

## CHAPTER IV ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION



Nong Tao is an interesting place to study the efforts of Karen youth to strengthen their identity for several reasons. The youth have received modern education and have begun to identify themselves as both Thai and Karen. They have not, however, become assimilated into Thai society but rather have developed innovative ways to promote and preserve their identity as Karen. They often use modern methods and technology to do so. Further, their proximity to Chiang Mai has exposed them to the world outside the village, and the fact that they are Thai citizens has involved them in the political system of the state. In short, Nong Tao youth allow us to study Karen society at a point where modernity and tradition meet.

Given such socio-cultural context, we found that the educated young Karens in the village function as mediators between the villagers and the world outside, and the older and younger generation. The youth helps transmit Karen language and literature to the younger generation and dispense Karen traditional wisdom to outsiders. Their role as mediators can be called cultural promoters in a way that they diffuse their inherited tradition to the younger generation and to outsiders.

Why do the youth in Nong Tao village have a strong desire to strengthen Karen identity and tradition even in modernized clothes?<sup>1</sup> Firstly, I would like to deliberate upon this from the perspective of historical forces, which have transformed the village.

Since the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the policies to create national identity and the movement to include the ethnic minorities into the Thai nation had a great influence on the changes of the educational system in the village. Consequently, family structure has changed, namely, children leave the village to receive education and modern knowledge, and these skills have been highly esteemed rather than traditional wisdom and culture, acquired through informal education from their parents. Moreover, government development projects, such as the improved road access and financial aid in the village have led to an influx of external culture and values. As Kwanchewan explains, “this internalization of external power is the basis for the emergence of the religious-political movements amongst the Karen,”<sup>2</sup> meaning that

---

<sup>1</sup> “I have perceived Karen identity since I was young. As I grow older, I have been conscious of preserving Karen tradition.” Papan, 22 years old.

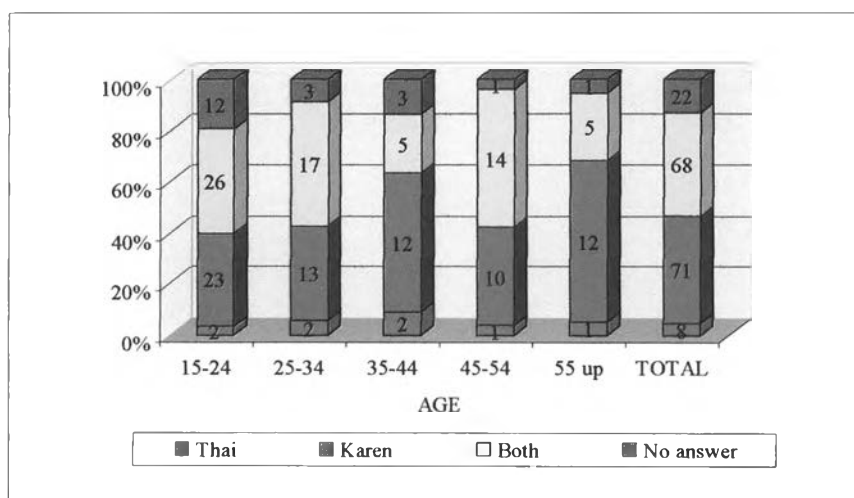
<sup>2</sup> Kwanchewan Buadaeng, 2001, op. cit., summery, p.i.

Buddhism and Christianity, or the religions of the dominant groups have been more or less accepted among the Karens.

After the opium reduction, poverty worsened in the village, and the villagers converted from animism to Buddhism or Christianity in order to get educational opportunities and health care.

Further, the questionnaire shows that formal education and standard Thai language are relevant in the young Karens' self-identity as Thai. This tendency is visibly stronger among the youth than among the older generations.

**Figure 4.1:** Self-Identity

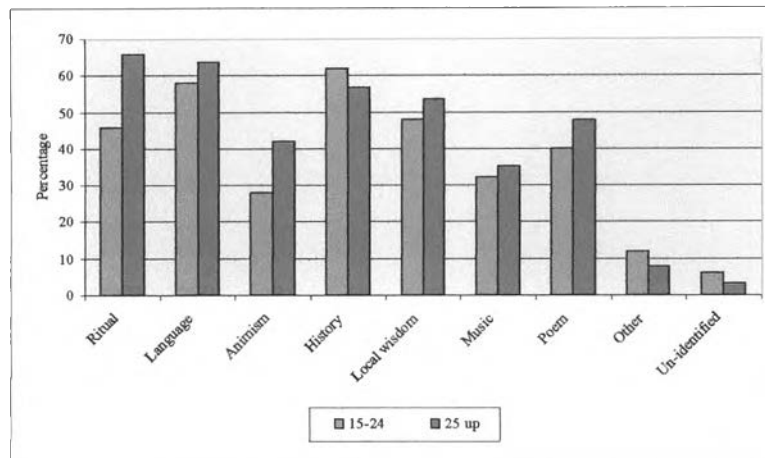


*Source: Author*

Figure 4.1 illustrates that a small number of the respondents identify themselves only as a Thai. They predominantly recognize themselves as Karen or both Thai and Karen.<sup>3</sup> Among villagers over 55 year-old, however, nearly two thirds regard themselves only as Karen.

<sup>3</sup> Papan, a 22 year-old man, who identified himself as a Karen who lives in Thailand, regards himself as privileged, for he has the choice to live either in the Karen village or in a Thai society.

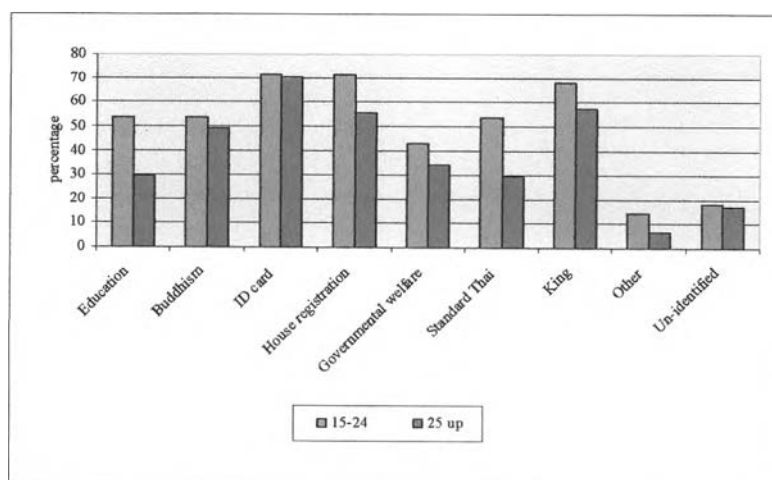
**Figure 4.2:** Valuation of Aspects of Karen Self-identity by Age



Source: Author

This graph demonstrates how young Karens aged 15 to 24 years old, and above 25 years old realize self-identity as a Karen through various aspects. The figure shows significant difference when people of the age 15-24 and 25 up identify themselves by using ‘ritual’<sup>4</sup> and ‘animism’ as the identity indicator. This indicates that although nearly all villagers maintain their ancestral identity, traditional rituals and animism have less influence on the process of forming or shaping self-identity of the youth.

**Figure 4.3:** Valuation of Aspects of Thai Self-identity by Age

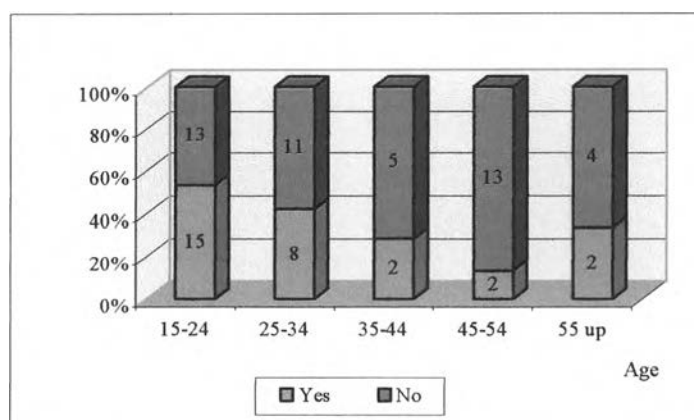


Source: Author

<sup>4</sup> An informant told, “Whenever I take part in a ritual, I sense Karen tradition and history inherited from our ancestors.”

Figure 4.3 shows how young Karens aged 15 to 24 years old, and above 25 years old realize self-identity as a Thai. In general, the percentage of young villagers who think of themselves as a Thai is higher than the above 25 year-old villagers. The figures of ‘education’, ‘standard Thai’ and ‘house registration’ factors markedly differ between the aged 15 to 24 and the rest. This result shows that those factors have a significant impact on the young Karens self-identity. Acquisition of formal education and official language open the door to the dominant Thai society. For the older generation, the main factors of self-identity as a Thai are the ‘King’ and ‘identification card’. It implies that the educated young Karens associate with the Thai society through national education system, while the older villagers are included in the Thai nation state by law.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 4.4:** Education as a Factor in Self-identification as Thai<sup>6</sup>



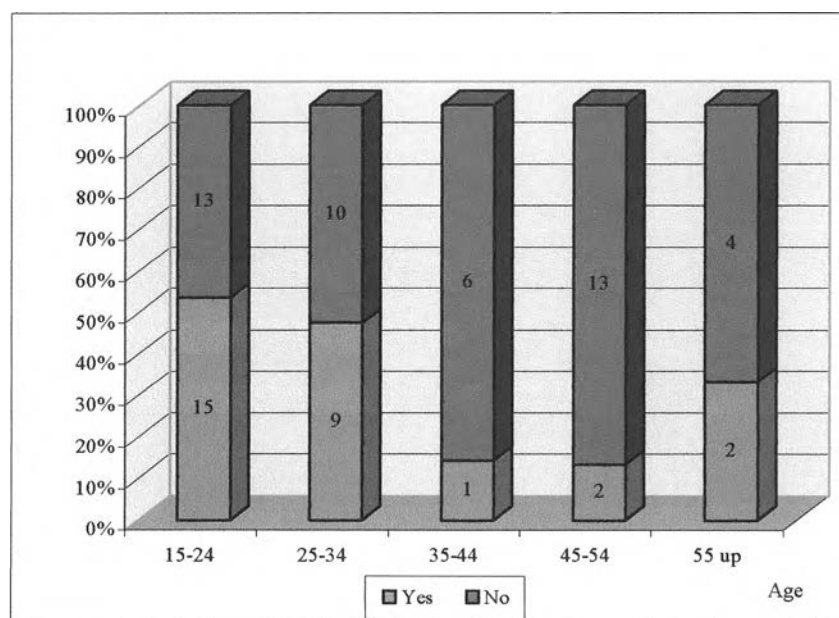
Source: Author

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.24. “Set theory distinguishes between membership and inclusion. A term is included when it is part of a set in the sense that all of its elements are elements of that set. But a term may be a member of a set without being included in it, or, conversely, a term may be included in a set without being one of its members. In a recent book, Alain Badiou has developed this distinction in order to translate it into political terms. Badiou has membership correspond to presentation, and inclusion corresponds to representation (re-presentation). One then says that a term *is a member of* a situation (in political terms, these are single individuals insofar as they belong to a society). And one says that a term is *included* in a situation if it is represented in the metastructure (the State) in which the structure of the situation is counted as one term (individuals insofar as they are recodified by the State into classes, for example, or into “electorates”).” The villagers hold a Thai identification card and voting rights, so that they can be *represented* in Thai politics. They are therefore *included* in the Thai nation state. Concerning membership, though, those who have little to do with the ruling class politically and culturally, by which I mean the elderly, have difficulty presenting themselves as members of Thai society. A lack of fluency in standard Thai contributes to this situation.

<sup>6</sup> From the beginning of its introduction by King Chulalongkorn at the end of 19th century, the public educational system was considered by the ruling class as an instrument for promoting national integration and for propagating the subject’s morality and virtues. Hans-Dieter Bechstedt, op.cit., p.246.

Figure 4.4 and 4.5 show that national education and Thai language are relevant to the self-identification of the respondents as Thai citizens. This tendency increases as age of the respondents decreases.

**Figure 4.5:** Thai Language as a Factor in Self-identification as Thai



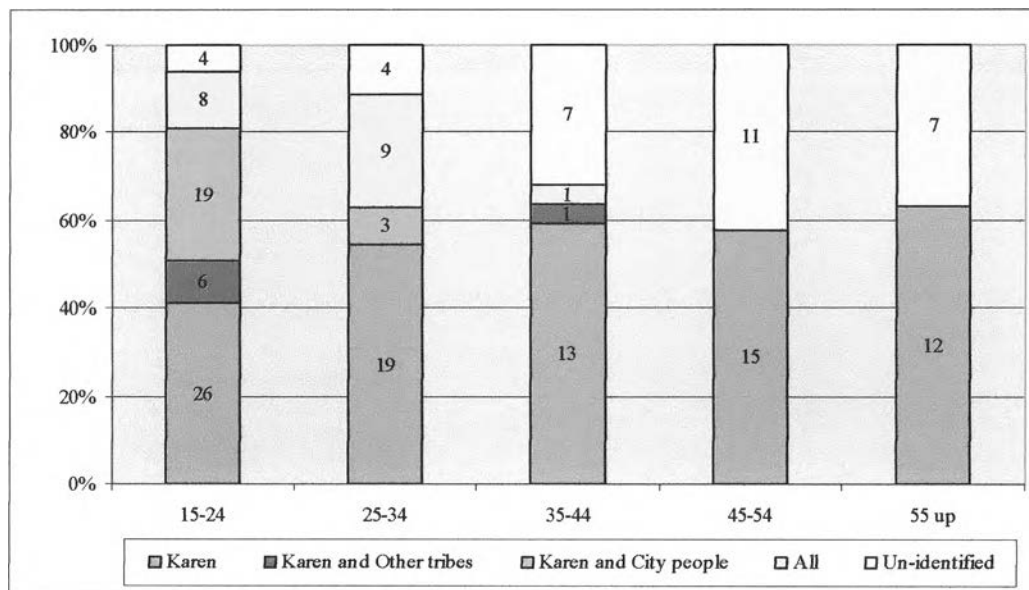
Source: Author

It can be assumed that their identity as a Thai gives the educated young different and new mode of strengthening their identity and tradition.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the increasing opportunities to have contact with outsiders rather than shortening the lives of Karen culture, instead, prolonging their culture.

<sup>7</sup> According to an interview with Mr. Prasut, who is a former director at the Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT), the young Karen have acquired the way of learning in a school, namely, writing and memorizing. The traditional way, however, is learning practically. For instance, when he teaches the youth Karen poem, *tha*, they try to learn with a notebook and pencil, but according to tradition, they should practice and acquire skills in the ordinary life of the community.

Secondly, as an external factor, to some extent association with NGO groups like the Assembly of the Poor<sup>8</sup> and the Northern Farmers Network, has urged the villagers to raise awareness of the conservation of Karen tradition and culture as well as the possession of rights as Thai citizens.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 4.6:** Who Do You Study or Work with?



Source: Author

In addition, the contact with outsiders has created an awareness and consciousness that they are Karen. This recognition of differences between being “Karen” and “non-Karen” has strengthened the Karen youths’ sense of Karen identity. The recognition of ethnic identity makes the youth abstract the idea of Karen identity and tradition as an object to be preserved and has directed them to the intensification

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <http://www.thai.to/aop/>

<sup>9</sup> “More than 1,000 hilltribe villagers started rallying at Chiang Mai city hall on April 26 to demand the right to Thai nationality and to live in protected forests which they have claimed as having being their home for generations. They were supported by the Assembly of Community Forestry in Northern Thailand, the Assembly of Hilltribe People of Thailand, the Assembly of Academics for the Poor, and the Northern Farmers Network.” “Tribespeople Rally Against Govt” Bangkok Post, 16 May, 1999. “Non-government development organizations with the support from local academicians have also some activities in the village though in smaller extent than the government’s. Their resisting discourses have been produced. This includes the construction of ideal image of the Karen as the peace-loving people, the people who are generous and have intrinsic consciousness in conserving natural resources as shown in their taxonomies of natural resources, their related rituals and taboos. The state was portrayed as the destroyer of this ethnic group’s way of life. And there is a need to reproduce their traditional culture and push the state for policy changing.” Krisadawan Hongladarom, 1999, op. cit., pp.2-3.

activities as if they were NGOs. I mean by this to say that many Karen youth approach the strengthening of their tradition in the same way, and using the same techniques, as outsiders do. In both cases tradition is seen from a distance, as if it were a self-contained object.

The informants recognize that the government officers have an unfavorable attitude towards the Karen villagers.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the villagers staged a protest against the Government with the assistance of NGOs worsened the relationship. The maps drawn by Pati Joni and his son are an apt example that tensions between the Government and the village strengthened consciousness of the villagers to protect their own history and tradition from external pressures and present to the world outside.

**Figure 4.7:** Pati Joni and Activist Mr. Surak Siwarak<sup>11</sup>



Source: Author's photograph

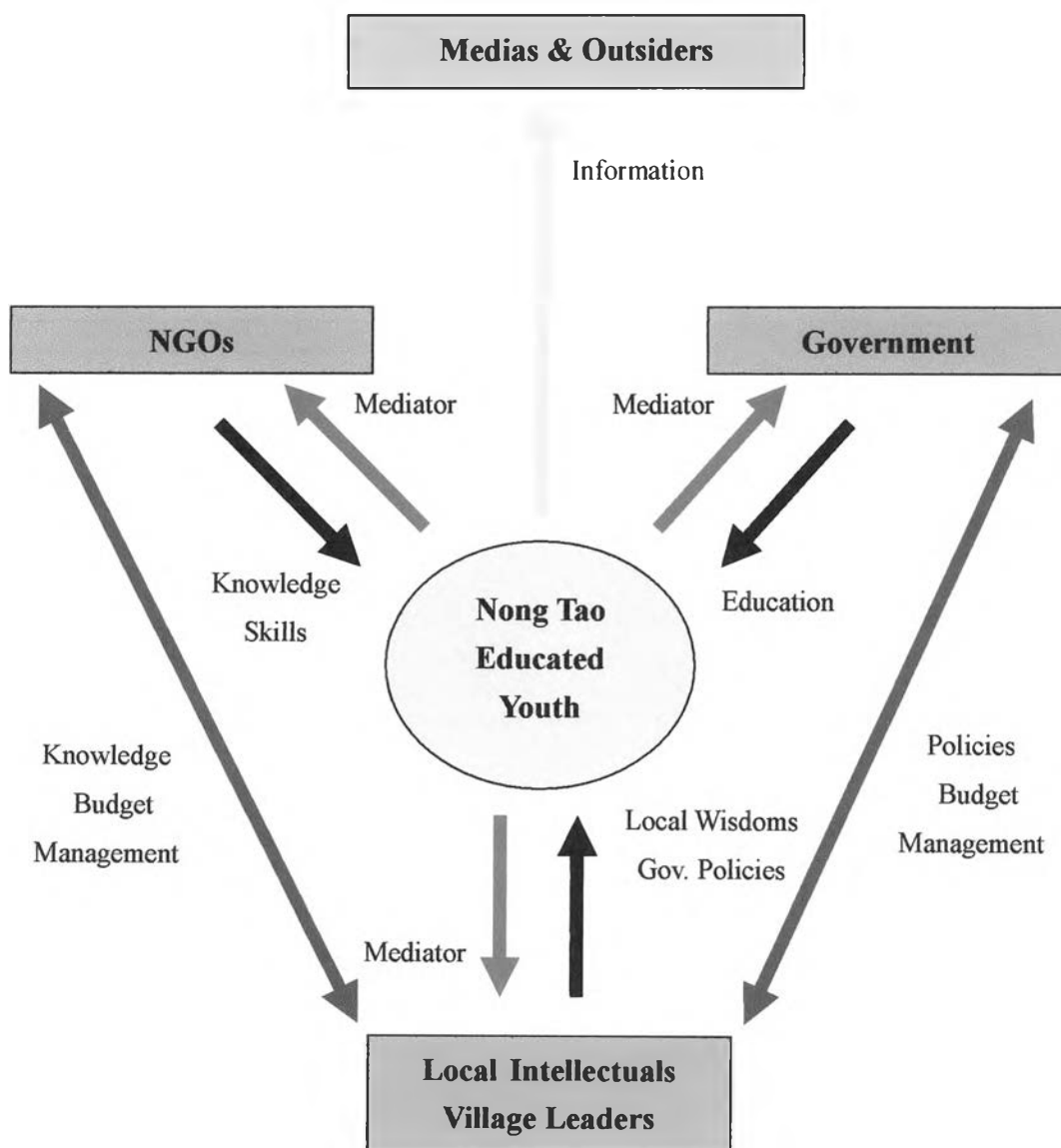
<sup>10</sup> For my inquiry for information concerning Nong Tao village, an officer of Mae Wang district office mentioned the problems of opium poppy growing and opium addicts in the village. He then suggested me to take a letter from the district to the village leader for my security. This experience manifested the officers' incomprehension and the remaining stereotype of *chao-kao* (hilltribes).

<sup>11</sup> Pati Joni is second from right, and Surak Siwarak is on the far right. At a seminar on Sgaw Karen folktales, life style, culture, tribes, and music organized by the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) on 27 November, 2004.

Thirdly, as an internal factor, the youth group functions as an “informal education institute”, which have had accumulated knowledge on how to protect Karen identity and tradition, while formal education has provided the youth with skills they can use to protect their identity and traditions.

Fourthly, the existence of charismatic leader, Pati Joni and the founders of Nong Tao youth group is also an internal factor. The youth group is not entirely autonomous. Leaders within the village encourages the youth to engage in the activities to strengthen and protect Karen identity and wisdom.

**Figure 4.8:** Model of Factors concerning the Roles of the Nong Tao Educated Youth



Source: Author



When they acted as an intermediary between the government and the villagers for the King's Royal Project and the February 6<sup>th</sup> general election, their function was to let the government hear the villagers' voices and also to let the government's policies reach the villagers. Their role as mediators is important for assuring mutual understanding between the government and village. Such mediator role is played predominantly by the educated young men.

Further, through interviews and observation, I noted that the young women who do not pursue higher education keep Karen tradition through acquiring weaving and cooking skills from their mothers, while the relatively highly educated women had little opportunity to acquire these skills, and the young men teach Karen language and use computer skills to strengthen and promote their culture. In other words, mostly women preserve their tradition in the traditional way that their ancestors had as their life-style, whereas the men strengthen their tradition in the modern way that they acquire knowledge from a school. Therefore, it can be said that the men abstract the idea of Karen identity and tradition as an object to be preserved.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, it is interesting that the young men individualize their roles as cultural promoters among the youth group members. Pichai, who is good at Karen language and literature, teaches Karen language to the younger generation, and Siwakorn, who is equipped with computer literacy, uses electronic devices such as a computer and video camera to record traditional rituals, oral history, and folktales. This diversity and individuation of roles was not found among the young women. Further, it is remarkable that the roles their fathers played in the community also have been clearly recognized among the villagers. When the primary school in Nong Tao village had a local curriculum to teach the students local wisdom, for instance Karen language, natural resource management, rituals, and local music, the sole Karen teacher in the school arranged local men to be lecturers relevant to each subject.

Army training will be obligatory for the young villagers above 21 years old and under 25 years old since this year. This implies that only men will have the related new opportunities in the future because, for example, they will be able to work as governmental officers. This may cause a change in identity for these men, so that nation state affairs might be given priority over the community. It cannot be predicted with certainty, but the point is that at least it will have implications in the future.

---

<sup>12</sup> For related discussions, refer to Chapter 1.5.2 Social Change.

**Figure 4.9:** Army Training Registration Form



*Source:* Author's photograph

This thesis implies several consequences for the future of Nong Tao youth group activities. We can see that modern education has introduced new ways of viewing tradition, and that these new views have a particular gender division to them. Mostly young women continue to learn Karen traditions in a largely traditional way, that is, through experience. Young men, however, have started to see traditions like a subject in school: something to be learnt at a distance, and memorized, or something to be taught in a classroom (as with Karen language classes), rather than learned through experience. In this second way, traditions become objectified rather than directly lived.

Another consequence of this change is a change in the contents of Karen traditions. Certain cultural items, such as Karen language and literature, are conceptualized as something to be recorded, taught, and protected, however, certain items get left out. We see, for example, that although animism used to play an important role in Nong Tao traditions, it is not highly valued by Nong Tao youths. As a result, it is not among the traditions the youth seek to preserve. They may record animist rituals to show outsiders, but they do not learn and practice the rituals for themselves.

Further, military training implies that only men will have the related new opportunities in the future as governmental jobs, and may cause a change in identity for

these men, so that loyalty to nation state might be given priority over the community. It may lead to the expansion of gender roles in the future.

Lastly, in spite of its uniqueness in terms of the existence of charismatic leader in the village as Pati Joni, Nong Tao village is likely to be a model to the other Karen villages that have been faced with modernization and the struggle of maintaining their ethnic identity and tradition.