

From Interacting to Accessing: On Relationship between the Mlabri and the Forest

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Abstract

The Mlabri, also known as *phi tong lueang* (“spirits of the yellow leaves”) in Thai, had lived as the only nomadic hunter-gatherers in the northern part of Thailand. However, during the past two decades a circumstance of the Mlabri has been drastically changed under the name of development (*kan phattana*), which is especially promoted by the Thai government. Due to this encapsulation, they live a sedentary life in permanent settlements engaging in wage work and cash crop cultivation instead of the traditional way of life in forest. In the process of the sedentarization, their intimate relationship with forest is becoming difficult to maintain. While the Mlabri traditionally have very close relationship with forest as an animate in the past time: it was not only the external world to live physically but also the internal world to live culturally, the relationship is gradually inclining to only the former. In order to grasp the current situation surrounding them, this paper

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will explore how the relationship between the Mlabri and forest has been changed.

Keywords: the Mlabri, (post-) nomadic hunter-gatherers, northern Thailand, forest, animate/inanimate

จากปฏิสัมพันธ์สู่การเข้าถึง: ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมลากับป่า

ชู นิมนจยา

บทคัดย่อ

มลาบรี (หรือที่แปลว่า “คนป่า” ในภาษามลาบรี) เป็นกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ที่รู้จักกันในชื่อภาษาไทยว่า “ผีตอเหลือง” และเป็นเผ่าที่เคยเร่ร่อนเก็บหาล่าสัตว์เผ่าเดียวที่กระจายตัวอยู่ในป่าทางภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย ช่วงเวลา 20 ปีที่ผ่านมา สถานการณ์เกี่ยวกับชาวมลาบรีเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างมาก โดยเฉพาะภายใต้การพัฒนาที่ส่งเสริมโดยรัฐไทย การถูกโอบล้อมโดยการพัฒนาทำให้ชาวมลาบรีมีวิถีชีวิตที่ตั้งหลักปักฐานถาวร ทำงานรับจ้างและเพาะปลูกพืชเชิงพาณิชย์แทนที่จะใช้ชีวิตในป่าเหมือนเดิม ในกระบวนการตั้งหลักปักฐานนี้ ชาวมลาบรีไม่สามารถจะคงความสัมพันธ์อันแนบแน่นกับป่าได้อีกต่อไป ในอดีต ชาวมลาบรีมีความสัมพันธ์ใกล้ชิดในแง่จิตวิญญาณกับป่า ซึ่งไม่ใช่ความสัมพันธ์ในแง่ของกายภาพเพียงอย่างเดียว แต่มีเป็นความสัมพันธ์ภายในซึ่งเป็นวิถีชีวิตเชิงวัฒนธรรมด้วย ความสัมพันธ์นี้ค่อยๆ ถูกลดทอนเหลือเพียงความสัมพันธ์เชิงกายภาพ บทความนี้จะทำความเข้าใจสถานการณ์ปัจจุบันของชาวมลาบรีและค้นหาว่าความผูกพันและปฏิสัมพันธ์กับป่านี้เปลี่ยนแปลงไปอย่างไร

คำสำคัญ: มลาบรี ชนเผ่าเร่ร่อนเก็บหาล่าสัตว์ ภาคเหนือของไทย ความสัมพันธ์กับป่า ความมีจิตวิญญาณ/ไร้จิตวิญญาณ

1. Introduction

One day in February 2014, a Thai NGO, the Inter Mountain People Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT), visited Ban Huai Yuak, a permanent settlement of the Mlabri in Nan province, and held a meeting with the Mlabri in order to grasp the current situation surrounding them. In the meeting, a staff asked, “When do you feel the pleasure that I am the Mlabri?”. A Mlabri man answered, “When I’m in forest”. His wife continuously said, “I’m reminded my parents who passed away in forest if I’m there”. Now, it is already ten several years after they left the forest.

The Mlabri, also known as *phi tong lueang* (“spirits of the yellow leaves”) in Thai, had lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers. Before the 1980s, they depended mainly on wild resources while maintaining economic and social relationship with neighboring farmers such as the Hmong and the Mien. After the end of insurgency period in northern Thailand, they experienced a radical socio-cultural change due to encapsulation by the Thai government under the name of “development” (Sakkarin 2009). As a result, they are now leading a sedentary life engaging in wage work, cash crop cultivation and ethnic tourism (Nimonjiya 2015).

In general, hunter-gatherers have a very close relationship with natural environment. Many anthropological

studies on hunter-gatherers focused on their close relationship with environment especially from a perspective of adaptation which is a key concept of ecological anthropology. However, hunter-gatherers traditional lifestyle with/in environments has changed drastically as a result of encapsulation by outsiders (Trigger 1999).

The term “encapsulation” here can be rephrased as “whole or partial enclosure or enclavement” (Woodburn 1988: 36) by outsiders such as neighboring ethnic groups and nation-states, and can be referred to as “the process by which formerly autonomous groups are drawn into the orbit of regional social formations and eventually undergo incorporation into state-level entities” (Lee 2005: 17). One of the main means of encapsulation is sedentarization which means placing nomadic people under control by putting them into a permanent settlement. For hunter-gatherers, its impact is immeasurable; for example, sedentarizing the Kutse of central Botswana caused unstableness to households, sharing networks, and friendship because it disrupted the flexibility of their social organization (Kent 1995) and sedentarizing the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia resulted in several deaths because they could not endure the intense heat, illness, and mental pressure in permanent settlements established by the government (Carey 1976: 306-308).

Sedentarization has a great impact on the relationship between hunter-gatherers and environment. It goes without saying that hunter-gatherers' subsistence depends on various resources which are produced by natural environment. Nomadism prevents resource depletion. As hunter-gatherers settle down, socio-cultural relationship with natural environment has also changed. The reason is very clear; hunter-gatherers usually regard the environment as their true home and consider that their life is a part of the natural order of things. For example, the Batek in Peninsular Malaysia identify themselves through the relationship with their rainforest (Endicott 1979). For them, certain hazards such as thunderstorms and tigers are relevant to this reality. In fact, to protect themselves for the hazards, they prohibit specific social behaviors. This shows that natural environment, which would be regarded as an inanimate object in the Western idea, is a source of cultural identity as well as source of food for them.

This paper presents the case of the Mlabri focusing on their past and present relationship with the forest. The data is based on the author's long fieldwork among the Mlabri in Ban Huai Yuak, Wiang Sa district, Nan province from April 2012 to March 2014.

2. The Mlabri in Thailand

The Mlabri (pronounced /mlaʔ briʔ/ in their language) are (post-) nomadic hunter-gatherers living in the northern part of Thailand. They speak Austro-Asiatic language belonging to the Khmuic branch of the northern Mon-Khmer language group. They usually call themselves *mlaq* (“human beings”) and *mlaq briq*, though they are better known to the general Thai people as *phi tong lueang* (“spirits of the yellow leaves”)— “spirits” is an allusion to their hiding in the forest to avoid to contact with outsiders, and “yellow leaves” refer to the fact that they abandon their windscreens when the palm or banana leaves they are made of turned yellow (Bernatzik 1951: 89; Surin 1992a:1).

The Mlabri have a very low population, there are about 400 individuals in Thailand. While the result and its implications are contested (Walters 2005), a recent genetic study conducted by Oota and his colleagues suggests that the Mlabri are of recent origin (500-800 years ago) and descend from a very small founder group of individuals who practiced agriculture (Oota et al. 2005). This would imply that they are not “continuous foragers” but “re-specialized foragers” (Endicott 1999: 275).

A brief description about the Mlabri was found in a book written by a Thai elite in 1886 (Khun Prachakhadikit cited by Thongchai Winichakul 2000: 46). This implies that

the Mlabri have lived in Thailand since the late 19th century at least, while many scholars agreed that the Mlabri migrated into Thailand in the early 20th century from the Lao province of Sayaboury bordering the Thai province of Nan (Bernatzik 1951: 131; Young 1961: 87; Boeles 1963: 153; Trier 2008: 28). The Mlabri first appear in an academic report in the first half of last century by a Danish Major, Erik Seidenfaden, who used to work for the Royal Thai Police (Seidenfaden 1919; 1926). Thereafter, some articles were published in the Journal of Siam Society in the 1920s (Keer 1924; Bourke-Borrowes 1926; Phra Winit Wanadorn 1926) but the data were from secondary sources. The first ethnographic study on the Mlabri was by an Austrian ethnologist, Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, who conducted a research among the Mlabri in the forest in 1936-1937 and published a book, *the Spirits of the Yellow Leaves* in German language in 1938 (Bernatzik 1951). After that, several researchers from Thailand and foreign countries did the study on the Mlabri (e.g. Nimmanahaeminda & Hartland-Swann 1962; Surin 1985; Surin and Staff 1992; Trier 1981; 2008; Sakkarin 2007; 2009; 2013; Ikeya and Nakai 2009; and Nimonjiya 2015).

Unlike the other hill tribes, the Mlabri did not receive much attention from the Thai government. It is only in the mid-1980s when the insurgency was over that they have become a target of development (Nimonjiya 2015).

The government, foreign missionaries, and the royal projects were involved in this kind of development. As a result, the Mlabri are living a sedentary life scattered in five permanent settlements in Phrae and Nan provinces and are engaging in wage working, cash crop cultivation and ethnic tourism (Fig. 1).

3. Intimate Relationship between the Mlabri and Forest in the Past

Northern Thailand is described as the eastern extremity of the Himalayan mountain chain (Ives 2004:20). The topography of this area is extensive, north-south-running mountain ranges. About 70% of the total area may be classified as “highland”, 20% as “upland” and a mere 10% as “lowland” (Meer 1981: 8). The climate is generally categorized as “tropical savanna”, although some areas might be termed a “mountain climate” (Judd 1977: 26). Until the 1970s, the Mlabri lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers in tropical seasonal forests more than 3,000 feet above sea level in the northern part of Thailand (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1 Current settlements in Nan and Phrae provinces

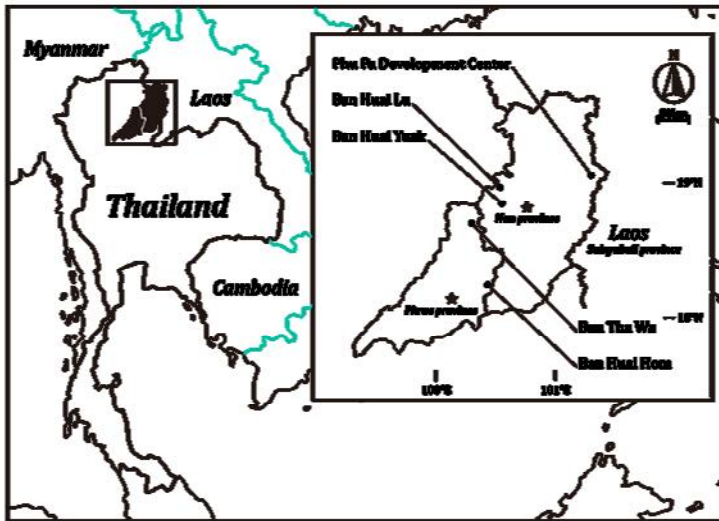
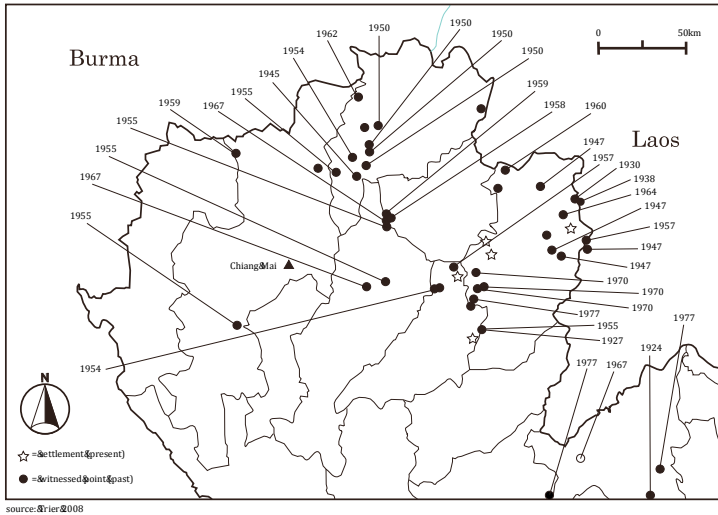


Table 1 A number of household and population in each settlement in 2014

settlement	household	population
Ban Huai Hom	13	102
Ban Huai Yuak	33	200
Ban Tha Wa	13	42
Phu Fa Development Center	16	64
Ban Huai Luu	8	18

Fig. 2 Residence range of the Mlabri (from the 1920s to the 1970s)



The Mlabri distinguish three seasons: hot season (*nyam thu.ul*), rainy season (*nyam mèq hot*), and cool season (*nyam takat*). Moreover, they consider that forest has various characteristics: e.g. dry evergreen forest (*briq caboq sung*), tropical dry-evergreen forest (*briq mək/briq krum*), mixed deciduous forest (*briq citce*), sparse forest (*briq praw*) and so on.

Bernatzik (1951: 139-140) described their daily life as getting up and scattering in search of food in the forest, then the meal is cooked and eaten, and the family rest under the windscreen, after three to five days they wander

slowly then set up the new camp. Jasper Trier (2008: 55), a Danish anthropologist, conducting a fieldwork among the Mlabri in the late 1970s, also describes their daily life in a similar way - men leave the camp early in the morning to hunt small game, dig out bamboo rats, collect roots and honey and, occasionally, to catch fish from a small stream, sometimes staying away for several days, women and girls collect roots, edible plants, crabs, etc., not far away from the camp. Each family usually eats separately. They often take short rests and go to sleep early.

Fig. 3 Traditional Lifestyle in the Forest (Trier 2008: 22)



A set of windscreens (*g'eng*) was a social unit or a band. The group size was not fixed, it depended on the time and situation. In the 1930s, a band consisted of two or three families, totaling five to seven individuals (Bernatzik 1951: 276); in the 1970s it consisted of twelve to twenty-five individuals (Trier 2008: 30); in the 1980s it consisted of two to three families totaling eight to twelve individuals (Surin 1992b: 177). A band was a mobile unit that stayed in one place for about five to ten days (Surin 1992a: 1). Like other hunter-gatherers, the Mlabri's nomadic life mainly depended on ecological factors. Thus a composition of band was not stable, it tended to split up during the dry winter season because food became increasingly difficult to find (Trier 2008: 31).

Hunter-gatherers generally do not produce any food but exploited natural resources. The Mlabri's main diet was obtained by gathering and digging. As Trier mentioned, the main diet was roots and tubers, and wild animals were indispensable protein (Trier 2008: 279). Forest products, such as wild fruits, roots, berries, leaves, snails, caterpillars, crabs, lizards, and frogs, were obtained by gathering, and wild plants, such as bamboo shoots, the sap of wild sago palms, honey, and especially the potato-like tubers of a small species of palm, taro, and yams, were obtained by digging (Bernatzik 1951: 138; Surin 1992a: 11-14).

Among these forest products, wild yam (*eq*) was the most important diet for them. However, there was a way to dig it; when they found a wild yam, they did not take all of it but just left the root in the ground to gather again some other time. During the rainy season when it is difficult to dig wild yam, they obtained various kinds of bamboo shoot. According to the earlier studies, they used twenty-five types of wild plants, six types were for fabrication of clothing and shelter and five types were for medicinal use (Bussban Na Songkla 1992) especially for relieving bleeding, sickness, pain, and headache (Vongstit Chauakul et al. 1992). According to Pongtorn's and Sarapee's work, however, it appears that plants, roots and tubers were not enough for the Mlabri's nutrition; they concluded that the state of Mlabri's nutrition was probably not enough if the Mlabri did not eat meat (Pongtorn and Sarapee 1992: 161). The Mlabri hunted with spear (*kòot*), spade (*soq*), spear point (*khabok*) and knife (*tòq*), and they got the cooperation of the dog (*bran*). Several types of animals were hunted, like muntjac (*polh*), deer (*ciak*), wild boar (*cabut briq/ngay*), hedgehog (*qudok*), bamboo lat (*koc*), mole (*met lèk*), mouse (*hnèl*), big lizard (*pye*) and so on (Fig. 4). The Mlabri's spears were not for throwing but for stabbing by hand (Bernatzik 1951: 138). Their traditional weapons and utensils were made entirely of wood and bamboo (Seidenfaden 1919: 50, Trier 2008: 54), but since mid-1980s, hunting gun was introduced so

they are able to hunt for monkeys (*thawaq*), birds (*ac*), fowls (*sr.kèng briq*) and squirrels (*cak.qdar*) (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4 Catching bamboo rats by digging (Trier 2008: 60)



Fig. 5 A Mlabri man with a hunting gun (Trier 2008: 62)



The Mlabri traditionally used bamboo tubes for boiling and wooden skewer for roasting. Large pieces of meat were thrown directly into the fire. They ate and shared everything with all of members in a band. Incidentally, like other hunter-gatherers in the world, food sharing is also a very important social principle among the Mlabri. An old Mlabri man once said, “We can’t live together if food is not shared”. However, they did not depend on only natural products; they have limited relation with other hill tribes such as the Khamu, Karen, Lahu, H’tin and Hmong, and even the highland Tai. The Mlabri sometimes visited other ethnic groups and exchanged forest products for consumer items such as salt, steel, tobacco, blankets, clothes, pigs and rice (Chanan 1992: 101). The ethnic group with whom the Mlabri had the closest relation is the Hmong. According to Trier, this “preference” emerged soon after the arrival of the Hmong in Thailand in the 1930s (Trier 1992: 231) and the Mlabri sometimes were employed by the Hmong to work in their fields (Bernatzik 1951: 139).

The Mlabri’s relationship with forest was not only economic but also social and cultural. The forest is a place that gives the Mlabri everything they need, but it is also a place with much danger. It is especially linked with the world of spirits. According to Trier’s great study, the Mlabri recognize natural objects as the place of spirits (*wɔk*). There are many kinds of spirits, such as the spirit of sky (*wɔk klar*),

the spirit of sun (*wək tal*), the spirit of thunder (*wək kūr*), the spirit of forest (*wək briʔ*), the spirit of mountain (*wək chaboh sung*), the spirit of water (*wək wɣk*), the spirit of waterfall (*wək wɣk hot*), the spirit of earth (*wək bεʔ*), the spirit of big stone (*wək kεp*), the spirit of wind (*wək rəmūt*), the spirit of big tree (*wək lam*) (cf. Trier 2008: 77).

The spirits that have different abilities and extend different forms of protection and harm. for example, the spirit of sky can see everything what people do and can make people ill when they have done something wrong; the spirit of water also can make people ill. Thus, the Mlabri thought that they have to keep a suitable distance from the spirits. For example, they avoid to be close to big trees because it may break and fall down. It was believed that big trees are habitats of mighty spirits (Bernatzik 1951: 134). When something bad happens, they made a bamboo altar and offered something on it to plead with the spirits to help them (Trier 2008: 30, see also Fig. 6). Moreover, a dead person's soul becomes spirit or ghost (*wək bəl*: the spirit of the dead) which may haunt and hurt people. As Trier describes, they call the soul of a dead person as “*cənre bwl*” (a spirit/ghost of dead) or “*cənre*” (spirit/ghost) and “it may be used for all kinds of spirits, but is mainly used for those of the dead, and therefore it is quite possible that originally it was used exclusively for such persons” (Trier 2008: 75). For that reason, if a person is dead, other people

immediately leave the place after putting the person's body under a big tree.

Fig. 6 Praying for all-important spirits (Trier 2008: 122)



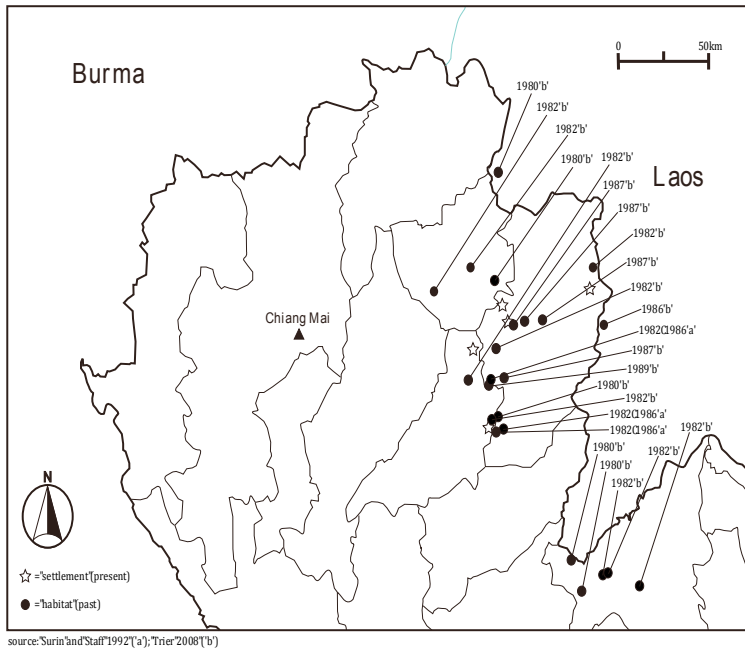
4. The Beginning of Change

Although the Mlabri's traditional lifestyle continued until around 1975 (Trier 2008: 30), it has gradually changed since then. The main cause was deforestation after the end of World War II (Rischel 1995: 9; *The Nation* 1988; *Bangkok Post* 1990) due to agricultural expansion, logging, and road construction (Delang 2002: 487-490). Until the 1950s, logging companies concentrated on high value timbers such as teak, but the new political and economic environment demanded all kinds of wood. It should be noted that logging was promoted officially as the government passed a

law granting logging companies 30-year concessions in 1968. The government also promoted road construction and encouraged lowland farmers to settle down along these roads as an indirect response to insurgency. Through the 1970s, the highlands became a refuge for the opponents of the military regime because members of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) established bases for guerrilla activities in the forest area. Political crisis between the Thai Army and Thai Communist members also affected the Mlabri as they were, 'Sometimes caught between the crossfire, causing death, they have had to limit their movement to a relatively small safe area in the wanderings for hunting and gathering of foods' (Surin 1992b: 175).

While the total forest coverage of Thailand represented 53% of the Thai territory in 1953, it went down to less than 30% by 1980s. The forest coverage of Northern Thailand decreased dramatically from 68% of the total country area in 1961 to 60% in 1976, and only two years later, in 1978, it dropped down to 56% (Thongchai Charupatt 1998). As the forest area in northern part of Thailand decreased, the traditional lifestyle of the Mlabri is also in decline and population can only be found in Phrae and Nan provinces in the 1980s up to the present (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7 Residence range of the Mlabri in the 1980s



During 1970s, there is also a change of economic relation between the Mlabri and other hill tribes, especially the Hmong. According to Chanan Vongvipak, the economic relations between the Mlabri and the Hmong began to change in the 1970s following the move of a community of the Hmong into Wiang Sa district of Nan province (Chanan 1992). Under the threat of communist attacks in Laos, this Hmong community moved to Pua district in Nan province in the mid-20th century and later moved again to settle down within the same province. At the same time, a lumber

company from Song district in Phrae province got an official logging permit in 1973, and began to cut down the forest from Huai Rong which is next to the Phrae-Nan Highway to the forest between Phrae and Nan provinces where the Mlabri frequently stayed. As the forest resources were in decline, the Mlabri came to provide their own labor to the Hmong in order to survive.

The intimate relationship between the Mlabri and the forest completely changed by sedentarization under the name of development first led by foreign missionary in 1979 followed by government initiated development project targeting the Mlabri in Nan province in the mid-1980s. In the beginning, the state-led project failed due to the lack of budget and staff, but in 1999 a permanent settlement in Ban Huai Yuak was set up near the Hmong's village. In 2007, after HRH Princess Sirindhorn officially visited the Mlabri at Ban Huai Yuak, the Royal Project has been initiated with the new settlement at Ban Tha Wa, Phu Fa Development Center, and Ban Huai Lu. In introducing the Mlabri to a sedentary life, alternative subsistence such as cash crop cultivation, keeping livestock, ethnic tourism, and so on, have been promoted. With those, the current situation surrounding them is radically changed (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 A Mlabri house at Ban Huai Yuak



5. Limited Relationship with the Forest at Present

Sedentarization has surely brought the Mlabri new opportunities, but on the other hand, it also undermined the intimate relationship with the forest. According to the etic view, sedentarization and deforestation causes this estranged relation, but emic view from old Mlabri indicated that they look to themselves to explain this changing relation, “After I had a tattoo on my forearm, it was difficult to hunt animals”, and, “Animals have gone away from us since we came to use the gun”. Mlabri’s consumption of food directly hunted or gathered from the forest has decreased since 1970s (Table 2) and at present amounts to only 7% (Table 3) of average food weight.

The Mlabri still practice hunting and gathering today but it is much more limited. Under the influence of cash economy, they sometimes sell the games to the Hmong because they can get more food from that amount of money. The money or bought food will be shared according to the traditional social principle of sharing.

Sedentarization also has an impact on the social life of the Mlabri. Young generations were born and raised in permanent settlement. At Ban Huai Yuak, the children go to school (Fig. 8) and sometimes work with the adults in the Hmong's or Mien's fields. Under such conditions, the children do not have much opportunity to relate with the forest, and the adults usually work so hard in the fields that they do not have time to go in the forest. Mlabri traditional ecological knowledge is losing ground. In place of the oral history, TV attracts all of them today (Nimonjiya & Holzinger 2014) (Fig. 9). Only during the rainy season when power supply stops occasionally do the parents tell their children old stories. Animistic belief and rituals are also in decline as Christian mission introduces new faith and activities like Sunday Service.

Table 2 Estimated Consumption of food 1970-2000 in % (by weight) (Trier 2008: 57)

	Large animals & rodents	Turtles, fish & crabs	Hmong pigs	Rotes & tubers	Vegetables & fruits	Hmong's rice	Other foods from market
1970-1980	23	4	3	44	16	9	1
1980-1990	15	3	5	35	13	26	3
1990-2000	10	2	7	24	10	41	6

Table 3 Estimated Average Consumption of Food 2013-2014 at Ban Huai Yuak in % (by weight)

	Large animals & rodents	Turtles, fish & crabs	Rotes & tubers	Vegetables & fruits	Other foods from markets	Hmong's rice	Mlabri's rice
2013-2014	2	3	2	8	50	30	5

Fig. 8 Mlabri girls in student uniform



Fig. 9 Children are glued to the TV

6. Conclusion: The Mlabri and the Forest in the Future

As mentioned earlier, Mlabri traditional relationship with the forest has been limited due to deforestation and sedentarization. However, the idea that forest is their home (*g'eng*) is still held through generations and the forest is still seen as a source of their identity. This is because forest is a natural environment that is seen as always “giving” and thus regarded as father/ mother and relatives or kin. A Mlabri woman once told me, “There was indeed a lot of danger in the forest but it was delightful to live there. The forest always gave us everything we needed”. This is true for other hunter-gatherers, as forest is not an

epistemological object that we are apt to think but an ontological one that is personalized with generosity; in other words, the forest is presupposed as an animate one for them and it is not an inanimate one that is presupposed in the Western model (cf. Bird-David 1990).

The Mlabri also realize that it is not realistic to go back to the forest despite this strong spiritual tie. Younger generations come to live in a totally different social environment from the older generations who “interacted” with the forest physically, culturally and spiritually. For the young, the forest is becoming an external world, an inanimate place which can be accessed to get natural resources. This changing attitude has been observed in recent years. Ta Sri, my key informant once told me, “I don’t worry about our future, especially our children. We can tell our stories to the children anytime and we take them to the forest to let them learn our knowledge”. It is true that the knowledge can be passed down to younger generations but the spiritual tie and the actual forest skills will gradually be eroded along with Mlabri cultural identity.

With the way of relationship with the forest is changed from interacting to accessing, the relationship among themselves is also changing. A young Mlabri man told me, “The concept of ‘*kan phattana*’ for Thai officers is to ‘own’ something valuable, but we don’t think so. The

word is going to make us forget our own culture. Our culture is to live peacefully with each other. If we have something, we share it together". The process of encapsulation by "development" will gradually make the Mlabri see the forest differently from their forefathers and they will be made to see one another differently in such a process.

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