddhist sites and belief systems and Christianity. The film culminates in the explanation of details of major communal religious practices and the role of the hermit in Le Tong Khu therein. The naming of all ten hermits in this film, to me, is the most deliberate sign of authorship: Whereas the listing is a normal practice in written text, to include it in a film, and to find images which 'fit' is a tedious, and therefore I argue deliberate task. Their naming is accrediting the lineage and thus legitimacy of the hermit in Le Tong Khu. That the names are potentially disseminated world-wide constitutes an immense symbolic

¹³ On the Burmese Siamese warfare involving Karen peoples in the 18th century ('Konbaung wars'), see Renard (1979 and 1980) and Keyes (1979)

power. This recognition is amplified through comparison with global religious movements. And the ending in a sequence of dramatic political rather than religious environments accentuates this even more.

The images are edited strictly to adhere to the narrated script, it seems, since the rhythm of editing jumps from short to long sequences without consistency in colour, or other forms of continuity. That the film *speaks about* a community is not an usual dilemma of ethnographic films in general, and is often the result of camera shyness. That such extensive use of *montage* is made emphasises the distance to the subject peoples, while at the same time constructing the dramatic change from past practise to reactions to modern life, which is not shown. By elaborating the past, local history of the Karen in Tak is re-written, but through the other, if politically correct, Thai narrator.