

CHAPTER IV

ECOLOGICAL CONCEPTS OF THE MUONG PEOPLE

The concept of land, forest and other ecological resources are not universal but embedded in particular contexts. Local people in different environment give meaning to their ecological resources in different ways. Local ecological concepts are the fundamental building block of local knowledge systems. Knowledge in general and local knowledge in particular is always expressed both in perception and in practices. In terms of perception, local knowledge reflects the way that local people define nature and construct their beliefs and cosmology. In terms of practice, local knowledge reflects their natural resource management activities.

The local ecological concepts are holistic in the sense that they encompass physical, human and supernatural spheres. They are embedded in the local ecosystem which is made up of a complex of relationships between humans and non-humans, living things and non-living things, animals, plants, spirits and landscapes. Local people's concepts on ecological resources are derived from social practices and reflect local people's perceptions of nature and society. Locally-derived meanings attached to land, forest and ecological resources carry with them sets of ecological values, principles, obligations, responsibilities, and rights that are applied differently according to social and natural contexts. These concepts form the social and cultural aspects of the local knowledge system. This chapter will present those dimensions of ecological knowledge which are constructed through the system of concepts about land, forest, ecosystem and the cosmology held by the Muong people in Mai village in the contemporary period. I emphasize on moral principles, which are used in defining land and forest of the Muong people.

1. Concepts about Land

Mai village is not the center of *Xu Muong* (the Muong region) in the same way that *Muong Bi*, *Muong Vang*, *Muong Thang*, or *Muong Dong*, those famous names of Muong region, is. It is a small Muong village in a remote area in Hoa Binh province. The people who founded this village one hundred years ago had been moved from other Muong areas to here. Compared to other Muong villages in Hien Luong commune, Mai village is rather small and it is totally farming village. Most of 34 households in Mai village are farming families and most Mai villagers are farmers. There are few members of the village who work as teachers, nurses, commune cadres and professional soldiers. Because they get a salary from government they do not depend on agriculture. There are some families doing non-farming activities such as running small shop, being a motorbike rider or a small trader. However they do these activities as part time jobs or in their free time. Anyway, farming is the main economic activity of the Muong people in Mai village.

As agricultural residents, the Muong people in Mai village understand how land is important to their life. Moreover, in recent years market relations have step by step intervened into Muong society. The social relations are now more or less effected by market relations in which wealth and prosperity are highly valued. The above internal and external factors affect to the way Muong people in Mai village give meaning to their land, forest and other resources. The Muong people do not learn and develop their understanding of the world though abstract concepts but through practical experiences and long term observations of their interaction to nature. Through the empirical observations and interview conducted with villagers I found out that there are three important principles related to Muong people's notion of land, and their relationship to land.

1.1 The Customary Land Law Based on the Belief in Spirits

The Muong belief system, which contains their ecological principles, has been developed to enable sustainable use of land from generation to generation. To establish and maintain land use and management systems, it has been necessary for the Muong community to issue customary laws in terms of rules and regulations as social control and as an exercise of power. Beliefs, rituals and the practice of traditional customs are all ways to express their relationship with nature and give meaning to land and other resources. Belief and ritual are important means whereby the forces of the invisible world are drawn in to the visible world in order to ensure sustainable growth. Muong beliefs, by giving moral support to certain norms and rituals, encourage Muong people to conserve natural resources.

For the Muong people whose lives have long been associated with agriculture, the land brings cultural meaningful to them. Muong people in Mai village believe that the land has a spirit. They worship the land spirit as the protector of them and all their land by giving offerings to it at every all family special events.. Muong people call the land spirit as *Than Dat, Tho Cong or Than Linh* (the land spirit that has the supernatural power). Depending on each family and different area, the land spirit is considered as a spirit of the family, of the village or of the region. It is commonly found in the corner of the garden of a Muong house, there is a small bamboo house that is the land spirit worship place.

Land spirits are believed to protect villagers from evil spirits. Land spirits are the persons who take care their life, support them when they are in difficult time, encourage them when they do the rights thing and punish them when they do the wrong thing. Land spirits bring good things or bad things to each family depending on the behavior of the landowners. They believe that if they act politely to other people the land spirit will support them. Every month and year at special family and village events, villagers

provide offerings and prayers land spirit. Land spirit worship is practiced by all families. Offerings include sticky rice, betel leaf, areca, fruit, flowers, and meat. These offerings are depended on the family. The owner prays to the spirit of his land to give him a good harvest from that land. In the case of a family member getting sick or their animals dying, they also ask the land spirit protect them form ill and other bad things. The land spirit is not only the person who protects the land of each family but also the witness to all the maters of the family. , The land spirit will be the person who reports what has happened to the family to God in heaven at the end of the year. So everybody has to act in a good way to other people to avoid God's punishment. Thus land gives meaning to Muong people's lives. It also gives meaning to their lives as its inheritance links one generation to the next.

It is clear that the belief in land spirits contains the moral basis and principles for their interrelationships and their relationship with nature.. Thus these moral principles play important roles in adjusting and controlling the behaviors of the Muong peoples toward nature and other people. These moral principles form the norms, rules and regulations that are respected by the villagers. The cultural meaning of the land is revealed by the exercise of these customary laws from generation to generation. .

The land-based moral principles of the Muong people are also expressed through their burial custom. The Muong people bury their dead in a cemetery in the midst of their fields and forest. In Mai village, the cemetery was found in the forest managed by the village. Muong people consider that as in the cycle of the universe, human beings are born from land and when they die, they turn back to the land. It should be noted here that Muong people worship their ancestor spirits as a type of religious belief. The graves in the cemetery and in the fields are the houses of their ancestors. Thus their ancestor spirits are embed tightly in the land. Muong people believe that their ancestors are always with them. Their village, their land and their fields are the places where their ancestors, and their parents used to live. Thus to the

Muong farmers in Mai village, land is not only a place to build their house, to cultivate or to raise their animals but more than that it is their life. Land is the place where they are born and grown up. They work hard on the land to earn their living. They had to fight with their enemies to keep their territory. When they die they are returned to the land. Their ancestors did that, they do that and their children will do that. The land is a witness of all the most important events in their life and in their community. Land in this sense brings the sacred meaning and cultural value to the villagers.

Thus the Muong people give meaning to land firstly through moral principles and cultural customs. Those principles are respected by the villagers and play the role of a social control to their behaviors. The second principal used by the Muong in defining land is part of the moral principals associated with their belief in spirits. This principal says that land use is the right of those who invest labor in clearing forest and converting hills into fields.

1.2 The Land Use Right Based on the Labor to Clear Land

Different from the Kinh (Viet) people, the Muong people have long been living close to the forest. They set up their villages in the valleys and at the feet of the hills. They expand their territory by clearing land for village establishment. Therefore the history of Muong communities is related closely to converting land to village settlement and to cultivation. In this process, in order to adjust relationships among themselves, they set up the rules over land use in which land use rights are verified by the investment of labor to convert land. This customary law is passed on from generation to generation. This reveals the significant role of the first person who clears land to village settlement and cultivation.

Muong society has always recognized the land ownership and use rights of the first person who clears land. Once a person puts the labor to converting hillsides into a

field, or clearing forest plot to make cultivated land, that plot of land forever belongs to that person. Even when he has died, he is still the owner of this land. That land can be inherited by the children under his protection.

In the past the merits of the first person who cleared land to found the village were recognized by villagers. Both the landlord (*cung na*) and village spirit (*than thanh hoang*¹) which are worshiped by the villagers, can be seen as symbolic representations of the founding father of that particular village. His merit has made him become an ancestor of that village. It is possible to say that the history of a Muong village is also the history of Muong clans or families. In other words, “a Muong village is the extension of a family or a clan” (Cusinier 1996:442). The first person who converts hillsides to the fields, clears unused land to cultivate become the owner of that land. When land is still abundant, the land area and boundary depend on the ability of that person. He was freely to expand their territories and the land that he worked in forever belongs to them.

Because of the merit of the first person who cleared the land for a village settlement, his followers in the original founding of the village and the later the ordinary villagers in the same village attribute super powers to him. That person becomes their village spirit, worshipped from generation to generation. In every Muong village there is a small temple to the village spirits. Muong people call their village spirits: Than Thanh Hoang (the King of the village). Than Thanh Hoang was the first person who founded the village. This person is attributed superpower in many holy stories such as, depending on different villages or different Muong, being the person who can kill monsters or tigers to help the villagers. In other words the first person, who cleared land

¹ It is believed that Muong people borrow this term from Viet people. However in both Muong and Viet, the “*than thanh hoang*” is the first person who founded the village.

to found the village, who converted wild land to the fields is considered as the spirit who protects the villagers. The Muong people worship other spirits such as the agricultural spirit, land spirit or mountain spirit in the same way but these spirits are often mixed together with the village spirit so it becomes unclear whether these are just other identities of the village spirit or actual separate identities. Worshiping the village spirit is the most important event in the community worship of the Muong villagers. Communally worshiping the village spirit encourages communal solidarity in the sense that because all villagers worship the same ancestor they have to find solutions for their conflicts.

Thus it is clear that the customary law verifies the right of the first person who clears land to village settlement and to cultivation has many sides. On the one hand it legitimizes the right of the landowner. On other hand it gives the agriculturally based everyday lives of the people sacred meaning. At the beginning, land use laws are a result of sacred beliefs. However these two sides of land use are actually symbiotic. Customary law is a social control in adjusting the behaviors of the villagers but at the same time it gives power to the landowner.

It should be noted here that the principle of land rights based on being the first person who cleared the land has been persistent for a long period of time. Under the *Nha Lang* regime in Muong traditional society, the original *Lang* is the person who contributes the largest amount of labor, rice or buffalo to convert wild land to fields. This is recognized by the *Lang's* followers and villagers. So he is allowed to own the most fertile fields. His land area is also the largest because in many cases, as the first comers, all he has to do is plants a cane on a plot of land as a sign of his ownership (*cay neu*) and that plot will belong to him. The newcomers have to rely on him. In the case of no new land being available, if newcomers want to have land to cultivate, they have to ask permission from the *lang*. They agree that in return for land they will become his servants and so Muong society, with its two classes, *Lang* and *Dan*, or, chief and the

servant, is formed. Thus the labor of the first person who cleared the land, wherever it is real or just symbol, forever ensures him the right of ownership and use of that land. This right is inherited by his children and all generations of the same family line. Land ownership is not only about resource access but also expresses the power of its owner in a political sense.

These regulations and principles have been practiced by Muong people from generation to generation. Even when the *Nha Lang* regime was eradicated, the state claimed ownership over all land and the state's land laws were applied to Muong society these principles are maintained informally. Mai villagers still respected the right of the first person claim his ownership to the land and other things, which he had pioneered and hang this right on to his children. If after a long time, for example five or ten years later, this land was abandoned, other persons could clear that plot and the land would no longer belong to the former.

In the last ten years since Mai villagers stopped practicing shifting cultivation, forest boundaries have been demarcated, land has become a lot less abundant, there is now very little unused land and land is allocated to households through state land law. Because most land is ownership is ratified by state law, clearing larger land areas is no longer an option. However, in small plots of land near the forest and far from the village, Mai villagers still practice their customary laws which verify the use right of the persons who put their labor and capital into converting the land.

Besides traditional principles, as the agricultural residents whose livelihood depends on land, Muong people in Mai village perceive land in it's interrelationship with their livelihood. Thus the third principle used by the Mai village Muong in defining land's meaning is related to its role in their survival.

1.3 Land as a Source of Subsistence Livelihood

The Muong people in Mai village, are the farmers. Their life depends on land. Agriculture is their main economic activity. Whether they have enough food to eat depends on the land that they have. Their main daily concerns focus on the crops that they plant, and the animals that they raise. Thus land is defined as the habitat for their crops. The purpose of the land is for cultivation and husbandry. From these activities, land brings all the necessities for Muong people's lives.

Muong people in Mai village are aware that they cannot survive without land, and that all the wealth they get comes from the land so they regard land as a symbol of wealth and prosperity. In Mai village, there is only one landless family. The wife is a Luong Phong villager. Her parents were settled in Luong Phong, the resettlement village that was established next to Mai village, for a while. But they and her siblings were removed to the Central Highlands in 1994 due to the impact of Hoa Binh Dam construction. Therefore she and her husband decided to sell their land in order to be ready to go to the Central Highlands. But in the end they could not go because they spent all the money that they got from selling land instead of saving it for their original purpose. They now live in a hut that their sister let them build on her land. This family is the poorest family in Mai. To other Mai villagers, this family is the evidence of the value of keeping their land in order to survive and be rich.

The Muong concept of land relates closely to their concept of livelihood. This concept of land is therefore different from scientific definitions of land, which pay more attention to land economics and principals which can be found applied everywhere rather than cultural aspects, agriculture and livelihood (Santita 1997:250). In fact, the unavoidable tendency today is for Muong people's concept of land, to be affected to a lesser or greater extent by market relations. Causing the Muong people to desire wealth and power just the same as outsiders. However outside influence in their society is not

very strong. In general, the social relationship among villagers nowadays retains its traditional elements. Land for many generations has brought meaning to the lives of Mai villagers and it continues to give meaning to their lives even in the present.

In sum, the Muong people give meaning to their land through their fight to adjusting and develop the relationship among themselves and between themselves and nature. Traditionally, their concepts of land have been based on customary laws and their belief in spirits. Under the state intervention in the long collective period, their belief in spirits has reduced. But in recent years, they have turn back to their traditional beliefs and customary laws, moral basis and principles of which are respected by all villagers. It is clear that the concept of land held by the Muong people is different to that of outside institutions, which see land as an economic resource rather than as a source of cultural meaning. The moral principles, which are part of locally situated knowledge enables the local community to use and managing land in an effective and sustainable way.

2. Concepts about Forest

Muong people are neither forest dwellers nor hunters and gatherers but the forest plays an important role in their lives. Most Muong villages are located close to the forest. While rural Kinh (Viet) people rely mostly on agriculture, the life of Muong people depends on both agriculture and forestry. The forest plays an important role in sustaining their livelihood. The forest not only provides material benefits to the Muong community, but also gives cultural meaning to their lives. The Muong build their concepts of forest in their own way. Similar to land, forest is perceived as a whole and complex cultural system following the moral principles related to using and managing forest. There are three main issues related to the way Muong people define the forest and their relationship to it.

2.1 Moral Principles Based on Beliefs in Spirit

Maybe because of the long period of exposure to the ideology of man dominating nature, in recent years the Muong people have tended to change their views of traditional beliefs. They have tended to think in terms of manipulating supernatural beings and powers to their advantage but they still see themselves being a part of nature rather than superior to it. The basis for this perspective lies in the way the Muong people related to nature in real life. Since there is alarm about the rapid degradation of the forest, the way of seeing forest promoted in the collectivization period, solely as objectives of human exploitation, changes to seeing the forest as a place for spirits and souls.

Muong people consider the forest as their guardian spirit. The forest and mountains are places of spirits. Forest spirits (*Than Rung*) are mixed with mountain spirits (*Than Nui*) and in some villages, forest spirits are also mixed with village spirits, and land spirits. When conducting interviews with Mai villagers, I received the different answers about forest spirits. Some elders said that forest spirits were mountain spirits. Some others considered forest spirits as village spirits. In reality it is difficult to separate the different kinds of spirits. Anyway, in the minds of the villagers, the forest and mountain spirits are their protectors. Therefore they have to behave in a good way to the forest spirits. They believe that the forest spirits will punish them if they do something wrong to the forest.

Forest and mountain spirits are believed to always bring happiness to the village. The Muong people believe that the forest spirit and mountain spirit have enough power in control floods and droughts. Therefore when they want to have rain or sunlight they will pray to the forest. The Muong people also ask the mountain and forest spirits for health when they are ill and for food when they are hungry. They also ask for the

permission from the forest spirits when they cut trees to build their houses and go hunting. They make all of these requests to the spirits by providing offerings to them.

As has just been mentioned, before hunting or cutting trees, the Muong villagers always pray to the forest spirit to ask for permission. They believe that if they do not pray to the spirits, the spirits will be angry and punish them. In the ritual songs read by the ritual men before hunting, are found the words:

*We are the members of a group,
The land lords of our village.
We want to enter the forest to have things to drink and food to eat
We want to enter forest to have things to feed us
We want to have a female bamboo, but we are afraid of it falling on us
We want to have male bamboo but we are afraid of it felling onus by chance.
We want to enter forest at night, but we are afraid of tigers.
We want to enter forest at day but we are afraid of ghosts.*

....

*We are the adults and eldest sons,
The land lord and members of our village.
We have made our consensus
We are well prepared
We have bought a male and a female chicken
A bow of a white sticky rice
The bright candles, flowers and incense sticks,
The fresh betal leaves and nuts.*

....

*We pray to the land spirit
We pray to the forest spirit
We pray to the than thanh hoang (village spirit)
The owners of the land, rivers and water,
We wish for you to protecting our houses*

We wish for you to protecting our children

We wish for you to protect our elders

We wish you to protecting our adults

We wish for you to protect our men

We wish for you to protecting our women.

(Cusinier 1996:767-770)

The ritual song only mentions the offerings that the villagers provide to spirits, it does not mention any thing about the animals that they will hunt or their success in the hunt. They only inform the spirits about their hunt and ask for the spirit's protection both of those going on the hunt and those left behind.

Presently there are very few Muong people in Mai village who remember the ritual songs, but they still see forest spirits as having power over them. Although scientific knowledge has been imposed on Muong community villagers still respect the spirits in an informal way.

Muong people in Mai village make a rule of saying that in some forests there is a ghost or some serious disease to discourage use of this forest this is a strategy for conservation of the forest in general. They call these forests scared forests or ghost forests. No one is allowed to enter, because they are afraid of ghosts killing them or becoming infected with a serious disease. Villagers believe that they also do not cut the trees in that forest, because they are scared they will be punished by the spirits.

Forest are a place to hanging the newborn baby's umbilical cord. Muong people in Mai village have practiced this custom from generation to generation. They put the umbilical cord of a newborn baby inside a bamboo pole and hang it on a high tree in the

forest. Therefore each of the people in the village has their eighty souls² tied into the forest. The forest carries their souls. They believe that if they do that their children will grow up as strong and fast as the tree. The soul of the baby will live in the forest. People never cut those trees. This custom also is practiced by other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia for example the Karen in Thailand (Pratuang 1997:122, Yos 2001). Thus the forest reflects their customary beliefs, traditional teachings, funeral rites and other forms that reinforce and transfer their knowledge and ideas from one generation to the next.

Those customs are the ways to protect the forest. It should be noted here that during the collective period, the forest was extremely degraded. The reasons for forest degradation are various. However, in my point of view, the root cause of forest degradation is the idea that sees humans as being superior to nature. People holding this idea do not see the complex relationships between humans and the environment within a particular ecosystem. This leads to inappropriate policies from outsiders being applied in natural resource management and the local community and their knowledge being ignored. In recent years, perceptions about the relationship between humans and nature are changing. People are paying more attention to sustainability in using forest resources. In Mai village, the forest is well protected by villagers. Besides that they participated in forest plantation projects.

In to sum up, in defining forest, the Muong people used moral principles about the relationships between human beings and nature. It is clear that they respect nature and behave in a benign way to nature rather than violate nature. These moral principles lead to rules and regulation, which are respected by all villagers. These principles show

² Muong people believe that each person has eighty souls, *ba muoi via ben tam, nam muoi via ben chieu* (thirty souls in the right side and fifty souls in the left side). Why does the left side have more souls than on right side? Tran Tu explained this belief that because there is heart in left side so that in left side has more soul than in right side (?)

that illness, unhappiness and poor harvests can be interpreted as divine punishment for behavior against the natural order creating puts strong individual and social pressure on people to handle their environment with care.

2.2 The Forest as Common Property of the Village

The second principle defining forest is based on the power of community. Muong people in Mai village see forest as the common property of a community. Every member of the village has to have responsibility in protecting forest so that they can have the right to utilize the forest. These principles have two collaterals. On the one hand these principles give villagers exclusive rights and duties. In the past these principles were respected by all members in their community as well as members of other neighbor communities. In the case of Mai, they demarcated forest boundaries with other Muong communities and with neighboring Yao communities by a hillside, a trail and the Ngoi Hoa stream. Each community had rights and duties within the boundaries of their forest. On the other hand, these rules emphasized communal benefits rather than individual ones so in this sense the forest reflects the communal solidarity and consensus. It creates a strong community feeling amongst villagers.

Mai villagers remember that they used to come together to participate in hunting lead by a *Lang Dao*. In reality this was not just a hunt but also a community festival. Men are the hunters. Women are the food preparers. They together share the products from the hunt. On the other hand, Mai villagers, women, men, and children, go to the forest as frequently as they do farming. Gathering forest product is a daily activity of the villagers. So it brings the social and cultural meanings inside.

Mai villagers had practiced these principles for a long time before the period when the state claimed ownership over all resources included in the forest and these principles were replaced by state laws. However customary law is still practiced

informally. Villagers consider that the forest belongs to their community, they have the right to benefit from the forest and have duties in taking care of the forest. Therefore in the long term there is always a conflict between the state and villagers in managing and using forest. As a consequence, the forest is overexploited and rapidly degraded. Because of the many different forms of resistance used by local people, the Vietnamese government has gradually come to recognize the role of the community in forest management which has changed their policies toward the forest. At present, although the state claims ownership to the forest in fact the state allocates natural forest to the community and forestry land to individual households for them to make plantations. These forestry policies cause responsibility shifts between the state and local people in forest management and creates conditions in which state law, which promotes private ownership, and customary law, which promotes collective use, are coexistence. Because the state has allowed local people get benefits from the forest, the forest protected by the local people.

Originally the Muong people practiced both shifting cultivation and fixed agriculture. Most Muong villages were located in the midst of the forest. Because of their long association with the forest, the Muong people knew how to make a living from the forest just as much as from cleared farming lands. Their economy was almost entirely subsistence orientated. To combine these two points, the forest was an important source of subsistence integrated into their whole subsistence livelihood production system. This third principle used by the Muong people to define forest.

2.3 Forest as an Integrated Part of Subsistence Production Systems.

Mai village is located next to forest. For Muong peoples, forest is more than just a source of timber. Muong people who live in areas close to forest, rely extensively upon collected or gathered foods and other resources, a significant portion of which are or have been manipulated by them to meet their needs. The forest is actually the basis of

their subsistence livelihood. It is a source of foods in the form of wild vegetables, wildlife, herbal medicine, and fire-woods. The usefulness of forest to the Muong people is expressed through the facilities they own. Their houses, tools, livestock housing, and many other things are all made using forest products. Also in their daily lives they collect fuel woods from the forest. In each meal, we also can see that everything that can be eaten in the forest is included in their meals. The forest provides food for them in their daily life. The forest is especially useful to the Muong people in Mai village in periods of shortage including due to bad harvests war or natural disasters. In the 1990s there was serious erosion as the consequence of overexploitation of land, which in turn was an effect of the construction of Hoa Binh hydroelectric Dam. Hien Luong commune in general and Mai village in particular survived thanks to the forest. They went to collect roots and vegetable in the forest to survive.

The forest is also a rich store of medicine for the Mai villagers. Everyday, the women go to the forest to collect some kinds of root. They cut these into small thin pieces, dry them and boil them with water. This kind of drinking water is found commonly in Mai village. It is considered as a kind of medicine. The villagers say that it makes the body cooler and it is good for the digestive system. They use this root in the same way as tea or coffee. As Mai village is far from the district center where the district hospital is, villagers treat with illnesses using leaves and roots in the forest. Almost mothers in Mai village have some basic knowledge about treating common illnesses such as high temperatures, fevers, headaches, stomach aches, and slight hurts. There are also some healers in the village. They are usually middle wives or professional medicine people, who give treatment to patients in their village. At present, Mai village does not have a health care station. The nearest hospital is 15 km far from their village. They only go to the hospital in the cases which cannot be treated using their traditional medicines. Thus the demand of the Muong for medicine is almost entirely filled by forest products.

Thus unlike scientific forestry, which thinks of forest only in terms of trees for timber supply for economic development. The Mai villagers perceive forest in terms of wider utilitarian purely subsistence based purposes. Besides that the forest plays an important role in their social and cultural life. Moreover Mai villagers also possess a holistic view of ecological systems in which land, water, and forest are interact with to each other and to human activities. They understand that there are complex interactions between humans and their environment. This is closely related to their religion beliefs, which expresses their relationship to nature and their ritual ceremonies interpret their religious beliefs into action.

3. Summary

In this chapter I have presented how the social and cultural aspect of Muong ecological knowledge give meaning to land, forest and how they interpret these concepts in relation to their beliefs and cosmology. It is commonly agreed that the way Muong people define nature is based on their moral principles, which are derived from their belief in spirits and based on their methods of dealing with the imperatives of survival. The role of the community and benefits to the community are emphasized. Their definitions are not abstract concepts but are based on their empirical observations. and in terms of cultural meanings. As the agricultural residents whose lives are dependant on nature, their perceptions of land and forest are different to scientific perceptions. It is a holistic view and encompassing with superbeings, forces and powers, whereas the latter is based on physical and chemical analysis. The former sees land and forest as a means of survival strategy, the latter sees land and forest as a resources for economic development. Ideas and behaviors of Muong people to land, forest and nature in general are connected to and articulated through their religious beliefs and rituals in which natural elements are personified as superbeings who are related to on terms of mutual respect. Respect of nature and its order leads the local community to handle their environment with care.