

CHAPTER IV

LOCAL SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT MILIEU

4.1 General Overview of the Thai-Karen people

Thailand has nine hill tribes who are officially called *Chao Khao*; namely Hmong, Lahu, Mien (Yao), Akha, Lisu, Htin, Lua, Karen and Khamu (Buadaeng 2003). The population of these groups is about 800,000, which is about one percent of The Thai population (Eliot & Bickersteth 1999, pp 335-337). The hill tribes are also known as ethnic minority groups of Thailand, who live mostly in the remote and mountainous areas of the country (Tribal Research Institute 1999). The ethnic Karen people, interchangeably called Thai-Karen people in this paper, have two subgroups, Pwo and Skaw. They are also called *Yang or Kariang* by northern Thais and Thais in other parts of the country, and are the biggest ethnic group in Thailand, comprising 46.18% of total ethnic population.

The Thai-Karen people of Thailand are one of the ethnic minority groups that have been scattered in northern Thailand for centuries. Generally, the Thai-Karen people reside in the rural areas of North-west of Thailand where they rely on agriculture for their main income generation. In Thailand there are two Karen subgroups, Sgaw and Pwo. The surveyed population was 321,000 in 1995, comprising about 46% of the total highland ethnic population (Buadaeng 2003, p. 3). Historically in the north, it has been told that Pwo Karen were war captives brought into Chiang Mai by King Kawila in 1802 and some were said to have moved in from Burma (Renard 1980). Karen in western Thailand, on the other hand, were subjects of the Siamese kingdom and joined the Siamese army to fight against the Burmese two hundred years ago. Some of them even advanced to high-ranking positions in the army.

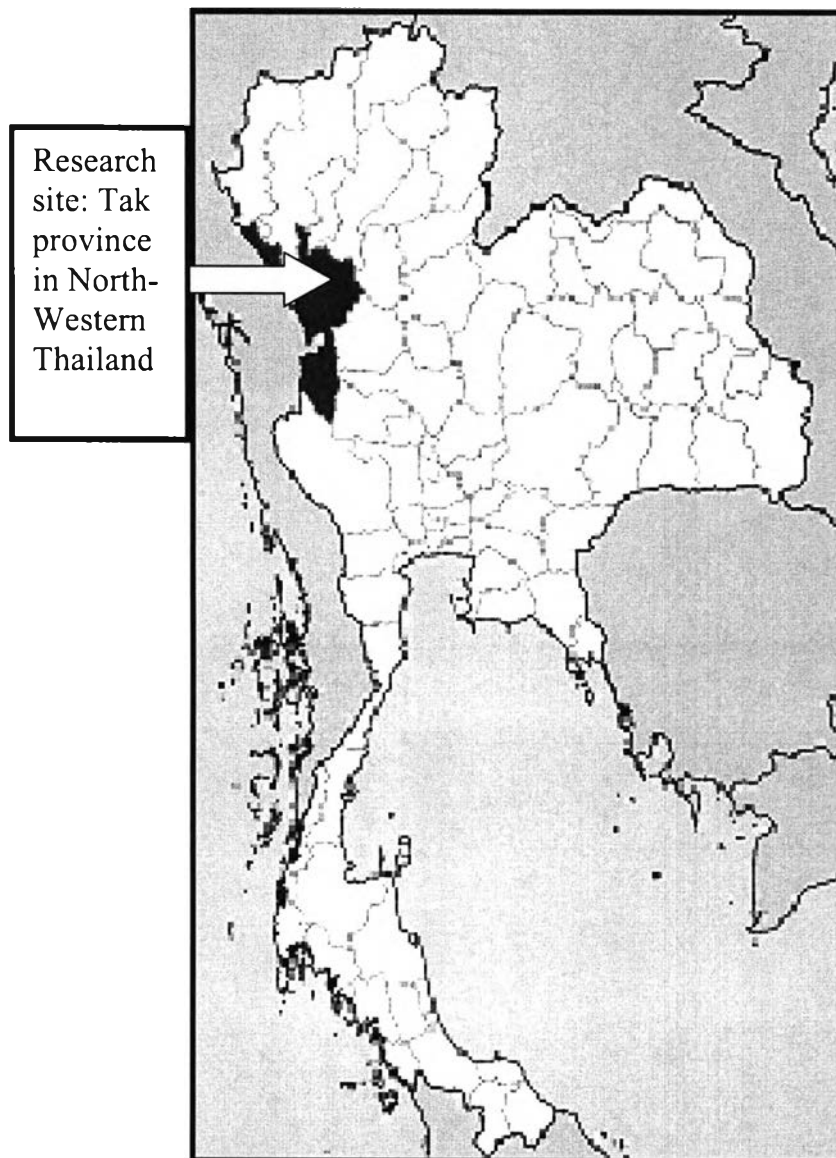
4.2 Topography of Research Areas

Information on the geographical settlement and population of Thai-Karen people and their composition with Thai people will be explored. Maps of research site, areas of Thai-Karen settlements in Thailand, and natural resources such as waterfalls and parks will also be included in this chapter.

4.2.1 Geography

Most of the geography of Tak province is covered with mountains and valleys, especially west of the province which borders with Karen State of Eastern Burma (Myanmar). They cover 72.50% of total areas. These mountain areas are the sources of rivers and streams in the area. The main mountain ranges are Thanonthongchai, Luang and Phamuan mountains. The total land can be categorized as that, out of total area mountains and forests cover 69.57%, farmlands or croplands cover 10.56%, and residence and others cover 19.87% of total land area.

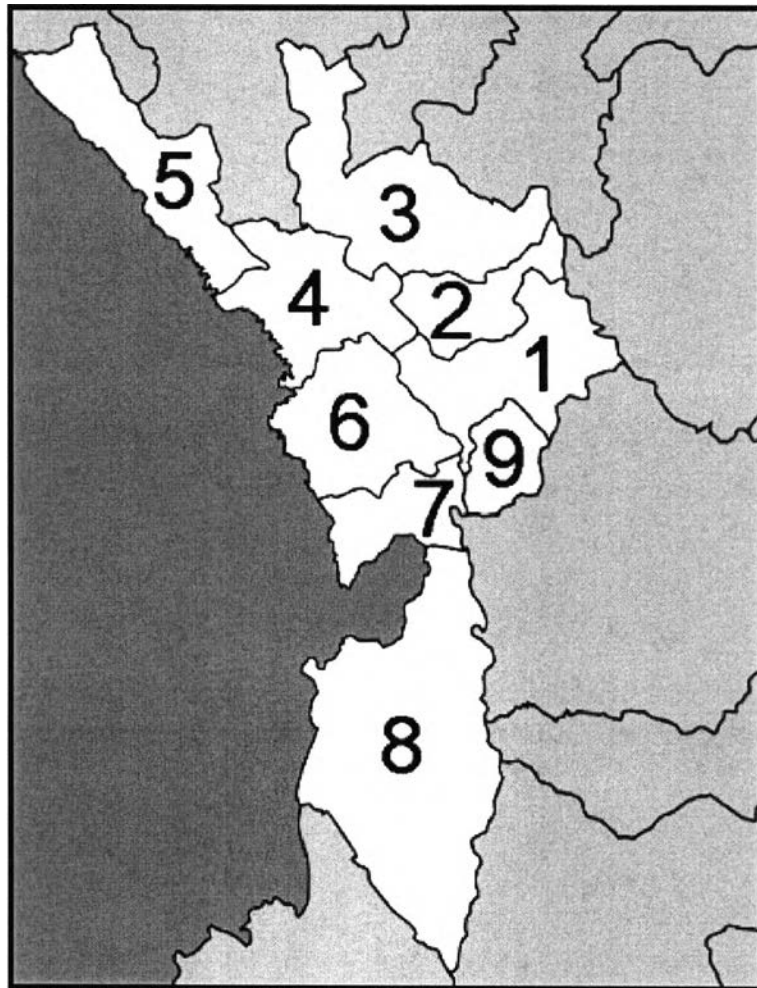
Map of Thailand: highlighting Tak province which is in the northwestern Thailand, bordering with Burma (Myanmar)



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Amphoe_Tak.png#file

Tak is also the site of Bhumibol Dam, the largest in Thailand, which covers an area of 16,406.6 square kilometers, Tak is located 426 km from Bangkok, and administratively divided into 8 districts and a sub-district, namely (1) Mueang Tak; (2) Ban Tak; (3) Sam Ngao; (4) Mae Ramat; (5) Tha Song Yang; (6) Mae Sot; (7) Phop Phra; (8) Umphang and (9) Wang Chao (sub-district). (<http://www.trekthailand.net/pl/index.html>)

Map of districts of Tak province



Map of Tak province with its districts (Amphoe) numbering: (1) Mueang Tak; (2) Ban Tak; (3) Sam Ngao; (4) Mae Ramat; (5) Tha Song Yang; (6) Mae Sot; (7) Phop Phra; (8) Umphang and (9) Wang Chao (sub-district);

The research location is the five border districts of Tak province, namely (5) Tha Song Yang; (4) Mae Ramat; (6) Mae Sot; (7) Phop Phra and (8) Umphang;

Tak province has a number of national parks, and they are:

1. Lan Sang National Park with an area of 104 square kilometers,
2. Klong Wang Chao National Park covering 747 square kilometers of Klong Wang Chao and Klong Suan Mak forests in Kampaeng Phet and Tak provinces,
3. Mae Moei National Park covering 185 square kilometers in Tha Song Yang district,
4. Mae Ngao National Park covering 412 square kilometers, and locating in Mae Hong Son, Tak, and Chiang Mai provinces,
5. Khun Pha War national park covering 220 square kilometers of area in Mae Sot district,
6. Mae Ping national park, covering Doi Tao district of Chiang Mai province, Li district of Lam Phun province and Sam Ngao district of Tak province,
7. Mae Wa national park locates in both Lampang and Tak provinces, covering 589 square kilometers area,
8. Pha Charoen waterfall national park, covering around 855 square kilometers areas in Mae Sot and Phop Phra districts and bordering Klong Wang Chao and Lan Sang national parks, and
9. Taksin Maharat national park is located in the Mae Sot district. The park is close to Lan Sang national park, and it covers an area of 149 square kilometers. (<http://www.trekthailand.net/north50/index.html>)

Tak province covers an area of 16,406 square kilometers and is 426 kilometers north of Bangkok. As the province shares natural border with Myanmar, it is highly regarded as a western gateway to Myanmar. It is also a trading gateway to Myanmar at Amphoe Mae Sot, where lots of economic activities take place daily along the border. In addition, the province has the Asian Highway that runs from Thailand's western border towards the northeastern region (through Mae Sot, Sukhothai, Phitsanulok, Ubon Ratchathani and Laos). Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge connects the Asian Highway between Thailand and Myanmar, and is located at Tambon Tha Sai Luad, opposite a town called Myawadi in Myanmar. The Asian Highway also runs to other regions in South Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

Apart from its economic importance the province is also an environmental and cultural center with magnificent forests, spectacular waterfalls and caves. Namtok Thi Lo Su is located in the Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, a UNESCO World Heritage site (declared by the UNESCO as a world heritage in 1999), which links with the Thung Yai Naresuan and Huay Kha Kaeng Reserves, as well as Khlong Lan and Mae Wong National Parks. Together, they form Thailand's largest wildlife haven and Southeast Asia's top virgin forest. Being the biggest and the most beautiful waterfall in Thailand, Namtok (waterfall) Thi Lo Su is also considered the sixth biggest waterfall in the world. Another newly-developed tourist attraction Namtok (waterfall) Thi Lo Rae is also situated in the Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary. (<http://www.tourismthailand.org/destinationguide/list.aspx?provinceid=50&typeid=7>)

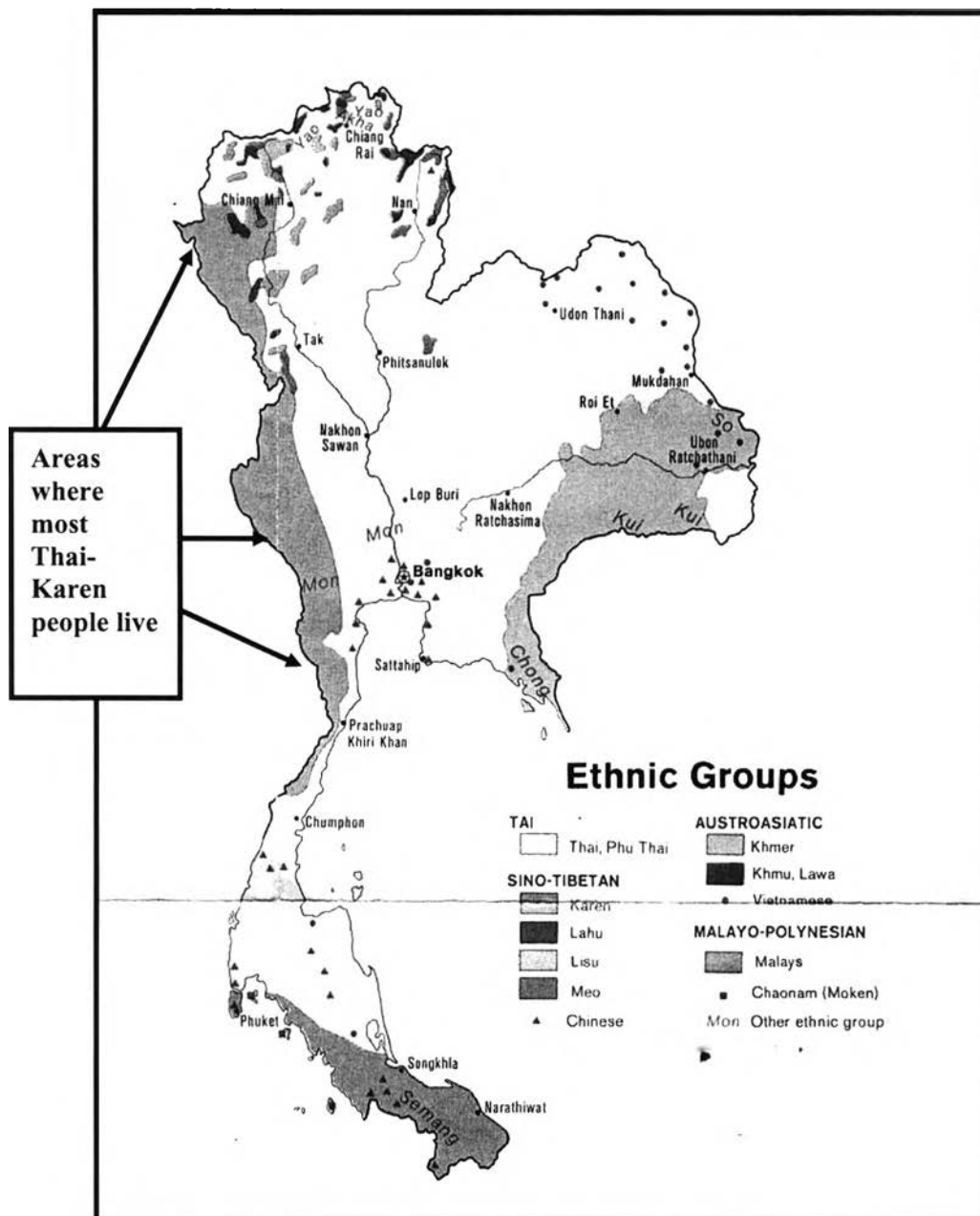
4.2.2 Population

The target people of the research are the Thai-Karen people residing in the border districts of Tak province, north-western Thailand, namely Tha Song Yang, Mae Marat, Mae Sot, Phop Phra and Umphang. These border districts are situated along the border of Thai-Burma (Pls. see maps). The five border districts have a total of 31 Tambon Administration Organizations (TAO), 8 municipals, 290 villages and 33 Sub-districts (Department Of Provincial Administration: <http://www.dopa.go.th>).

The total population of Tak province is 521,615 and the households are 147,667 (DOPA). The Thai-Karen population in Tak province comprises of 118,065 (KNCE <http://www.karenpeople.com>). The Karen has the highest population in the five border districts compared to other ethnic groups, like ethnic Hmong, Lisu, Mien, etc...

Among numerous attractions suitable for ecotourism, Amphoe Umphang is a former Karen settlement and is currently home to several hill tribes including Thai-Karen, Lisu, Hmong, Mien and Lahu. Amphoe Umphang is populated mostly by Karen people who are in particular, very traditional. They live simply and maintain contact with nature using elephants at work and as a means of transportation. (<http://www.tourismthailand.org/destinationguide/list.aspx?provinceid=50&typeid=7>)

Map of Thailand, showing places of ethnic groups in Thailand
(Thai-Karen people mostly live in the north and northwestern Thailand)



4.3 Livelihoods and Economics

The Thai-Karen people are scattering in provinces of Thailand, such as Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Tak, Kanchanaburi, Lampang, Rachaburi, etc. Due to their living in remote areas of the mountains, the infrastructure, social welfare - such as health and education - , and economic situation are poor compared to the people from the central or low land areas. Agricultural farming is the main source of their income and livelihoods. They practice slash and burn cultivation that is also known as 'swidden' agriculture farming. Since the economic situation of the country has progressed, along with modernization and market oriented economic schemes the practice of these kinds of farming are no longer suitable. Coping with these changes in their farming activities have created difficulties for the Thai-Karen people.

For two decades Thailand has expanded its economic development, although it experienced two economic crises in 1980s and 1997, which caused a recession. Along with the mainstream development of the country the economic growth has also expanded from the central to the periphery areas of rural provinces of Thailand where ethnic Thai-Karen and other ethnic minority groups have populated. The upland minority groups are, typically, engaged in agriculture for their primary source of livelihood although handicrafts and wage employment often bring additional income (Hares 2004). Their agriculture in the areas not suitable for irrigation agriculture has been traditionally based on slash-and-burn techniques (Hares 2004).

The economic development of Thailand has also had consequences on the livelihoods of the Thai-Karen people and their ways of livings. With the economic expansion jobs were created and young Karen people from the rural areas have come to the nearby towns, big cities and Bangkok to find a job. Most of them are unskilled workers who have found jobs in shops, restaurants and factories. The remittance of these laborers which was sent back to the families back home has supported the households for a better economic situation. On one hand the Thai-Karen people have

enjoyed their economic growth, and the other hand the shortage of labor in rural areas for labor-intensive farming has caused less productivity (Maniratanavongisri 2004).

Along with the development scheme of newly industrialized Thailand the country has advanced from agricultural based production to market oriented economy during the last two decades. Among the progress of production, technology and economic infrastructures the environmental and conservative schemes have also influenced the forest dwellers who are mainly ethnic minority groups. The government policy on forest reservation, National Parks and Wildlife Centaury has restricted the use of forests and forest lands.

As a consequence the Thai-Karen villagers who have dwelled in those places have experienced the limited utilization of forests and lands that they have relied on for their main income generation. In the late 1980s conflicts between the Thai nation-state and hill-tribe farmers in northern Thailand which was justified in terms of the conservation of forest resources had increased. NGOs took parts in the fight for the rights of local communities to manage the forests and the preservation of Karen's cultural values which centre upon fostering of forest conservation and sufficiency.

Since the Thai-Karen villages that are formed with small number of kinship households are situated in the remote mountainous areas it is not reachable in all seasons. Some places can be reached by dusty roads in the dry seasons. The government schools are mostly situated in bigger villages as the small villages sometimes have small number of students coming to school. Children in the villages are quite often assisting their parents in the farms and they are not interested in coming to schools. With the government policy on free education until secondary school and non-governmental organizations and family supports more and more Thai-Karen children have studied and pursued higher education. Along with the mainstream of economic development of the country the economic situation of Thai-Karen people has also progressed.

4.4 Impacts of the mainstream Economic Development

The developing Thailand's economic boom kicked off with the appreciation of foreign investments and trades two decades ago with two crises, an economic crisis in 1980s and Asian financial crisis in 1997. One view of events that lead up the 1997 crisis was that the rapid growth of Thailand's export-oriented industrialization from the mid 1980s, aided by a large inflow of foreign direct investment, created large structural problems which undermined export competitiveness (Phongpaichit & Baker 2000). According to the economic development theory, the economic development will bring core benefits to the centre while its proceeds will also influence and manipulate the periphery with its positive and negative consequences. The overall circumstances of economic status of rural provinces, such as infrastructure, education, health and social welfare have improved and people have more choices in their lives.

The traditional livelihood of ethnic Thai-Karen people of northwestern Thailand has experienced various influences and pressures of the country's rapid economic development in recent years. Living in the remote mountainous areas of northwestern Thailand their traditional rotational farming have become subject to changes in their ways of living and work. The Thai-Karen communities have progressed with better economic and social achievements in their milieu, with the adaptation and adjustment of their income generation activities in order to be compatible with the mainstream economics and developmental schemes of the country.

Development projects such as dams' constructions, Forest Parks and Wildlife Sanctuary, etc, have also had a profound impact on the lives of people living in those locations or project sites. Forced relocation of ethnic villages situated in the territory of the developmental projects, outlawing of the practice of swidden agriculture farming which is also the main agricultural activity of some ethnic villagers for their staple foods, and prohibition of land tenure and citizenship of some ethnic minority groups have created misunderstanding, distrust and suspicion between the authorities and the people in question. This is especially true of the unprivileged population of the rural areas, in this case the Thai-Karen people. They have had to

undergo these struggles along with other ethnic minority groups of Thailand, whom are also known as hill tribes people of Thailand. Poverty is severe in rural Thailand where people did not benefit from the boom years of Thailand's economic development, rather, they become victims of environmental destruction, industrialization, marginalization and displacement (Laird 2000).

Most of ethnic minority Thai-Karen people have scattered in the remote and mountainous areas of north and west of Thailand. In general terms the source of income generation of Thai-Karen people is based on agricultural farming and their economic situation is at a subsistence level. Because of their settlements as forest dwellers in the mountains and forest areas this agricultural farming is most suitable for their livelihoods. Most of them depend on rotational farming, and only a few of them who own agricultural wet lands, use irrigation farming.

Along with the mainstream economic development of Thailand, the rural areas, such as remote provinces and their population have also benefited to a certain level of improvement in economics, infrastructure, social welfare, education, health, and working opportunities in factories, service industries and business sectors. Included in the groups that have improved their economic wellbeing from the country's overall economic development are the ethnic minority Thai-Karen people.

In this context of study the Thai-Karen people from the five border districts of Tak Province of northwestern Thailand, such as Tha Song Yang, Mae Ramat, Mae Sot, Phop Phra and Umphang districts, are taken as the focal point or target group of study. The following discussion of the study is going to highlight what are the possible opportunities or risks on the economic development, education and work opportunities of the Thai-Karen people from those districts, and the supportive inter-relationship of the three issues and their association or driven force on the economic wellbeing of the Thai-Karen people in this study. It is hoped that the outcomes of the study will not only bring some alternative solutions to the risks or standstill economic conditions, but also shed light on the opportunities which will encourage the economics of the Thai-Karen communities studied and the whole ethnic minority Thai-Karen people of Thailand as well.