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Abigaël PESSES

WOMEN ABILITIES.

**Feminism and the Ethics of Sustainable Development
among Karen Highlanders**

This article, based on a recent ethnographic investigation among Karen communities located in the mountainous area of the Mae Win sub-district, Chiang Mai Province, aims at questioning the role assigned to tribal women in the development policies made in Thailand, and at exploring whether and how the different projects focussing on women's participation in development since the eighties have contributed to extend their activities, mobility and power. By confronting the various concepts and practices of development targeting women from local actors, state institutions, religious representatives or environmentalist NGOs, I intend to show how, from the level of village community to nation-state, women abilities are utilized to serve contrasting cultural or political understandings that emphasize the safeguarding of cultural and ecological patrimonies menaced by the industrial civilisation.

On the one hand, women are engaged in the promotion of tribal folklore in the frame of tourism and the cultural national display. On the other hand, they participate in the contest of state development policies by rehabilitating an indigenous corpus of knowledge of which they are partly the holders according to gender division of labour.

**Administrative Decentralisation and Women Participation
in Development**

The changing attitudes toward the status and role of women has been officially brought to national consciousness in Thailand since 1975, when the government sent a delegation to the United Nation First World Conference on Women in Mexico city and joined the international community in recognition of the decade of women (1975-1985). The main idea defended at the meeting in Mexico was to promote women's role and status in development as equal partners with men (Papanek, 1977). In Thailand, the practical application of this international message came with a larger process of administrative decentralisation which aimed at creating a genuine Thai democracy. The reinforcement of the decision making at the community level of the society was officially presented as the way to politicize rural people so that they could become actors taking part in centrally based policies (Nelson, 1998).

The 5th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-86), framed through the concept of "popular participation" promulgated by the World Bank in 1978, accordingly dedicated some priority to the inclusion of the rural population in the capitalist market economy (Turton, 1987). The objective of the so-called "popular participation", including women, was to encourage village communities to govern themselves and to increase the people's ability in local "self-development".

As the country had been engaged since the sixties in a very rapid process of industrialisation and economic growth, the problems resulting from the migration of rural women into the cities where they got unsuitable working possibilities enhanced the need in supporting the rural women in education, training, as well as improvement of income, health and family planning. The 5th plan thus encouraged the expansion of

social services to target groups – women, children, youth and tribal groups while promoting a more stable women's role in the decision making at all key levels of society: the household, the community and the nation.

With the 5th plan, tribal peoples first became a target group concretely included in the national development agenda. In the Mae Win sub-district, the participatory and decentralisation policy was subsequently introduced in Karen highland communities through the reinforcement of the prerogatives of the village administrative committee, *kammakaan muubaan*. This committee was placed under the responsibility of the village headman, *phuu jai baan*, who represents and articulates the relationships between villagers, the local administration and state central authorities. In order to manage the aid coming from the various state agencies implied in hill tribe development, the *kammakaan muubaan* was divided into various development sub-committees (education, health, agriculture, security, religion ...) held by men village volunteers. Following the participation policy held by the Interior Ministry, three organised groups *klum*, based on gender and age categories were associated to the organisation of the village committee, in the same way as all rural communities of Thailand. It is namely the group of "household fathers" *klum phoo baan*, the group of "household mothers" *klum mää baan*, and the "youth group" *klum jauwachon*. These three groups now became the main apparatus to receive the state macro policies and the various development projects coming from the outside, to identify the needs of the local population, to represent and articulate the consensus between the villagers at the village assembly. As I could observe in the field, administrative officers, Christian and Buddhist missionaries, and activist NGOs henceforth relay these groups and committees to transport their propositions of development.

In order to understand how these groups are instrumentalised by the various development agents that interfere in the local scene - I propose to explore in further detail the normative discourses that underlie the development propositions targeted to women groups.

“Women group”, *klum mää baan*

The creation of the *mää baan* groups in the highlands around the mid-eighties followed the evolution of the state integration policy toward hill tribe (*chaao khau*). The priority objectives fixed by governmental policies and supported by foreign-aid development agencies were at that time focussed on national security problems: fighting against the spread of communism in the countryside by producing Thai citizens of tribal origins and replacing opium production by sedentary wet-rice and alternative cash-crop cultivation (coffee, fruit trees and temperate vegetables) as a means to provide income. As the *chaao khau* were accused of being the most responsible for deforestation, because of the population growth and the use of "slash and burn" techniques of cultivation, men groups were set up in order to capture the new agricultural policies oriented towards market, and women groups in order to drain health and family planning policies, and youth groups for developing prevention policies towards drugs, security and the protection of the environment.

Tribal women groups thus became the target of sanitary and educational development programs that intended to limit the birth rate to two children per family and give them some additional knowledge of the use of contraception pills, childbearing, nutrition, and the initiation to new agricultural activities or professions (sewing in particular).

Traditionally, Karen women used to have four to nine children. Nowadays, most of them prefer to get between two and four. From the villagers' point of view, this diminution is primarily due to the transition from dry-rice cultivation to sedentary wet-rice practices of cultivation. The villagers don't have the possibility to open up new swidden fields in the forest while the land available for wet-rice cultivation becomes more and more fragmented with the progression of the generations. As in Karen society inheritance is idealistically egalitarian, parents choose now to have fewer children in order to transmit land to them, and to afford the schooling and health expenses.

A *mää baan* group is composed of all the married women of the village. A leader, *huanaa*, assisted by a vice-president, a secretary and a treasurer are periodically elected at the head of the women committee. The advent of a *mää baan* group in a village systematically implies the creation of a common women bank to encourage savings and loans at a very low rate of interests so that they could take part in the household economy. Tribal *mää baan* groups thus received some training in how to organise a group, supervise the bank and run a family budget. In principle, the women bank is divided into two purposes. One savings bank is dedicated to borrowing small amounts of money to supply for the every day or emergency needs of the family, like schooling children, buying food or cover health expenses. The other savings bank can be used for more subsequent long-term loans in order to invest in agricultural or other economic activities that are supposed to increase the welfare of the family. After a few years savings, the interests money is redistributed between all women members that monthly contribute to the bank. The *mää baan* bank also serves to capture external development subvention (NGO, administration or political representatives) in order to support projects that enhance women's participation into village development. Following the official administrative discourse, the *mää baan* groups are meant to help women members of the community to produce goods together. Collective work is supposed to make them more competitive in the market, so that they could sell their products at a better price than if they produce alone. That's why women are encouraged to take advantage of the free time during the breaks of the agricultural calendar in order to produce local goods. The training in collective work thus deals with some notions of marketing, the promotion of local handicraft and culinary specialities as well as the systematic apprenticeship of the techniques to make shampoo and after-shampoo based on plants derived from the soils. These activities, oriented toward market, aim at bringing complementary subsidies for the home.

Since the mid-1990s, the Karen women living in the Mae Win sub-district have been integrated into the hierarchy of the Northern Thai *mää baan* groups. The *mää baan* group of each village is thus included in a *mää baan* group representing the sub-district level (*tambon*), which is in turn included in a larger *mää baan* group representing the district level (*amphoe*). This inclusive system was made to authorise common activities between neighbouring villages or districts in order to exchange knowledge, handicraft techniques and organise regional parade. From what I could observe, the Karen *mää baan* groups enters in interaction with lowland Northern Thai women group at the occasion of one main national event: the anniversary of the Queen which also corresponds to the international celebration day for women. Since the seventies Queen Sirikit has indeed largely contributed to revitalise traditional weaving as part of the Thai national cultural patrimony. This activity, considered typically feminine and exalted with a new traditional nobility to the eyes of urban elites, was amalgamated to the international principle of women's participation in development. With the multiplication of *mää baan* groups in the whole country, the Queen's birthday thus

became the occasion to organise big processions where women parade in traditional costumes and sell the *mää baan* local collective production: shampoo, traditional dress and handicraft... Karen Women of the Mae Win sub-district, who enjoy a lot less mobility than Northern Thai women, were not engaged in that kind of production and trade yet. They received training and injunctions in order to revitalise weaving, but didn't get enough subsidies to buy the materials to organise an industrialised and collective based way of production comparable to the women cooperative that exist in the lowlands. So, they continue to weave at home to support the family. On the other hand, following the example of Northern Thai women groups, Karen *mää baan* of the Mae Win sub-district started to fashion a standard traditional dress to represent their village at the regional parade. By this way, Karen women find an advantageous occasion to enhance their village community and tribal identity in the institutionalized and legitimate frame of expressing the diversity of regional folklore promoted by the tourist industry.

As we can see, the institutional policies directed toward women are addressed through strict functionalistic strategies that contribute to the production of gender development groups. In that manner, economic development issues are systemically thought in terms function and status and based on the stereotypes of what should be the standard women activities: weaving, promoting the local and national cultural heritage, taking care of the children and fructifying the family budget. From what I could observe in Karen villages, the *mae ban* groups mostly became the receptacle to the implementation of the state integration policies. In particular, the diminution of population growth and the substitution of slash and burn cultivation, forbidden by law, by alternative activities that do not harm the "culture" of tribal groups and benefit to the tourist national industry. By that way, women are confined in the role of representing tribal folk and identity. Outside this low margin action, they do not contribute to the community development decision-making. New roles and responsibilities arising from the greater administrative involvement into the community are held by men. Systematically elected to administrative posts or at the head of village development committees, they nowadays make use of the outside political and economical system in order to gain profit and enhance their status in the community. Whereas in contrast, women enjoy far less mobility and are maintained by men at a good distance from the outside peripheral order.

Missionaries, Women and the Evolving of Karen Ethnic Identity

The spread of Buddhism and Christianity in Karen communities, in their present form, took place in the Mae Win sub-district after the Second World War. It was principally carried out through the intervention of the missionaries of Bétharram, a French catholic organisation, and then followed from 1969 onwards by Buddhist missionary monks of the *phradhammacarik* program. At that time, Karen villages were hardly accessible by administrative authorities so that monks were sent to the mountains with the official mission to convert hill tribes to the national religion and to play an informal role in the sectors of alphabetisation, hygiene and medicine. Following the government's priority objectives of security, the representatives of both religions entered into a kind of dynamic competition in order to facilitate the Karen's integration into the Thai nation-state, to extend their religious networks and propose social and economic development opportunities. In that context, the conversion to Buddhism or Christianity was mostly

achieved through the renunciation of the *au xae* ritual, which supposed to expel the ancestral spirits into the village forest surroundings, *pga*.

In Sgaw Karen society, kinship ties are traced bilaterally. An emphasis is however put on the matrilineal side, concerning two specific domains: uxori-local residence after marriage and the ancestor cult, *au xae* (Hayami, 1992; Kunstadter, 1979; Madha, 1980; Marlowe, 1979; Mischung, 1980; Rajah, 1984; Yoshimatsu, 1989). This ritual, mostly performed in case of the illness of a family member, consists in the sacrifice of a pig and/or chicken to appease ancestral parental spirits, *xae*, which trace an intergenerational chain to a spirit called *si kho miu xa*, the mythical pan-Karen ethnic ancestor. The *au xae* ritual is held in the house and is strictly limited to the family sphere: the nuclear family and/or extended to matrilineal descendants. Although the husband can play a leading role in some part of the ritual process, insofar as the ritual sacrifice is prepared and consumed in the women spatial domain, the hearth of the kitchen, and is linked to domestic women activities, rearing child and animals, *au xae* is usually referred as a women's rite. On the other hand, men rites deal with the community's well-being in its relation to the peripheral order.

The village, *zi*, is indeed considered the human domesticated settlement as opposed to the forest, *pga*, which embodies the realm of the wild (Madha, 1980; Mischung 1986, Rajah, 1986, Hayami, 1992). In order to cultivate or inhabit a piece of land, the spirits of the wild must be expelled through men's sacrifices offered to the territorial spirits on behalf of the community tutelary spirit, the Lord of Water and Land, *thi k'ca kau k'ca*. The ritual leader, along with all married men of the community, has to feed the Lord of Water and Land at the auspicious moments according to the agricultural calendar or when a community disorder is manifesting the spirit's anger (famine, conflict, epidemic, infertility ...). Men are thus in charge of negotiating good relationships with the tutelary spirit through ritual performances and the keeping of moral proper behaviour inside the village, especially concerning sexual extramarital taboos. As women are thought to be more vulnerable to wild spirits, often compared to Northern Thai men (Mischung, 1980), they have to be escorted in the forest and be kept from speaking to strangers, and are confined to the village centre. Whereas men have to deal with the peripheral powers which maintain the community order as opposed to the outside world, women, through the practice of *au xae*, embody the core of the ethnic identity rooted in the household and the village centre (Hayami, 1992).

One of the main motivations of both Karen men and women to break with the practice of *au xae* was explained by the villagers as a possibility to increase their economic capital by saving the livestock usually dedicated to expensive curing sacrifices. Moreover, as the practice of *au xae* implies the presence of all family members, villagers usually explain the breaking with this tradition as a way to extend their mobility, either for searching seasonal wage works or sending their children to the lowland schools.

While the conversion to Christianity demanded the complete renunciation of territorial and ancestral sacrifices, the same was not a condition to become a follower of the Buddhist faith. However, both religions offered the Karen villagers some alternatives to relativize the taboos that limited the access to land. The religious change were thus accompanying other socio-economic changes linked to a sedentary life style based on rice field subsistence mixed with complementary swidden cultivation and cash crop income. The traditional prestige system based on rituals and worshipping the spirits was thus progressively challenged by new factors of empowerment in the village society: the

control over land, the accumulation of cash and the ability to deal with external developments or religious agents. Whereas women were losing their traditional system of prestige based on the practice of *au xae* and the delivery of numerous children, men gained the opportunity to enhance their status in society by seeking economic or political opportunities outside the village. While resources such as land and livestock are owned by women and men, men predominate in the exchange with the outside world including the accumulation of cash. As pointed out by Yoko Hayami (1992), just as the men deal with the “outside” forest world, it is the men’s role to deal with the Thai administrative order reaching their community, while the women’s “centrality” (the confinement to the house) remained unchanged.

Women to date still dress in their traditional costumes and speak Karen language, whereas men may dress in Western or Thai style and have more opportunities to speak the national language. The separation between the two complementary spatial spheres of rituals characterising traditional Karen organisation – the inside family rites of the women and the outside territorial rites of the men, could thus find its prolongation through the separated fields of gender power characterised through the development practices. Women deal with family and household matters and represent the maintenance of the ethnic identity rooted in the village centre whereas men are in charge of negotiating the order and well-being of the community with external agents. Because it is mainly the men who are in relation with religio-political powers, development actors have first to pass the frontier of men before accessing to women. About this subject, we can however notice some disparities between Christian and Buddhist missionaries in the implication of women groups in their development strategies.

The missionaries of Bétharram, supported by the *suan sangkhom phathanaa* (SSP), a catholic NGO based in Chiang Mai, have largely contributed to developing *mää baan* groups in the Karen villages placed under their area of influence. According to the saying of father Bétharram, when missionaries entered the region after the Second World War, many men were mortgaging their land and family livestock in order to buy opium to the Hmongs. In the eyes of the missionaries, compared to men, women were considered less individualistic and more trusted agents for managing the family budget. In order to fight against the chronic indebtedness of the peasants, missionaries thus strongly included women into development strategies which emphasize the subsistence economy and research on village self-sufficiency from external support, such as rice-bank, cow bank, and *mää baan* saving banks. Missionaries started to look for women with a strong character in order to lead women associations to pray together, supervise saving banks and reinforce the cooperation between the Christian and Buddhist women groups spread throughout the Karen neighbouring villages.

Indeed, from what I could observe in the years 1999-2000, the president of the *mää baan* group of the Christian village of Huay Tong, was also the president of the *mää baan* committee, representing all Karen women groups of the Mae Win sub-district. The Christian women group of Huay Tong played indeed a leading role in propagating their own economical initiatives in the surrounding villages while participating in the extension of the Christian community network beyond the village level. As Christian Karens do not practice sacrifice anymore, the benefits of the women savings banks could be partly reinvested in a new prestige system based on the accumulation of material wealth, investment in child’s education, redistribution to the poor and the organisation of inter-community religious events. Moreover, as the catholic worship is based on the reading of the Bible translated into the Karen language in a scripture

developed by the missionaries, women are able to access a certain degree of literacy. By maintaining the Karen language and putting a high value on the membership in the Christian community, they have been engaged in producing a new sense of ethnic identity and pride. The women's deprivation of political function was thus counterbalanced by their ability to represent the Christian Karen distinctiveness inside a Buddhist dominant environment. The fact that Christian missionaries strategically relied on women to support their propositions of development have opened the pass to a greater access to education and economic entrepreneurship. The Buddhist monks whose first mission was to ordinate men got into contact with the Karen women more indirectly. Along with the Christian missionary, they defend the idea that women should be more educated to face change. But through their practice of development both religious representatives tend to reproduce the traditional dichotomy between "women—inside" and "men—outside".

Most of the monks' development strategies towards women groups deal with the reviving of traditional weaving, organising Buddhist ceremonies and women parades in tribal costume. By that way, they try to search a compromise between the official administrative policies concerning women's participation in development and men's efforts to confine women in the village.

With the growing intrusion of the Thai world to the inside of the community bounds, one way to protect the Karen collective integrity was found in the women's ability to represent an alternative path by which, through Buddhism or Christianity, Karen are becoming Thai while maintaining the core of their ethnic identity.

NGOs, Women and the Development of Swidden Cultivation

Since the early nineties, faced by the radicalisation of governmental policies concerning the protection of environment, a network of Thai environmentalist NGOs, consisting of academics and urban middle class activists, has started to play a very active role in order to avoid the relocation of highland communities away from "national parks" (Hirsch, 1997). To counterbalance the state monopoly over the management of natural resources, they propose alternatives based on the concepts of "participation" and "sustainable development" propagated by the international institutions. These organisations define their work as an intervention in the field in order to stimulate strategies of development inspired from villagers' "local knowledge" (*khvam ruu chaao baan*) and "indigenous wisdom" (*phuumpanjaa dang dööm*). The IMPECT (Inter-Mountain People Education Culture Association of Thailand) was the first organisation, created in 1991 at the initiative of tribal groups, in order to revitalise their cultural heritage and reclaim legal land rights to preserve their lifestyle in the mountains. The Karen representatives of the association argue that the survival of Karen culture is inseparable from the preservation of the natural ecosystem they are part of. All kinds of ancient traditions and taboos linked to nature conservation and animist beliefs, eroded since many Karens became Christians or Buddhists, have been reinterpreted as part of the indigenous wisdom to protect the environment (Prasert Trakarnsuphakorn, 1997; Pessès, 2004). In that context, Karen intellectual and "wise men" have constructed a discourse which defends the *rai mun wian*¹ (rotational agriculture). This neologism is nowadays used to illustrate

¹ This Thai expression has been recently used by the Karen to counter the pejorative expression of *rai lian loi*, derived from the English concept of «slash and burn agriculture». The term *rai lian loi* is commonly used by Royal Forestry officers in order to qualify the destructive character of the slash and burn techniques in regard to soil erosion and deforestation (Pinkeaw Laungamsri, 2002).

the “sustainable” character of Karen swidden techniques both regarding the fertility of the soils and the preservation of bio-diversity. The term indeed refers to a cyclical pattern of land use which combines a short period of cultivation to a long period of fallow, so that fields could return to forest before being exploited again. Because officials consider that swidden fields are not based on permanent agriculture and refuse to consider the sustainable character of rotational shifting techniques, they deny villagers tenurial rights over swidden land. This process encouraged villagers to overexploit the swidden fields and drastically shorten the period of fallow, so that swidden field turned to be transformed into permanent fruit trees plantation. If not, the land returns to the forest public domain exclusively controlled by the State. The rotational agriculture, condemned by the law and progressively abandoned to the profit of commercial cultivation, is now valued by the Karen activists as a fundamental aspect of their culture, strongly connected to all the different aspects of their livelihood: subsistence production, rituals, handicraft, medicine, and gender relations. In particular, the campaign for the rehabilitation of *rai mun wian* became a way to engage the participation of women in the contest of governmental conservation policies and the acknowledgement of ethnic specific knowledge in the management of forest resources.

The Karen spokesmen of these associations say that originally, their society was matriarchal. Women, through the practice of *au xae*, were playing a crucial role in connecting family members within the same matrilineal line. Although the household is clearly considered the women’s sphere of power, the main argument of the activists consists in promoting the women’s knowledge in the complementary division of gender labour tasks which prevailed under swidden cultivation. On the one hand, men had to domesticate the land through appropriate rituals and endorsed the harder physical work to clear the new fields. On the other hand, women were in charge of sowing the fields, harvesting the plants as they bear fruits, collecting and preserving a large array of seed grain for the following year. They thus disposed of specific knowledge on plants and a significant role in the maintenance of bio-diversity. But, this women ability has been challenged by the state and foreign development programs which favour men involvement in cash cropping or mono-cropping without considering the traditional labour division between the sexes. New technical knowledge and responsibilities accessible to men in many domains, like agriculture, trade, and communication with external agents thus contributed in the reducing of the women’s role to be merely vassals of the men. Their lack of knowledge in these new domains, added to the smaller opportunities to speak Thai as the men, excludes them greatly from decision-making about development. Moreover, since the introduction of cash-cropping and the use of pesticides make it possible to cultivate large areas throughout the year, the intervals of rest between seasonal agriculture cycles has decreased. Women, who traditionally take care of the daily growth of plants, have inherited a surplus of subordinate tasks in cash crop gardens and don’t have much free time for weaving any more.

In this context, IMPECT considers alternative solutions of “sustainable” development that integrate the cultural dimension of gender labour division which prevailed in a subsistence economy. In order to empower the women, it proposes to revitalise specific traditional knowledge and activities while providing them access to a modern corpus of knowledge which is necessary to secure the survival in contemporary Thai society.

This analysis puts into light the way in which Karen activists engaging in the creation of alternative development projects apply the ongoing discourse on women’s conditions in order to reconsider the use of traditions generally stigmatized as being primordial for the sustainability of Karen culture and environment. IMPECT defends swidden

cultivation as a cultural capital that gave important power to women in Karen society, by referring to the anthropological concept of matriarchy. IMPECT, along with the NGO activists who interfere in the local scene defend the idea that the development of commercial agriculture in the highlands is less sustainable than the Karen traditional rotational farming. They argue that cash cropping reinforces the competition over the control of land resources, encourages an intensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, unbalances the relation between the genders, and supposedly a greater dependency toward an insecure market economy. They thus tend to condemn the destructive impacts of the governmental cash crop policy on the environment, on the stability of rural communities and the subsequent degradation of the women's status. From this point of view, they started to associate Karen women to reconstructing "local knowledge" by pointing out their specific "wisdom" in the safeguard of local biodiversity. As far as NGO's projects intend to promote the sustainability of environment and culture, *mää baan* groups became a vector to transport projectionist development strategies which trace a continuum with the subsistence ideology. That is to say the promotion of weaving, rearing animals, and biological diversified agriculture through the perpetuation and adaptation of rotational farming. Indeed, most of the NGOs that advocate the minority groups seem to agree that women are expected to revitalise genuine ethnic traditions that fit with a conception of development culturally rooted in local territory. On the one hand they defend the women's right by stressing their role in the maintenance of bio-diversity, the lack of modern education and the need to listen to their voice on development issues, but on the other hand they confine them to traditional activities that partially overlap with the men's strategies to protect them from the outside world. As I could directly get in contact with women I now would like to relay their ambivalent points of view on two problematic development issues. Firstly, do they feel a degradation of their status linked to the state's condemnation of swidden agriculture? And secondly, what is their apprehension about men's politics and socio-economical change?

Women's Points of View on Development Policies

NGO's, by trying to value the women's knowledge and role concerning swidden cultivation have given a new echo to the women's voice in the political struggle of minority groups for claiming community rights to manage the use and protection of forest resources. During my field work in 1999-2000, I was able to observe many tribal women of all ages joining a demonstration at the Chiang Mai city hall in order to claim for the recognition of land community rights. Even though women have rarely been at the forefront as speakers, some Karen women activists have become supporters of a community forestry model, *paa chumchon*, which is a compromise between Karen customary land tenure system, its recent adaptation to sedentary modes of cultivation and the need to protect sensitive ecological zones (Anan Ganjanapan, 1997; Laungaramsri, 2002; Pessès, 2004). Women who joined the campaign for *rai mun wian* generally still practice swidden cultivation and feel especially upset by the idea they would lose their right over these lands. I have indeed observed that the process of sedentarisation had resulted in important modifications of the customary system of land tenure. The generalisation of permanent cultivation has progressively encouraged the transition from villager's use rights on communal swidden land to private ownership on rice fields. As the relative equality of Karen communities depended on swidden cultivation, the advent of private ownership over rice fields and cash crops introduced stratification between villagers considering their access to land. Since men are in charge

of opening new fields and investing important physical efforts to maintain irrigated rice-fields and cash crop plots, they tend to be considered men's property. The fact that rice field are linked to pecuniary transaction and, as a rare resource, became a strong factor of empowerment in the community, have reinforced men's precedence over these lands. Despite the fact that men and women can both inherit rice fields, if the parents do not have enough land to transmit to their children, paddy fields tend to be given to men while dry rice fields are given to women. In that way, the usufruct of swidden field could either become the individual household's property or circulate on a more flexible basis among matrilineal kinship networks settled in the village. The reason why women are attached to swidden fields is thus linked to the fact that it is more and more considered as their reserved domain of transmission and expertise. Despite the fact that field rice has become the primary mode of subsistence of the villagers, swidden cultivation still serves as the complement. The multiple cropping in swidden fields led by women provides a variety of vegetable fruits and plants throughout the year, especially during the dry season. Moreover, as some of these plants are tolerant to inclemency, they can provide a food security in case of a drought or excessive rain. Therefore, the official ban to practice swidden cultivation reinforces the insecurity towards the women's ability to supply the various nutritive resources for the family and to keep a margin of control over land resources.

What women claim is not at all to come back to a past system exclusively based on swidden cultivation, but to have the right to manage the sustainable cultivation of upland slopes without taking the risk of being submitted to penal pursuits. By defending swidden cultivation, women take part, along with men, in a collective struggle for the safeguard of the Karen livelihood which they feel threatened by the radicalisation of environmental policies.

However, the discourse I could obtain from women concerning the progressive abandonment of swidden cultivation and the subsequent change of the women's status was not as negative as those presented by the various development actors in charge of social projects targeted at women groups. A fifty-year-old Christian woman to whom I had frequent contact used to repeat to me that life was lot more fun than it had been in the past:

“Before, we walked barefoot in the forest. We worked hard in swidden fields and we never had enough to eat. Women couldn't give birth in hospital and didn't have the right to mix with men or to talk to strangers. With schools, life has changed. Children leave to study books and don't stay at home any more. My child and my husband go everywhere. I, on the other hand, have to stay at home. It's here that I delivered and nourished my nine children”.

The words of this woman who complains to be too much confined in the house are quite illustrative of the ambivalent apprehension of change by the women of her generation. Indeed, change is globally perceived as positive as long as it brings greater material comfort (electricity, running water), more mobility (roads, cars and mopeds) and access to modern education and western medicine. But with the multiplication of development projects and the greater implication of the administration into village matters, men have more and more opportunities to flee the house. Many women thus complain that their husband turns away from house matters and spends much time outside the village in order to consolidate their network of relation in the surrounding Thai society. It is especially the case when their husband endorses the role of headman or other administrative function. In the same time, women enjoy being more and more in contact with the masculine universe. Even if they don't directly take part in the community decision-making, they attend the periodic assembly of the village committee. They are thus aware of men's politics inside the village and can influence their choice indirectly.

The woman mentioned above had a 30-year-old daughter who had the chance to study books and become a nurse in a neighbouring Hmong village. She had two children, one in a private Catholic boarding school and the other was staying with his grand parents, since the mother was sleeping at her workplace on weekdays. She told me a list of positive points in her vision of changing women's status:

“In the past, women couldn't go out of the village without having their father, their mother and their husband accompanying them. Today, some women like me know how to ride motorcycles and can go to find work outside the village, no matter what their husband says. I bring the money back home and I have more authority on my husband for sharing domestic task like cooking and washing. In the past women could hardly communicate with men whereas today young women who go to school and speak Thai even have a chance to communicate with Thai men. In the past, many marriages were arranged by the parents and as soon as boys and girls moved away from the watch of their mother, a pig had to be killed to feed the spirits. Nowadays, teenagers can ride mopeds and go to the cinema together. Men and women are more mixed and teenagers have more freedom to choose their partner.”

Despite the fact that this woman was very emancipated, her discourse reflects a significant shift between generation as regards the access to education and mobility and the softening of customs concerning the communication between men and women. Nowadays, with the extension of school infrastructure in the mountain, young girls learn how to read and write Thai. As they watch television and sometimes have the opportunity to pursue high school studies in the neighbouring plains, they have integrated most of the social codes that allow them to behave like Thai people. Comparatively to the generation of their mother, they are less and less feared and more and more in contact with the Thai universe. The girls, well-known as being more serious and attentive in class, generally obtain the best marks at school. But as long as men fear that they have pre-marital sex relationship or marry Thai men, they have less opportunity than boys to pursue professional training in the city. The minority of girls who had that opportunity then exercise valued professions of nurse or teacher in mountain schools and clinics. Many teenage girls I have known would better project themselves in such professions, than in the maintenance of swidden cultivation which some of them have never or rarely practiced. It doesn't mean though that they want to become Thai and leave their home village. On the contrary, following the official discourse transported by development actors, they want to be associated to the community development matters. Nowadays, unmarried teenage girls who are part of the youth group, have been used to share responsibilities with other boys of the same age. Thanks to their ability to read and write Thai, they feel like equal partners to boys concerning the decision-making inside the youth group. They know how to elaborate development projects and are strongly engaged in the organisation of collective events linked to the safeguard of Karen cultural heritage. Like men women are aspiring to social change while being ready to defend traditional attributes that give them a status of importance in their society.

Conclusion

In Thailand, the adoption of the international rhetoric on women's rights has led to the systematic creation of women groups in all the villages of the nation in order to increase their participation in community development projects. From my observations among Karen highland communities, this institutional policy which first focused on women's social and family planning issues, has not managed to promote women's role as equal partners with men in the community development decision-making. Like before,

women don't directly take part in the village politics as long as it is men who occupy the traditional role of communication with external powers. Women, for their part, exercise their authority on household and family matters. This traditional repartition of roles has been reproduced through the actions of development transported by the administration and the missionaries. The leading posts of representation and mediation with administrative authorities and development agents are occupied by men whereas women's field of action is mostly confined to the revival of typical feminine activities that are supposed, in theory, to provide a complement of cash income to support the family. Apart from the household budget, the development projects targeting women's group didn't really extend their traditional domain of activities even if they could feel back some benefits : an opening to education, an increasing tolerance in the interaction with men and a greater mobility outside the village. The masculine external world, turned toward the "public" and "modernity", is still substantially opposed to the internal feminine sphere, which remains "traditional" and spatially confined to the village centre. Most of the development strategies hardly overpass the theoretical dichotomies – traditional community/modern society; subsistence strategies/market economy – which freeze men and women's roles into separate specialised spheres of activities without considering how they concretely overlap in a process of socio-economic mutation. Whereas the Western feminist discourse propagated by development actors defends the equality between men and women in all domains – education, economics, and politics – the practical strategies used to reach that aim are in contradiction to this, as they are mostly linked to the revival of specific female abilities that reproduce and reinforce the traditional division of the genders through the prescription of typical roles. Both NGOs and religious representatives tend to sponsor these attempts of preservation that stop from reflecting more deeply on the growth of the women's social mobility and their capacity of adaptation to the outside environment and people. Then, the question is: Do the development projects have to go beyond the revitalization of the traditional functions and roles of the genders?

On the one hand, the practise of development agents to first address the men tends to increase the men's control over the main resources: the transmission of propriety rights on rice field and cash crop, and the ability to gain cash income outside the village. If the men's political empowerment in society is more and more linked to the capitalisation of the resources, we can imagine that women's political empowerment also passes through the strengthening of their economic roles and their ability to negotiate with external development agents. But as long as Karen women are maintained in a marginal economic role linked to the perpetuation of swidden cultivation, handicraft and subsistence strategies while losing control over land resources, they are likely to become more and more dependent on men's political decision-making or confined to a symbolic role of representing the continuation of the ethnic tradition and identity.

On the other hand, we should consider the fact that western conceptions of equality between gender cannot be transposed everywhere without considering the dynamic relation of power and division of roles between men and women that prevails in a particular socio-political context. Facing the threat of relocation policies and the diminution of land available for the coming generation, Karen women have come to embody the stability of lifestyle rooted in the mountains. For this reason, women are more and more invited to play a crucial role in the representation of the Karen collective for the safeguard of its cultural and ecological patrimonies. In that domain, women's participation in the promotion of weaving and the display of the Karen traditional costume is aligned to state policies concerning the cultural value of tribal folklore

promoted by the national tourist industry whereas the rehabilitation of women's knowledge linked to swidden cultivation by NGO activist reflects in contrast the resistance to state development and environmental policies. NGOs, by starting to echo women's voices and promote their role in the definition of sustainable strategies to protect natural resources, have opened a new path to a wider commitment of Karen women on the national and international political scene. Through putting a high value on women's traditional knowledge, they have contributed to the expression of a feminist discourse which emphasises the women's role in the maintenance of the bio-diversity and the subsistence economy which fits international ethics of sustainable development promoted by international organisations. Indeed, as long as the consensus among development actors relies on the paradox that the modern emancipation of women passes through the revitalization of traditional abilities, the acknowledgement of women's specific knowledge is probably the first and most obvious step to reach better strategic results in the field of political participation and action.

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