

CHAPTER IV

THE MAKONG PEOPLE OF PHONG NHA-KE BANG NATIONAL PARK IN THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

This chapter presents the Makong people in the context of Phong Nha – Ke Bang National Park. It is an attempt to answer the question of who the Makong are and how their relationship with the National Park has developed. This chapter also discusses social structure of the Makong community and how it relates to natural resource management. Understanding this social organization is essential to understanding how the Makong people can preserve their traditional values. The last section of this chapter discusses the cosmology of the Makong people. Living in a close relationship with the nature and forest, the Makong people have their own perceptions of forest meanings, use and management. This part also shows the Makong people's awareness of the importance of nature conservation. I will argue against the conventional wisdom that the Makong destroy the forest.

4.1 The Makong: People of the Forest

The Vietnamese government's ethnology, based on an October 1979 survey of ethnic minorities groups in Binh Tri Thien province (Loc et al. 1984), classified the Makong as a sub-group of the Bru-Van Kieu. In fact, this classification has been debated among scholars. Some French researchers contend that the *Bru* ethnic group includes the Van Kieu people in Middle – Indochina. Some American scholars maintain that *Bru* includes the Van Kieu, Ta Oi, and Co Tu ethnic groups. However, several Vietnamese researchers use term “Bru” to refer to several ethnic mountainous groups who have lived in central provinces, along the border with Laos.

Nguyen Trac Di (1972) contends that the Bru people have different names including Baro, Calo, Galo, Kalo, Khua, Muong-Leng, Muong Kong (Makong), Van

Kieu, Ta Oi, etc. who live in mountainous areas of Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. The author claims that the term “Bru” was formerly a name of a small ethnic group nearby Quang Tri town while other highlanders were called Van Kieu and Toi Oi. Later, term “Bru” was commonly used to refer to several other groups, such as Makong, Khua, etc.

According to Loc (1984), the term “Bru” in fact is not a name, but only a pejorative term that the lowlanders use to call ethnic groups who live in mountainous area in the central Viet Nam. It is similar to the word ‘*Xa*’ in the northwest and the word ‘*Moi*’ (savage) in the Central Highland. The term Bru refers to the ‘forest people’. However, the Makong people have different opinions about their name. Some Makong people say that the term Bru was their traditional name while the name Makong is imposed by the lowland, but some people have the opposite opinion. In addition, as Di (1972) claims, “Bru” is a common name that refers to several ethnic groups, including the Makong.

The term “Bru” was widely used since 1960s by the Southern government. Nguyen Trac Di, an official from Racial Research Institute under the regime of Republic Vietnam wrote in his book entitled “*Cuoc Di Dan Sac Toc Bru tu Quang Tri vao DakLak*” (The Migration of Bru Tribe from Quang Tri to Daklak) in 1972 that “the term Bru has recently been used... It refers commonly to ethnic groups in mountainous area of Quang Tri Province. In 1963 when communists in the north started to attack the south Vietnam, they forced the Bru people to participate in the communist army” (1972:5). The current government has also used the term Bru as an official name in the current list of national ethnological classification. Presently, the Bru-Van Kieu is considered one mountainous ethnic group whose language belongs to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family. It encompasses the Van Kieu, the Khua, the Tri and the Makong. However, according to the official ethnic policy of Vietnam, all ethnic groups are equal; therefore, the term “Bru” is used as a common word, but not a pejorative meaning.

Trang (1998) differs from the current national ethnological classification. She contends that the term Bru-Van Kieu does not include the Makong, Khua and Tri because it refers to the Van Kieu only. She argues that the Bru is a common word

referring to highlanders living along Laos' border with Central Provinces of Vietnam. In Quang Tri province, it applies to the Co Tu, Van Kieu and Ta Oi; while in Quang Binh Province, the Khua, the Tri, the Van Kieu and the Makong comprise the Bru. Therefore, Trang (1998) claims that the term Bru-Van Kieu does not apply to the Makong, the Tri and the Khua. Trang also maintains that in Vietnam the Makong people have lived mainly in Thuong Trach commune, Quang Binh Province.

Because there is not enough official ethnological research to clarify the differences of sub-groups of the Bru-Van Kieu, I will use documents related to Bru-Van Kieu in reviewing the Makong people.

The Bru-Van Kieu group includes around 40,000 persons, including approximately 2000 Makong who are mainly living in the Thuong Trach and Tan Trach commune, Bo Trach District, Quang Binh Province (Trang 1998).

The Bru-Van Kieu and the Makong in particular have traditionally practiced shifting cultivation. Though the market economy has expanded to most villages in Vietnam, most of Bru-Van Kieu ethnic villages still have a subsistence economy. Their daily livelihood is mainly based on minor forest products. However, they have more relationships with lowlanders and other ethnic groups in the new context.

In the eyes of outsiders, ethnic groups who practice shifting cultivation are under-developed. Loc et al (1984:117) claim that the Bru-Van Kieu were traditionally trapped in a "backward" farming system using simple instruments including a knife (*popia*), ax (*a chat*), and stick (*roal*). They have often suffered serious malnutrition and even starvation because of low crop productivity and crop failure.

What these outsiders do not see is that, in reality, villagers have accumulated precious local knowledge for crop production, which takes the form of soil classification, rotational cultivation, and careful production planning based on the weather and topography of their area.

Living in a harmonious relationship with the nature, the Makong have developed their own belief systems, which help them to overcome difficulties of life. It can be said that the Makong are animistic. They believe that every entity in the nature has its own life and power. People must be gentle with nature; otherwise, the

spirit beings may bring about bad luck to them. With this belief, the Makong people have controlled the overuse of natural resources. They have established unwritten traditional rules over forest use and management based on their own religious beliefs and experience. In addition, they have used customary law and traditional ceremonies like the Drum Beating Ceremony, Stone Ceremony, and Buffalo Sacrifice to maintain and strengthen their beliefs and solidarity at the community level. At household level, they express their beliefs through their ritual practices performed at certain stages of crop production, marriage and funeral ceremonies. Traditional ceremonies and customs have helped the Makong people to educate their descendants about the value of the community cultural identity.

Identified as a sub-group of the Bru, the Makong society is recognized as a patriarchal society. Men are considered to play main social-eco-political roles in the family and the community as well. Activities related to the survival of the family and the community are decided by men. Therefore, we hardly see women in traditional local institutions. Though women are also knowledgeable about soil identification, this work is done by men because it relates to rituals normally practiced by men. When going to select a field site, Makong men worship and pray for support from the forest and their ancestor spirits. However, this does not mean that Makong women play no role in their family. There is a division of labor among Makong men and women. Women are in charge of domestic sphere such as childcare, cooking, and water carrying. In addition, they equally work on the field like men. They participate in crop planting, weeding, animal feeding, harvesting minor forest products and so on.

In addition to crop production, both Makong men and women search for their daily food from forest products such as wild animals, honey, vegetables, mushrooms, and bamboo shoots. However, since the market economy was introduced to the Makong community, forest products (e.g.: rattan, wild animals, etc) have been collected more to sell for cash or exchange manufactured goods with lowland traders.

4.2 History of the Makong People in Thuong Trach Area

The Makong people do not have a written language; therefore, their history has been transferred from one generation to another through legends and myths. Makong people learn stories about their ancestor's origins from their parents or elderly people from the time they are very young. When some elderly people were telling me their ancestor's myths, several young people even added details that the elders forgot to mention.

Currently, the Makong community in Thuong Trach area is composed of 21 small *mu* (clan) that came from different areas. Some clans contend that their ancestors came from Quang Tri Province; some clans believe that their origin is in Thailand; and some people claim to come from Laos.

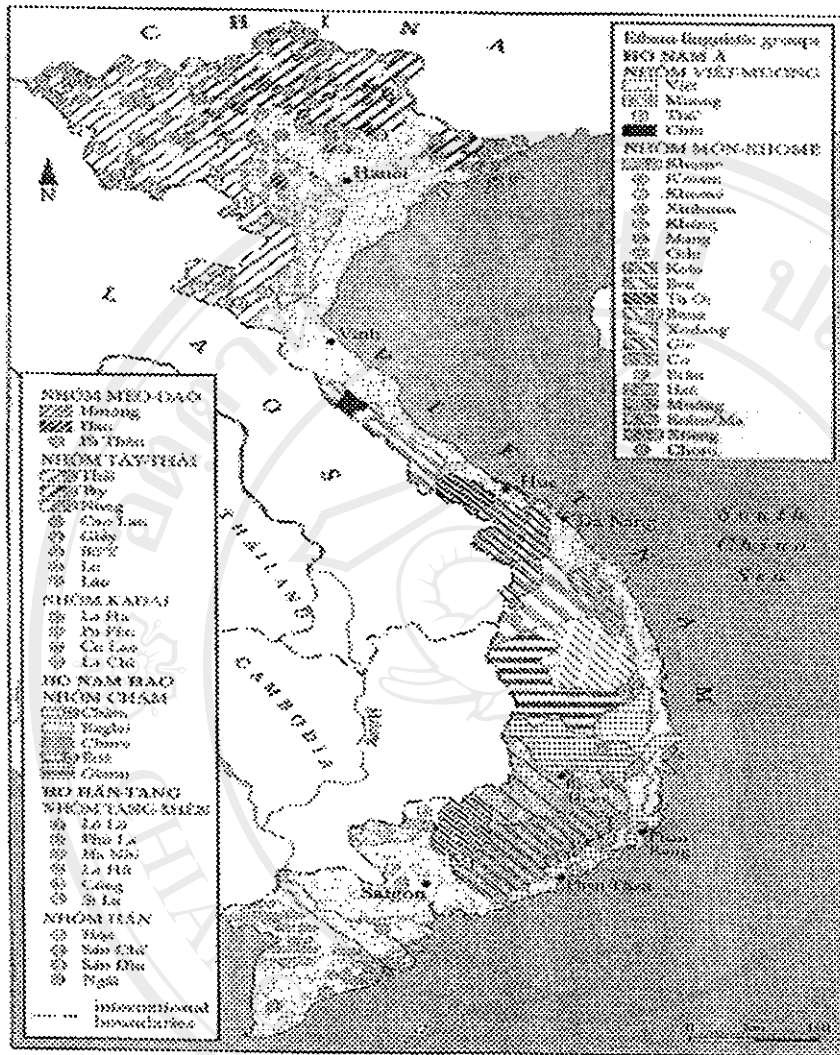
Though different clans have different stories about their origins, they consider themselves a community and share a common cultural identity. They have common ceremonies and traditional rules. They share some traditions and customs in resource use and management, in children's education, in community organization, in religious beliefs of natural spirits and ancestor spirits. In particular, they all believe that land in Thuong Trach is traditionally managed by the *Dung Dzang*. Each person who uses the land has to ask permission of the *Dung Dzang*. Meanwhile, each clan has still maintained traditions and customs of their families that dictate how to worship their ancestors, how to hold a funeral or a wedding, etc.

According to the old people of the Sel clan⁷ which now holds a position of *Dung Dzang*, their ancestor came from Huong Hoa, Quang Tri province. When their male ancestor arrived in Thuong Trach area, he married the only daughter of the former *Dung Dzang*, who belonged to the Mangcoong clan. Because of the bravery of this Sel ancestor, the Mangcoong clan transferred the power of *Dung Dzang* to the Sel⁸. However, the head of the Mangcoong clan still plays an important role⁹ in the community ceremonies, especially the Drum Beating Ceremony.

⁷ See more in 4.3

⁸ See more in 4.4

⁹ See more detail in the Drum Beating Ceremony (4.4)



Đồ 3.1. Vietnam's official ethnographic map (contemporary period).
Source: Nguyen Van Tai 1984.

Figure 4.1 Location of ethnic minority groups in Vietnam

Source: Nguyen Van Tai 1984, cited in Salemink 2003:3

Indeed, various current documents claim that the Makong people and the Bru-Van Kieu lived around the Truong Son Mountain range, in western Quang Tri Province (Di 1972, Loc 1984, Hong 1998, Trang 1998, Manh et al. 2001). Some ethnologists contend that these ethnic groups came from Laos (Dien, Binh, Hoan 1977, cited in Manh 1996). They claim that the movement of ethnic groups of the Mon-Khmer linguistic family including the Khua, the Tri and the Makong to the northwest

of Quang Binh started before the 15th century. They are now living mainly in Dan Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, and in Thuong Trach and Tan Trach communes, Bo Trach district of Quang Binh Province.

According to Manh (1996), the Makong people are one of ethnic groups who appeared earliest in northwest Quang Binh. This means that Makong people should be recognized as indigenous people of this area.

Thuong Trach area is a remote area but historical changes of the whole country have still had impacts upon the Makong people who live in the area. The next section is a brief reflection on the history of Makong community in Thuong Trach.

Pre – Colonial and Colonial Times: Before 1954

The first forest taxes were established by the Ly Dynasty in 1013. In the 1700s, the Le Dynasty developed its own forest exploitation regulations. In the 1800s, the King Gia Long forced mountainous provinces to send tributes of ivory, timber, and young stag horn (Dang 2001). These laws notwithstanding, mountain ethnic groups were still autonomous in using and managing their own life (Tinh and Dao 2000).

Under French domination, however, contacts between the two groups increased. In order to exploit raw materials for the industrial economy, “the French considered land alienation the cornerstone of economic exploitation” in the colonies (LePoer 1987: 33). They had policies to encourage French capitalists to invest in industrial crop plantations in Vietnam (Tinh and Dao 2000). These policies were effective: more than 90 percent of plantations in highland areas were French owned by 1930 (LePoer 1987:33). To discourage the local people from rebelling, the French allowed the highlanders linguistic and cultural autonomy, and administered their areas separately from the rest of Vietnam.

An administrative management system was set up in Thuong Trach area. In order to control the resource and people more easily, the French renamed streams and identified boundaries of villages. Several key informants claim that before the French

came, villagers lived by clan without the concept of village. They said that villages in Thuong Trach area did not have names until the appearance of the French. However, according to the guidelines of the Governor-General of the South, traditional institutions of local communities should be incorporated into the new administrative structure at the village level (Dang 2001). Traditional village leaders named village chiefs who were representatives of the state in the management and control of community activities (loc.cit.).

Some Makong elders remembered that the French selected the highest mountains to build their observatory stations. The French came from Laos and ordered local people to transport construction materials to the highest mountain in Phong Nha area, where they planned to construct observatory posts. However, it seems that the Makong were not really affected by the French because in reality the French did not attempt to control the Thuong Trach area. Makong elders said that though the French interfered with the Makong's village boundaries, the Makong continued to control resources according to their traditional rules. It is reasonable because the colonial objective was to exploit natural resources for industrial development. They thus focused on regions like the Central Highlands and some areas in the Northern Vietnam where they can invest into rubber, tea, coffee, etc. The French appropriated land to set up rubber and pine plantations in Dak Lak, in Tam Dao, in Bach Ma. Meanwhile, Quang Binh was rich in terms of limestone mountains, which did not interest the colonists. For this reason, the mountainous area in Quang Binh does not have any trace of French intervention. Chi (1992:5) said that the "Thuong" (highlanders in the central of Vietnam) "lived their lives without having to refer any superior authority".

Several people in the Makong community had exchanged products with the lowland Kinh people during the French colonial period. As Van, Son and Hung (1993:7) argue, though the economy of Vietnam was traditionally self-sufficient and dependent largely on nature, villages were not closed places, and no village or ethnic group could live separately from others. Mountainous people need salt, iron tools, jars, silver ornaments, copper items and colored thread from lowland communities. Meanwhile, lowland people need bamboo, wood, herbal medicine, etc, from the

mountain. In the case of the Makong, elders report that lowlanders sometimes came to exchange forest products, such as amomum (a type of medicinal herbs), bamboo shoots, betel areca, mushrooms, etc. Some Makong people were hired to transport forest products to the lowland area; and they bought what they needed.

However, under the influence of the national liberation revolution from 1940 onward, 'tribal' resistance emerged in the mountain districts of Quang Ngai, Quang Nam and Quang Tri. Vietnamese communists attempted to construct revolutionary network in the mountainous areas (Salemink 1995). Viet Minh (communist) apparatuses were established throughout the country. Viet Bac border region, which had the advantages of being remote from colonial control and accessible to China, which could serve both as a refuge and training ground, was created as a secure revolutionary base of the Viet Minh revolutionaries. Communists used this base to begin their expansion of revolutionist ideology into the south.

Revolutionaries came to Thuong Trach area and spread their ideology to local villagers. The influence of Vietnamese communists encouraged several young Makong people joining the revolution activities. The current *Dung Dzang* (Mr. Dinh Keo) also participated in the revolution. He said that when he was around 10-12 years old, he was secretly supported by revolutionists to go to school in another commune. By participating in revolution, he learned how to read and write Vietnamese. He said that his mother was very worried, and he sometimes sent her reassuring letters via his commander who often traveled across Thuong Trach commune.

American War: 1954-1975

In 1954, the northern part of Vietnam gained independence from French control. The Vietnamese government soon began to construct new administrative mechanisms at commune level appropriate to the construction of a new society.

The Socialist Government saw rich potential in the mountainous areas in term of land to be developed for agriculture and industry. In addition, these areas played an important role in national politics, economics and security. Forest resources were seen as capital that could be used to rebuild the war-damaged economy. The

government worked to exploit as much timber as possible. Mountainous resources were used inappropriately, leading to more and more forest depletion. A high-ranking former official once ironically said that “we have perfectly completed our deforestation”.

However, the state still saw the shifting cultivation of highland ethnic groups as the main cause of deforestation. Acting on this perception, the Northern Vietnamese Government issued a policy in 1959 to mobilize highland ethnic groups to move down the mountain and resettle in an area where they could make their living through permanent crop cultivation. The government declared the Resettlement and Cooperative Establishment Act (38/CP dated on March 12, 1968) as an increasing intervention of state in mountainous ethnic groups who were practicing shifting cultivation. Objectives of this act were to “improve material and spiritual life of shifting cultivation groups; in addition, to protect and develop abundant resources in mountainous area” (loc.cit.). This act encouraged villagers in Thuong Trach commune to farm in accordance with the terms of the Cooperative. However, because of the fierce American attacks from 1968 to 1972, the cooperative in Thuong Trach only operated for three years. Most families moved to live in caves where they were protected from bombs. Their survival was mostly based on gathering forest fruit, vegetable, root (*cu mai*) because they could not farm. Central Vietnam was especially targeted by American bombing that aimed to cut the assistance from the North to the South. The area of the Truong Son mountains containing the Ho Chi Minh Trail was bombed most seriously, reportedly 1200 times per day. The Quang Binh and the Makong were especially devastated by these attacks.

Establishment of Protected Area and Doi Moi: After 1975 onward

Between 1975 and the mid 1980s, when the whole Vietnamese country got independence, Thuong Trach villagers returned and started to rebuild their life and villages. The Central State put several assistances programs in place, but it was still difficult work. Rates of illiteracy, hunger and malnutrition remained very high in this area.

From the mid 1980s onward, lowland policy reforms have greatly influenced the life of villagers in Thuong Trach commune. The increasing market demand for forest products has led to more intensive extraction of timber, aloe wood, valuable wild animals and other minor forest products. Hundreds of lowlanders have come to Thuong Trach area daily to exploit forest products. Along with the introduction of a market economy, this has caused several changes in the traditional life of the local people. On the one hand, land and forest have been recognized as state property. The establishment of Phong Nha Protected Area in 1986 has made it difficult for the Makong people to carry out traditional cultivation. In particular, the upgrading and extension of Phong Nha Protected Area into Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park has greatly reduced the traditional shifting cultivation area for the Makong people.

On the other hand, state has implemented several programs to 'improve' life in the local communities in or around the forest. The central state has increased control over the life of the people, changing the traditional structure of the community. For instance, the state authorities ignore the traditional village leaders, normally very experienced elderly people who were respected by the whole community. Nowadays, new local leaders are selected by the authorities based on literacy level. Therefore, some village leaders are young men who have not gained the respect of the whole village. Another example is that the power of the *Dung Dzang* who traditionally holds the control of land and forest is now supplanted by state agencies. The *Dung Dzang* now just carries out traditional ceremonies of the communities under the supervision and permission of the authorities.

4.3 Social Structure of the Makong Community

The Bru-Van Kieu and the Makong have traditionally set up their villages based on kinship. Normally, households in a village have blood-relation (Hong 1998). However, due to several intrusions from outside communities, a Makong village now includes at least two clans (*mu*). According to villagers, the whole Thuong Trach commune now has twenty-one *mu*. Five of these (e.g. Muong, Ruc, Sach, Van Kieu and Kinh), however, are from different ethnic groups. Each of these *mu* include only a few households within one or two generations. For instance, in the whole Thuong

Trach commune, there are one Kinh family and three Muong households¹⁰. In each of these households the wives are Makong people; the husbands, who are non-Makong, came to work in Thuong Trach for a long time and got married to local women. They are recognized as members of Makong community because they live like the Makong. For instance, Mr. Dieu is Kinh, but speaks the Makong language, eats Makong food, lives in a stilt house and practices Makong customs instead of Kinh.

Makong culture prescribes different responsibilities for specific clans. The leader of the Sel clan currently hold the position of *Dung Dzang*. The Mangcoong clan is the former *Dung Dzang*, and transferred the position to the Sel clan. Each clan shows their roles more clearly in the Drum Beating Ceremony. The Sel clan is the main organizer of the Drum Beating Ceremony and community ritual. The Cu Sau clan, who are neighbors of the former *Dung Dzang*, helps the Sel clan celebrate the ceremony. The Cu Sau clan's leader also practices rituals with the *Dung Dzang* to communicate with the God. Together with the Sel and the Cu Sau clans, the Mangcoong clan also plays an important role in the rituals. He is one of worshippers in the Drum Beating Ceremony. However, according to villagers, the head of the Mangcoong clan is just a guest invited by the Sel clan to express their gratitude to the Mangcoong clan ancestor. This is because the *Dung Dzang* position traditionally belonged to the Mangcoong clan before they transferred it to the Sel clan.

Table 4.1 List of 21 clans of the Makong people in Thuong Trach commune

Clan (Mu) 1: Mangcoong	Clan (Mu) 8: Neen g	Clan (Mu) 15: Ta Boi
Clan (Mu) 2: Sel	Clan (Mu) 9: Ra Tung	Clan (Mu) 16: Sach
Clan (Mu) 3: Xu Nghi	Clan (Mu) 10: La Xaa	Clan (Mu) 17: Ruc
Clan (Mu) 4: Cu Sau	Clan (Mu) 11: Hui Sang	Clan (Mu) 18: Bung
Clan (Mu) 5: Cha Ang	Clan (Mu) 12: A Ky	Clan (Mu) 19: Muong
Clan (Mu) 6: Ta Hung	Clan (Mu) 13: Che Ree	Clan (Mu) 20: Xam Laa
Clan (Mu) 7: La Pit	Clan (Mu) 14: Van Kieu	Clan (Mu) 21: Kinh

Turning our attention to the social structure of the Makong community, there are several local institutions composed of clan leaders, "*Xuat Vil*" (village leader),

¹⁰ The three Muong households belong the same family because they are parents and children.

“*Mo Jao*”, village elders, and especially “*Dung Dzang*” who plays very important role in land and forest management of the Makong.

Clan leadership is a hereditary role transferred from a father to his oldest son. Clan leaders maintain their clan customs and traditions and worship their ancestors. They also practice certain rituals before members of the clan commence agricultural production. For instance, before a member of a clan starts to slash and burn, harvest, or hunt an animal, their clan leaders must hold ceremony to ask permission from their ancestors. Makong people never eat the rice harvested from the field before their clan leaders worship their ancestral and rice spirits.

Due to the important role that they play, clan leaders have to learn and understand their clan’s customs and traditions very well. However, because some clan leaders are young they often rely upon the assistance of village elders, who can teach them how to behave and perform traditional ceremonies.

The “*Mo Jao*” (spirit medium) plays very important role in the daily life of the Makong people. Like other ethnic groups who live in remote mountainous areas, the Makong people have their own cosmology. They believe that their life and death are ruled by the spirits. When they are sick, they need “*Mo Jao*” to cure the sickness and regain their health. They believe that sickness is a punishment for doing something that upsets the spirits. “*Mo Jao*” has the power to help them to work with the spirits to solve the problems. However, this belief is derived by the state as an act of superstition. The state prohibits “*Mo Jao*” from practicing, but in reality they are still invited to hold their beliefs by many Makong villagers.

“*Xuat Vil*” (traditional village leader) was a person identified as very knowledgeable about the community’s culture, customs, tradition and religion. He was selected by all villagers and made responsible for leading and organizing all social, economic and cultural activities of the community. However, the present formal village leaders are assigned by the communal authority, which requires that a village leader must be able to read and write the Vietnamese language. As a result of this structure, several young, literate Makong people have been selected as village leaders who do not have enough knowledge about their culture. Some villagers contend that the traditional village leaders disappeared when the new administrative

system was officially enforced in the Makong community. Functions of current village leader link only to the state rather than traditional activities of the community.

Village elders' council includes old people in the village who understand Makong custom, tradition, regulations, rituals and ceremonies. According to Hong (1998), they are seen as important persons in the village. They help the traditional village leader (*Xuat Vil*) organize all activities and teach their village members to live ethically and to do farming effectively. The council traditionally had power to dismiss the "*Xuat Vil*" if the "*Xuat Vil*" did not fulfill his responsibility. However, currently the traditional role of village elders is not recognized. Though the central government has recently organized several national workshops to discuss the important role of village elders in the development of ethnic minority communities, the Makong village elders are by and large not involved in the state programs.

The most important person in the Makong community is *Dung Dzang*, or land owner/manager. In Makong culture, *Dung Dzang* is respected as a spiritual leader of the community because he represents the whole community in communicating with the *Dzang* (God). He is a person who has powers to control this land. The Makong believe that the whole area of Thuong Trach belongs to him. Anyone who wants to live in his area must ask his permission. He thus traditionally had power to manage land use and protection, to perform community ceremonies, to solve conflicts, to educate younger generations how to live ethically, and to help them to understand traditional customs and cultural values of the Makong community.

The above mechanism has helped the Makong people manage their community. However, the introduction of state administrative system has created a new context and partly changed the traditional practices. The two systems have different languages, values, ways of thinking and ways of perceiving the forest. The government has overlaid the traditional local institutions with another mechanism that exercises control from the central state over provincial government, district authority, Commune People Committee, and village leaders. At the commune level, the commune people's committee act as representatives of the state to manage local communities. However, in the case of Thuong Trach area, Commune People's Committee is strictly controlled by the district. Therefore, most of activities in the

commune are influenced by the district authorities who do not understand the culture of the Makong people.

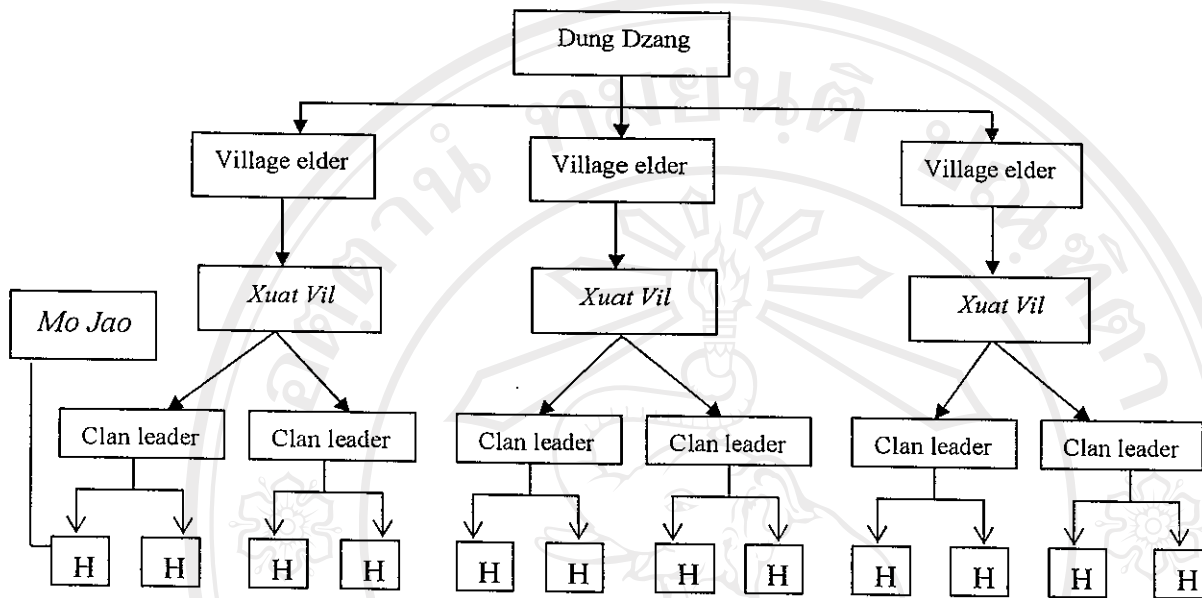


Figure 4.2 Traditional social structure of the Makong community

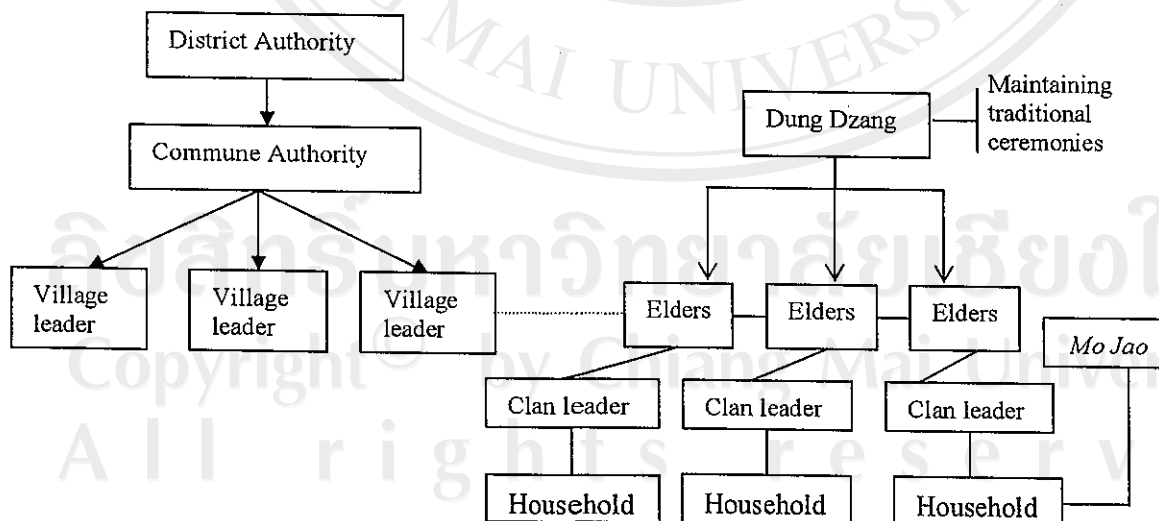


Figure 4.3 Current social structure of the Makong community

4.4 Cultural Landscape and Ritual Practice of the Makong People in Thuong Trach

The Makong people have been living mainly in Thuong Trach, a mountainous commune located in the border between Vietnam and Laos. Topographically, Thuong Trach is a karst mountainous area with an average altitude of 500 meters above sea level. It is formed by several high limestone mountains interspersed with small valleys, streams and underground springs. Thuong Trach is home to a stream system including Cu Ton, Ca Roong, Tum and Rung, which come from Laos, converging at Caroong and then flowing to Phong Nha cave (QBMERD 2002).

The state recognizes this long karst system as a natural site in need of conservation. Several international and national scientists have investigated the cave system and concluded that Phong Nha-Ke Bang forest is one of the most majestic caves of the world (Limbert 1994, cited in Quang Binh People Committee 1998:2).

However, this landscape is more than just biophysical space to the Makong people. It is their entire physical and spiritual way of life. They do not evaluate the length or the beauty of the cave and the biodiversity of the forest. Rather, natural landscape is part of the Makong culture. For instance, the caves were seen as safe places where they could avoid bombing. They used the caves as their temporary dwellings during the American war. Furthermore, the Makong believe that their ancestral spirits still live in the forest. These spirits grant them land rights that allow them to practice shifting cultivation. In these fields, they produce enough food for their survival. The forest also provides other food sources that are the Makong people's food security in the era of the market intrusion.

Indeed, we can find human relationships with places through myths and rituals in the Makong culture. The Makong are aware that land and forest has a history before the nation-state presence. They recognize the existence of ancestral forces in the land and forest. They perceive ancestral spirits and natural spirits that manage all entities in nature including forests, streams, stones and wild animals. The Makong's daily activities in nature are thus under close protective control of these forces. Before carrying out an activity, they must perform certain kinds of rituals. For instance, before going hunting, a hunter prays for protection and blessing from his

ancestor spirits and forest spirit to guarantee a productive hunt. This ritual is performed in front of a *Ma Xo* (ancestor) column in his house. The *Ma Xo* column is seen as a dwelling of their ancestor's soul. It is the most sacred area in their house, which outsiders and women are forbidden to touch. Villagers believe that both forest spirits and ancestor's spirits support them in catching game. They thus pray to them before they go hunting; and after coming back, they express their gratitude by offering different parts (eg: ear, heart, liver) of the catch to both forest spirits and ancestor spirits.

Landscape and Ancestral Past

Everywhere in the Makong community, the physical form of the earth thought of as the creation of ancestral spirits. The landscape is considered the property rights and connotations of the ancestral spirits. The Makong people believe that the natural landscape is not created by natural forces but by their ancestors and the supreme natural spirits. Therefore, every site around the Makong community has a myth explaining its origin. For instance, a sunken area along the path from the Cu Ton village to Cooc village is explained by a tale as follows:

Long time ago, the Makong community was facing a disaster caused by a super magical serpent. It forced villagers to sacrifice young girls in exchange for the survival of the whole community. One day, a traveling young man of the Sel clan stopped at the Makong village and heard about the incident. He volunteered to kill the serpent though villagers had informed him how dangerous the serpent was. He went on to meet the super magical serpent. He struggled against the serpent during several days that caused a convexo-concave terrain of the area. Finally, the serpent was knocked down and killed by the bravery and strength of the young man. The battleground left a sunken shape. It is located on the two mentioned villages.

(A Makong informant, Nov 5, 2003)

The Makong also have other myths that explain how the ancestral spirits named particular sites of the Makong ancestral landscape. Therefore, they traditionally called the Thuong Trach area "*Cun Roang*" - the serpent; and the current Caroong village was named "*Vil Che Roang Clo*" - village where the snake passed. However, these names were changed when the provisional revolutionist government was established, "*Vil Che Roang Clo*" was renamed "*Vil Caroong*". *Cun Roang* was changed to *Thuong Trach* by the Vietnamese officials to refer to an upstream area. Renaming the village has taken away the true local sense of their landscape.

The Makong area represents the various transformations of the bodies and spiritual imagination of the ancestral spirits. The essence of an ancestral being can be shown in any feature of the environment. For instance, they explain the presence of a big tree at the entrance of Caroong village as follows:

Long ago, the Siamese people came to Laos to capture hill tribe people as slaves; they also moved to the Makong villages in Thuong Trach and arrested all people and their assets. However, one couple were escaped from the Siamese and returned to their Caroong village. Because it was very long trip, they used a branch of tree to make a traveling stick. Upon finally arriving at their home site, they put the stick in the ground at a corner and it eventually grew into a big tree.

(A Makong informant Nov 10 2003)

The Makong old people nowadays tell this story to their children every time they pass by the tree. The Makong's tales reflect not only the role of their ancestral pasts in creation of the landscape but also the ideology and historical transformation of their society. For instance, in order to explain why the Sel clan is the current *Dung Dzang*, they say that the land in Thuong Trach traditionally belonged to the *Dung Dzang*, who was Mangcoong clan. However, after the young man of the Sel clan saved Thuong Trach from the magic serpent, the Mangcoong *Dung Dzang* married off his daughter to the Sel young man and transferred the position to the Sel clan.

The Makong people also have an explanation for the sacred stream from the Aky to Nong village. They believe that their spirits left a relic rock in this stream to remind everyone that it is the sacred area. However, one man violated this by fishing in this stream and was trapped on the rock. Therefore, before the Makong catch fish for the Drum Beating Ceremony, they must perform rituals to request permission from the spiritual rock. I asked the young Makong man who took me to the sacred stream how he gained this knowledge; He said that learned from different Makong elders including his father, his mother, his neighbors and elderly people in the communities. He contended that they taught him whenever and wherever they could, on the way to the field, on the way to visit other villagers, during rituals, and even resting time. He said that he often listened to tales starting when he was very young and that it made him understand more about his sacred historic past, his environment, his society and his ancestors. Above all, it can be said that he has been taught since his childhood what the Makong culture is and how a Makong person like him must

learn and conserve his own culture. It is a way to guarantee the Makong rights to exist in their ancestral forest.

Cosmology and Ritual Practice

Cosmology is a concept used to express the worldview of people. In this thesis, I use it to discuss how the Makong people explain their genealogy. In addition, it helps to look at the rituals through which the Makong people express their beliefs. Daily activities of the Makong people link closely with rituals, which are practiced at both household level and community level. In particular, the Makong people believe that spirits exist in the forest and natural landscape, and their land and forest-related activities are intertwined with the rituals.

Starting with the Drum Beating Ceremony, the Makong explain its origin as follows:

Long ago, Makong villages faced a serious famine. Not only Makong people lacked of food but birds and animals also had nothing to eat. In one village, a widow roasted one sweet potato in a bamboo tube. The smell of the roasted potato attracted hungry birds. They pecked on the bamboo tube, causing big sounds like a drum. These sounds echoed to God as if somebody wanted to report something. The God got angry, thinking that the widow was teasing him. He punished her and her people. So they were faced with more famine and sickness. After that period, and being advised by the Mo Jao, the widow had learnt the reason of her sickness; she worshipped and prayed to God for forgiveness. She pledged that she would beat a drum to celebrate a ritual every January if he returned her good health and supported her villagers to have a good life. Accepting the widow's act of remorse, God granted her a full recovery and gave the villagers a better life. Since then the Drum Beating Ceremony has been held every year to thank God.

(An old Makong man, Nov 13 2003)

In the Drum Beating Ceremony (*T'ranh Chi Cuut*), the Makong people practice rituals to worship their God and ancestral spirits. Offerings are prepared carefully from forest products which include fish, banana flower, bamboo shoot, rattan shoot. In addition, they also prepare homemade food consisting of rice, chicken and wine made from rice on their own shifting cultivation fields. The Makong villagers contend that such products are compulsory. They would feel uncomfortable if they did not have enough of such offerings. Therefore, though they now have several types of food from lowland, they still use forest products when they prepare their traditional ceremonial offerings. This can be interpreted as a way of maintaining

their traditional shifting cultivation and gathering minor forest products for their livelihood as well as their ritual life.

The above argument can be illustrated through regulations of a sacred stream. Makong people believe that water spirits strictly protect this stream for the Drum Beating Ceremony. All activities, including fishing, burning, making unnecessary noises which affect the growth of fish are forbidden from June to January of lunar calendar. It was said that some people were executed for violating these regulations.

Furthermore, through the story of the Drum Beating Ceremony and the sacred stream, the Makong educate their children how to live morally and ethically. The tale mentions a widow, an image of a marginal person as a founder of Drum Beating Ceremony. It evokes a belief that the marginal people do not always give up when faced with difficulties. They also have their capacity to overcome threats and challenges in their life. Their capacity and morality will be rewarded with good health, fertility, food, good soil, and forest resources. They believe that the God has enough power to influence human beings' lives. Therefore, they practice annual rituals to express their belief in the God and spirits who protect them from any kind of obstacles. Through the Drum Beating Ceremony, the Makong not only express their gratitude for the protection of God and Spirits, but also pray for good crops, good health and good weather. This is also an occasion for them to teach their children about the importance of living harmoniously with nature because nature has its own spirits. And above all, it serves to demonstrate how their children can live like the Makong people and what the Makong culture is.

The Makong people have another important ceremony called "Stone Worshipping". The ceremony is explained through a story as follows:

Lowlanders and Makong people traditionally had no border between them. But the lowlanders contended that the Makong were living on their land; they thus tried to expel the Makong people from the natural resources. They set up a land-tax system and forced the Makong people to pay. However, several Makong families could not afford the tax; the lowlanders took advantage of the law. They could afford to pay tax and therefore occupy most land of the Makong who were chased away. The Makong had to move to live in caves but the lowlanders came and burnt the caves. Fortunately, one large stone exploded and killed 7 lowlanders who were burning the cave of the Makong. The Makong believed that Stone Spirit punished the lowlanders to return land to the Makong people. To remember the support from the Stone Spirit, the Makong people perform a yearly ritual of worshipping on the stone, where the explosion took place. The Makong people believe that lowlanders should not appear

in this ceremony because bad luck will come not only for lowlanders but also for the Makong community as well. Therefore, there are no lowlanders allowed in the Stone Spirit worshipping ritual.

(Mr. Dinh Quang, Nov 15 2003)

This story is an example of how the Makong people want to internalize their spiritual beliefs. They totally believe that they are protected by the spirits in any situation. The dominant lowlanders were punished when they did something wrong and unfair to the Makong people. Once again, the Makong people want to remind everyone to live morally and fairly because according to their belief system, the law of causality applies to all people in society. Their spiritual belief is clearly expressed during the annual ritual that is organized to worship the stone spirit.

The Stone Worshipping is normally held after rice planting. The “*Dung Dzang*” leads the ceremony. It is believed that the Big Stone near Caroong village is the site where the explosion happened. The ceremony is thus held at that place with offerings of various local products and rice from the shifting cultivation field: 2 jars of wine contributed by the “*Dung Dzang*”, 4 chickens, 4 large fresh water fishes from the sacred stream and some cooked sticky rice. Villagers can contribute other kinds of offerings or bring any kind of food to the ceremony. On this occasion the Makong express their solidarity and their communal spirit. The ritual is divided into two parts: the first is for dead lowlanders to bless them and prevent them from disturbing living people; the second one is to ask the Stone Spirit to support their community with good health and abundant crop production. Through the Stone Worshipping rituals, the Makong people not only express their belief in Stone spirits but also emphasize tolerance in human relationships. Though the lowlanders appropriated their land and were punished by the spirits, the Makong still bless them.

The Makong’s belief in the spiritual world is expressed in most of their daily activities. For instance, they perceive the rice goddess (*Gia Bon*) determines rice productivity. Before starting rice production, they perform a ritual to ask for protective support from the rice goddess. Another ritual for rice goddess is performed after villagers harvest productive crops. It is also celebrated individually every three or six years. I learned this from a middle-aged Makong man in Cooc village who had just celebrated a big ritual for rice goddess because his family had very good yield for

several years. He said that the rice goddess blessed his family by granting a good yield; so, he must express his gratitude by performing a ritual to her. He explained that the ritual was a pledge made before clearing a field. After harvesting a good crop, the family requested the *Dung Dzang* who has spiritual power to mediate between the Makong people and the spirits to perform the ritual. During the ritual, participants should not quarrel or make noise because it may cause bad luck for the household observing the ritual. The ritual lasts for four hours. After that, two stream crabs are released back into the stream.

The Makong have another ritual that is performed after the completion of the rice harvest. This is called the New Rice Ritual. This ritual is normally celebrated in the house, not on the field like the ritual for the rice goddess. The head of the family performs the ritual after his family completes the rice harvest. The Makong people explain that the ritual for rice goddess relates to the god and nature; and that the new rice ritual relates to their ancestors. The purpose of new rice ritual is to offer new rice to their ancestors. The Makong people believe that their present life is closely related to their ancestral past. In addition, they also contend that their crop productivity is blessed and protected by their ancestral spirits. Therefore, they must show their respect and gratitude to their ancestors by offering them new crops to consume. Therefore, the Makong offer not only new rice but also various kinds of products such as new honey, new corn and game animals.

Ritual is not only practiced in agricultural production but also expressed in healing. The Makong people believe that a human life has two parts: a soul and a body. If the two parts are well balanced, people will have good health. However, when a human's soul separates from the body, the person feels sick and unhealthy. Normally, sickness is caused by the spirits. The Makong normally believe that the soul of a sick person has been captured by a certain spirit that is identified by a *Mo Jao* (spirit medium). I had the opportunity to observe a ritual that was performed for a sick child in one Makong family. They call this ritual "*Le Buoc Hon*" (soul tying ritual). The offerings include one boiled chicken, one small lump of sticky rice, a jar of wine, and some home spun thread. During the ritual, all members of the family gathered around the tray of offerings. The paternal grandmother of the sick child put a small bamboo stick and a betel leaf in a wine jar as an invitation to the spirits. Then

she started speaking to negotiate with the spirit for her grandchild's health. After that, the child's father also performed similar ritual. Then they tied the thread on both wrists of the sick child and all family members.

In some cases, *Mo Jao* (spirit medium) is invited to perform the ritual for any sick person. The Makong believe that the *Mo Jao* has supernatural power to communicate directly with the spirits. However, this practice costs a lot of money because a family has to prepare different kinds of offering for spirits and gifts for the *Mo Jao*. Therefore, when the situation is less serious, people in the family perform this healing ritual by themselves without asking for the help of the *Mo Jao*.

Generally the Makong people have expressed their belief in the spiritual world in their daily activities. They perceive that nature is created by the God, by spirits, and by their ancestor's spirits. This belief helps them to set up regulations that keep a balance with the environment and nature. It determines the way they use and manage natural resources and forest in particular. They have established regulations to manage the resources. Below are some examples of traditional forest use and management by the Makong people.

4.5 Traditional Forest Use and Management by the Makong

The Makong's cosmology of nature has provided the structure for their forest use. Being traditional shifting cultivators whose life entwines with the nature, the Makong have also accumulated precious knowledge and experience of how to use the forest. Their knowledge and spiritual beliefs are expressed in local practices of soil classification, production scheduling, fire control, and cultural practices that control forest use.

In order to conserve forest resources effectively, the Makong people classify forest into three main types: 1) the sacred forest (*Xa Trung Lau*), 2) the ghost forest (*Trung Cumui*) and 3) the production forest. The sacred and ghost forests are normally primary forest where the Makong people bury their dead and are known to be the dwelling of spirits. Anyone encroaching upon these areas without proper permission from the whole community will be fined according to community rules.

Individuals who rediscover or reclaim the rights to till land in production forest can have those rights recognized by the community.

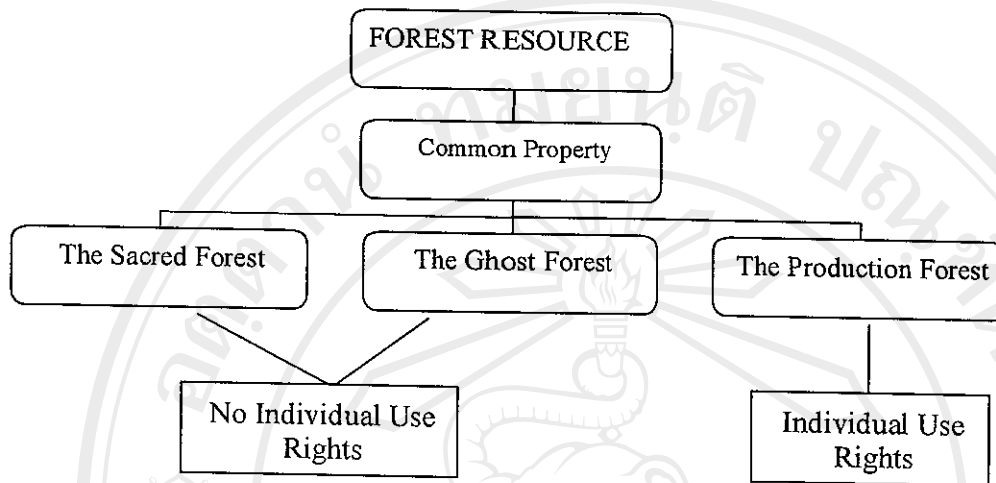


Figure 4.4 Property rights over forest resources of the Makong people

According to the beliefs of the Makong people, the primary forest is sacred forest where spirits live. The ghost forest is where the dead are buried. The sacred atmosphere of these areas must be respected. On these grounds, people are forbidden to hunt or to slash and burn. People perceive any violation of these area as the violation of spirits who manage forests in particular and the nature in general. Those who violate the customary regulations will be fined one buffalo, one pig, one chicken, a large jar of rice wine, etc. as offerings to the spirits. Though such traditional regulations are explained religiously, they represent a cultural justification of forest management and protection of the Makong people.

The Makong community has constructed cultural regulations for each type of forest that its members are strictly required to observe. In the sacred forest, nobody is allowed to exploit resources for the individual use, but it might be allowed for traditional and cultural activities of the community. For instance, in the case of communal house construction, the *Xuat Vil* represents the whole community and ritually asks permission from the forest spirits. In addition, when a family builds a

house, they can use timber and other kinds of material from the sacred forest after performing rituals to appease the spirits of the community and the forest. Normally, the family prepares two bottles of rice wine, a chicken and some cigarettes to ask the Xuat Vil and *Dung Dzang* to organize a village meeting to request consensus on the issue. In addition, the *Dung Dzang* helps them perform some other rituals to appease the forest spirits and the God.

The ghost forest is managed by clans (*Mu*) because different clans have selected different areas for burying their dead. Meanwhile, in the production forest areas, households are allowed to carry out traditional slash and burn for agricultural production, hunting, etc. A person who first reclaims a field site is recognized as the owner of that land. Even when the plot is fallowed, the use rights still belong to that person. Those who want to use a fallowed plot for crop production must perform some traditional rituals requesting permission from the previous user. The offering consists of a bottle of wine. If the owner agrees to transfer the rights to use over the land, he/she will drink the wine. However, the use rights over the land can be transferred among households within a village with no offering.

Traditional forest classification shows that the Makong people are aware of the importance of forest management. Moreover, in order to effectively conserve the resources, they have established traditional regulations rooted in ritual belief to restrain any attempt to overuse natural resources. They consider forest destruction a violation of the spiritual world. Below is the description of customary regulations that the Makong people have applied to manage the forest.

Traditional Regulations on Forest Use and Protection

The Makong people perceive the forest as community property that each member of the community has rights to use and duties to protect. They have different traditional regulations for different types of forest. For the sacred or watershed forests where there are big and precious trees that house the spirits, logging, slashing and burning, game hunting, cattle grazing, etc are strictly forbidden. Their protection of such sacred forest space is also an observance of their spiritual beliefs. Those who

violate will be fined by giving one buffalo, one cow, one pig or one chicken depending on the severity of the violation. The village leader will meet with village elders to decide how much the violator must pay.

The Makong people explain their system of forest use rights in terms of spiritual beliefs that differ from the National Park regulations, but it still reflects their awareness of the importance of forest preservation, which can also be observed in their traditional subsistence (see more detail in the next section).

If several households slash and burn their fields sites too close to one another, they have to discuss how and when to burn their individual fields. They normally agree to set a fire together; so that they can combine their effort and prevent any unnecessary fire expansion. If someone allows fire to spread into the sacred forest and the ghost forest where people bury their relatives, all clans (*Mu*) in the community have rights to punish that person. Regardless of a fire's cause, all young people in the community are duty-bound to stop the fire. Those who fail to join this communal effort are punished or even excluded from the Makong community.

The Makong people also protect the production forest. When they cut down a tree, they have to exercise the care not to damage other nearby trees. Normally, they use a rope tied around the middle of a tree to make a tree fall in a way they want. In the case of a big tree, they cut branches off it before cutting down the entire trunk. According to traditional regulations, someone who allows a tree to fall on another person's field must compensate the field owner for any damage from the incident.

According to the present laws of forest management, the state agencies that protect the forest use state laws and a management mechanism based on scientific knowledge. The Makong people use a belief system based on the spirits of their ancestors and the God. The Makong villagers believe that everything has a soul and a spiritual owner; therefore, resource use is allowed only by permission of the spiritual owner. For this reason, they always perform some kind of ritual requesting permission before carrying out activities in the forest. If they dream of a disabled or dead chicken, they will not go hunting for fear that this signals the disapproval of the spirits.

The Makong people are also very knowledgeable on the reproduction and growth of wild plants and animals. Based on the moon and the weather, they know the best time and method to harvest certain kinds of forest products. According to their traditional experience, March to June of the lunar calendar is the best time to harvest honey because this is also the forest trees' blossoming season. May and June is the best time to harvest forest fruits and bamboo shoots. August to October is game hunting season because wild animals often gather to hunt for food.

They have certain traditional techniques to harvest natural resources without destroying them. For instance, in order to protect themselves, and also to preserve the bees, they use smoke to force bees to flee their hive before cutting it from a tree branch. Makong women never dig inside a bamboo hedge to collect bamboo shoots. They contend that it is not only difficult but could also cause unnecessary damage to other bamboo shoots. One woman said to me that "the forest has a lot of bamboo groves but if we do not know how to harvest it correctly, in the future, we will not have bamboo shoots to eat anymore".

The Makong community also has some traditional regulations for game hunting. They are allowed to hunt only in designated territories. A Makong villager from one village cannot hunt in another Makong village's territory. Makong hunters must negotiate with Makong villagers of the forest areas where they could hunt. Makong hunters from outside the territory must prepare a jar of wine, cigarettes or even one live chicken to request access rights to hunt in an area. If they hunt big animals, such as wild boar, deer and barking deer, the Makong hunters can keep the two hind hams and the head, while the authority of the hunting village receives the tail, and the rest is divided equally among people of this village. A man explained to me that "if we share what we have with other people, they will share with us what they have".

However, this practice has been changed by the interference of the cash economy. Game hunting has become a profession for some young Makong men who hunt and trap wild animals to sell. The practice of sharing a hunted animal with all villagers seems to have been lost. People have changed their minds. They follow the saying "*if a person has money, he/she can buy anything*". The traditional way of

hunting is also changed. Before being influenced by lowland hunters, the Makong people hunted with a hunting dog, stick and simple traps, such as a blind ditch, a bamboo trap, etc. Now, villagers use guns, and buy hundreds of traps from lowlanders. However, the Makong people use most of these traps around their fields. This is also a way to protect their crops from being destroyed by wild animals.

Though many young Makong men have become professional hunters, they never hunt tiger, which is seen as the king of animals. They believe that if someone kills a tiger, he and his relatives will be punished until he dies. They often mentioned death of a family after the husband shot a tiger in 1996. They say that during that year, a tiger killed several Makong people's cattle and some villagers. The commune and district had to put everyone on tiger alert. They also posted an award for those who could kill the tiger. One day, the head of the commune military saw the tiger on his way to the field, and successfully shot it. However, one month later, his wife and his three children gradually became sick and died. Since this incident, the Makong belief in the tiger's power to revenge itself on those who kill it has grown stronger.

Traditional Rules on Land Use

Besides observing tradition regulations and being knowledgeable on forest use, the Makong people have traditional rules on land use rights, which are demonstrated through their practices of agricultural farming. Production planning, soil identification, slashing and burning and rice cultivation will be described to demonstrate how the Makong's traditional rules and knowledge of land use rights are observed.

- Production Planning

The Makong people depend on lunar calendar to plan their crop production. Villagers observe a proverb "December is resting month time" (*Cazay Oong tacoong ngoai cha*). In reality, the period from December (*oong*) to February (*liac*) is the time when people carry out traditional cultural activities, such as visiting relatives, worshipping the spirits and selecting a plot for cultivation. From March (*pacoi*) to October (*tlam*), the weather is the most suitable time for crop production. In one

month, the Makong rely on the phase of the moon to divide time. They divide a month into the three periods. They call the beginning of a month *caxaylo* (moon rising), the mid period of a month *raliang* (moon rounding), and the end of a month *caxaypat* (moonsetting). The Makong villagers implement their works according to these above time spans. They contend that days 4, 7, 9, 14, 17 and 19 in each month are normally good dates to implement agricultural activities, but they seldom do any important works on dates such as the 1st and the 30th.

- Soil Identification

Soil identification is an important stage for any agricultural activity because it is very crucial for crop productivity. In the end of December and beginning of January, Makong people use soil color, and types of plants growing on an area to identify whether or not the soil is fertile and could provide high yields. In addition, they can classify which kind of soil is appropriate for which crops.

Plots with black soil, which grow what are known locally as “*la mang*” plants and bamboo with long stems and large leaves, are good for rice production, according to the Makong villagers. However, bamboo leaves should be green, indicating moist ground, because yellow bamboo leaves signify a dry area. Areas where *strieng do* (water rattan) and *strieng trang* (white rattan) grow have high moisture, which is very good for rice. However, the authorities forbid them to cut these kinds of rattan; therefore, most of their fields are currently selected according to the first pattern of indicators. In case they could not find an appropriate area indicated by the above plants, villagers look for areas with *ra chan*, *la nghenh*, and *pa chac* plants, which keep soil soft but rather dry. In sum, the above traditional knowledge show the Makong villagers’ deep understanding of their environment.

Table 4.2 Soil types according to the Makong traditional identification

Soil Quality	Plants	Characteristics	Remarks
Good soil (Black, soft, moist with many decayed leaves)	<i>Ra Chan</i>	Water holding capacity	
	<i>La ngenh</i>	Water holding capacity	
	<i>Pa chac</i>	Water holding capacity	
	<i>Strieng do</i> (water rattan)	Water holding capacity	Slash and burn forbidden by the State
	<i>Strieng trang</i> (white rattan)	Water holding capacity	Slash and burn forbidden by the State
	<i>Ret dut</i>		
	<i>Bamboo with young leaves</i>		
	<i>La mang</i>	Bush	
Bad soil (Dry, hard and weedy)	<i>Cay bang lang</i>		
	<i>Bamboo with yellow leaves</i>	Dry soil	
	<i>Ret po tu</i>	stimulate weed growth	Rice plant will turn yellow due to a lot of weeds

Beyond the above well-known indicators and visible factors, a decision to use a plot has spiritual dimensions. After selecting a field, they often wait for dreams that are interpreted as the ultimate spirits' advice. Dreams about blood, fire, fighting, being clawed by wild animals, etc, indicate bad luck. However, dreams about friends, water, Makong children, births, etc signify good luck. When selecting an appropriate plot, villagers often make a signal to indicate ownership (*chomxay*). Before commencing production activities, they perform a ritual to give thanks to the forest spirits (*Yangxu*) for granting them the land rights to cultivate crops for their survival.

- *Slashing and Burning Field Sites:*

In February and March, after choosing a field site, the Makong people start to slash undergrowth and trees. They often cut tree from lower to upper area, from small bushes to big trees. All plants are slashed and dried before the burning takes place. This is a technique to maximize the effectiveness of the burning. After all dead plants are completely dry, members of all households select a good day to burn the field. It

is of crucial importance that they clear a large enough space as a fire buffer zone around the field to prevent the unnecessary forest fire. The Makong villagers recognize that building a thorough buffer zone around the field is very important to minimize the danger. They clear a 10 meters fire buffer zone around their field to prevent any unwanted fire expansion. In addition, they warn all villagers when the field is burnt so that nobody ventures near the burning field.

Field burning requires experienced people who know how to manage the situation. Burning also relates to productivity of the crops so traditional burning knowledge is valuable for the Makong people. If the field is burnt improperly, the Makong people will have to spend more time and labor to clean the partial burned trees and undergrowth, otherwise they will lose their crops to weeds. People have different methods of burning depending on location and current of wind. The Makong people also know how to read the wind current during the burning period.

If a field is flat, the Makong people often start burning from the outside moving into the inner field (figure 4.5). In a sloping field area, people usually start burning from the top, moving down toward the foot of the hill (figure 4.6).

Another component of their traditional knowledge that the Makong people use to control fire spread is putting fresh banana trunks around the field. Besides reading the wind current properly, the Makong must pay very close attention on to the field burning. With any whirlwind, they have to set a fire around the field (similar to figure 4.5). Meanwhile, with normal wind, they set fire first at downwind end of the field.

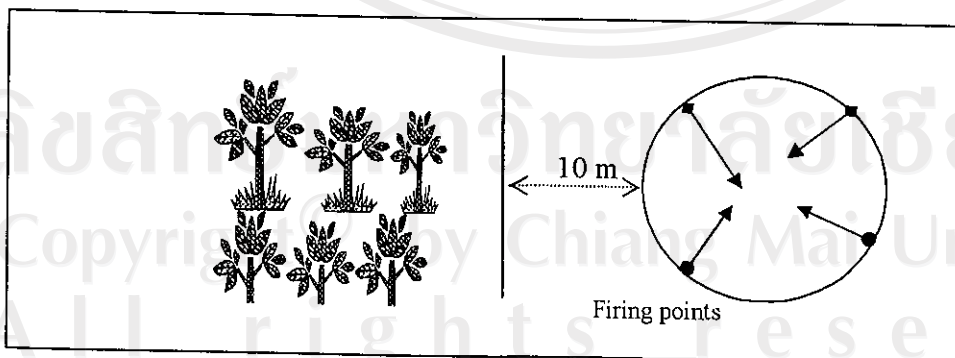


Figure 4.5 Burning technique on a flat field

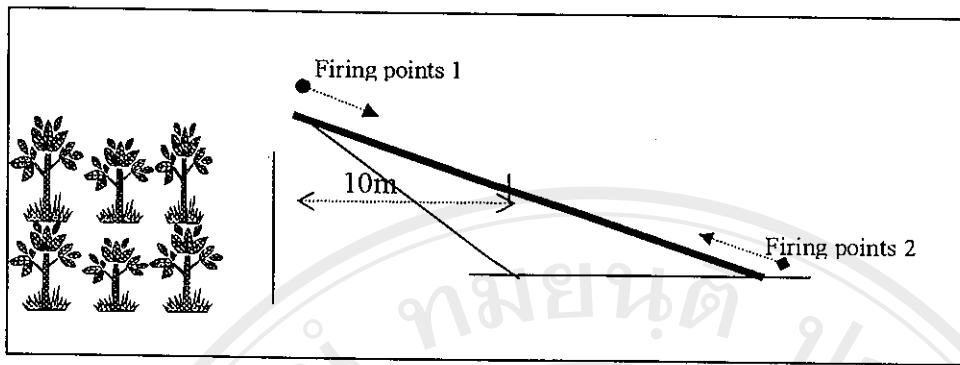


Figure 4.6 Burning technique on a sloping field

- *Rice planting*

Another important stage in the production cycle of the Makong is rice cultivation. This work is done by both men and women. Men normally go first, digging holes in the ground with a bamboo stick, and women follow putting rice seed in the holes before covering them. This is also a time for the Makong people to exchange knowledge and experience on how to guarantee high production yields, as well as sharing everyday life as they gather to help each other.

Upland rice is the main crop of the Makong community so they have accumulated many local rice varieties. Growing upland rice successfully depends on fertility of various kinds of soil, weather conditions, water sufficiency and proper maturation time appropriate to each sort of rice. The area of each field plot is normally based on available labor in the family. A family must estimate sufficient labor for planting, weeding, and harvesting on time; otherwise, their investment will be lost. In addition, they have to consider how much and what variety of rice they will grow in one year. If a household has a large field, they divide it into sections for early rice, and a late rice variety. Or if a household has several small plots, they will decide where to grow early rice and where to grow a late rice variety. The early rice is planted at the beginning of April; however, because early rice tends toward low yields, only a small amount is planted. They often intercrop the plot with an indigenous maize. The Makong people prefer to grow the late rice, which is planted in May and harvested from mid-October to late November, when the rainy season is over. Harvesting timing is very important because it determines the productivity of

the rice crops. Through these various practices, the Makong people limit size of the slash and burn plots.

The Makong system of local rice varieties as along with vegetables such as corn, bean, taro, eggplant, and belladonna allows for a great deal of diversity. Corn and cassava are grown as a reliable back-up staple for them and their domestic animal during the rice shortage period. Corn is intercropped with an early rice variety while cassava is planted on the plots that grew rice in previous years. However, corn and cassava are not traditional crops of the Makong. According to old Makong people, their ancestors did not have any maize until state cadres brought them. In the beginning, the state cadres taught them how to grow maize to be used during rice shortages. They began to use it as another main staple when rice is not sufficient. Later, more varieties of maize were introduced to Thuong Trach areas from the neighboring Van Kieu community in Truong Son commune, Quang Ninh district. The Makong people seldom slash a field for other crops like various kinds of vegetables, taro, beans, etc.; they are planted around the upland rice fields.

In addition to intercropping, the Makong people traditionally practice crop rotation. A fertile field is cultivated two or three years; a less fertile field is fallowed after one year of cultivation. Normally, each plot will be used to grow rice for one year, will then be fallowed for 7-15 years. Moreover, all villages maintain a certain cultivation territory because its members cannot cultivate in another village's territory. According to some researchers (Manh et al 2001:201), the Makong villagers promote soil fertility through the practices of rotational cultivation and the intercropping. In addition, these help to prevent soil erosion on sloping land. Fallowing a field helps soil recovery and forest regeneration by creating a resting time for the land.

Summary

In sum, the ethnic Makong have not yet been popularly recognized in Vietnam. In some documents, the Makong are classified as a sub-group of the Bru-Van Kieu ethnic group, which includes the Van Kieu, the Makong, the Khua and the Tri. Meanwhile, other scholars claim that the Bru-Van Kieu refers to only the Van Kieu

ethnic group. However, they agree that the Makong people are generally identified as practitioners of shifting cultivation who cause deforestation and environment degradation.

Through different historical periods, the Makong community in Thuong Trach area has been influenced by dominant rulers from lowland areas. The degree of influences has increased over time. Under the rule of feudal courts and the French colonizers, the Makong community maintained autonomous control over their forest and their society. Even though the French colonists demarcated and renamed their villages for an easier control, the Makong people in Thuong Trach still observed cultural practices for the security of their traditional livelihood. However, after the colonial period, the Vietnamese Republic Socialist Government recognized the forest as a highly valuable natural resources for the national economy. They strengthened forestry management policies, including establishing a protected area. In addition, the government introduced several development programs into upland ethnic communities. As a result, the state has redefined the status of ethnic minorities in the mountainous area that includes the Makong people in Thuong Trach area in particular. Their farming and use area has been narrowed due to the extension of Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park.

However, the Makong people have constructed their own identity, which is clearly expressed through their social structure, their cultural landscape and their ritual practices in the relationship with nature. In a present Makong village, the Makong traditional management is still observed by local institutions including *Dung Dzang* (land god), elderly people, *Xuat Vil* (village leader), clan leaders and *Mo Jao* (spirit moderator). These local institutions have been able to combine state laws with the traditional customary laws of the community. They believe that the combinations of modern and traditional laws governing natural resource management will lead to the sustainable use of local natural resources. The Makong people perceive the natural landscape as created by their ancestral past and spirits. In addition, they believe that their life is under the supervision and supports of those spiritual beings. Therefore, most of the traditional rules governing natural resource management express their belief that natural resources are not openly accessed but controlled by

their spiritual beings. One of moral norms of the Makong is that human beings should respect nature and should show constructive and conservational attitudes towards it if they want to survive and live harmoniously with nature.



ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่

Copyright© by Chiang Mai University

All rights reserved