

CHAPTER V

STATE INTERVENTION IN CAROONG VILLAGE AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF THE MAKONG PEOPLE

Since independence, the Vietnamese government has issued several policies regarding ethnic minorities, especially those living in mountainous areas. Ethnic minorities have been the target of several development and resource management programs from different state agencies. These interventions have had a noticeable effect on their traditional life. The case of Makong people in Caroong village can illustrate this point. In this chapter, I will discuss state interventions into the Makong community and policy implementation in Caroong village. My study examines the authorities' view of the Makong people, seeking the causes of Makong's marginality. In addition, forms of state power are examined as an illustration of the marginalization process.

5.1 Caroong Village

Caroong village is situated on an area along with Caroong stream whose source starts from Laos. The village is bounded by mountains and forests, which play very important role in both material life and spiritual life of the Makong people. The upstream forest is recognized as a sacred forest where their ancestor's spirits and supernatural forces are dwelling. Next to the sacred forest is the sacred stream where the Makong people conserve fish sources for the Drum Beating Ceremony and also protect their belief system. Caroong village¹¹ is considered the center of Thuong Trach commune. The authorities have built a main school, Commune People Committee office and a clinic station in Caroong village. It is one of few villages in Thuong Trach commune where cars can reach. This village is seen as the conjuncture among different village because it is the final destination for all means of outside

¹¹ See the map of Thuong Trach commune

transportation. Before traveling to other villages, travelers have to park their cars and motor cycles in Caroong village. In addition, through Caroong village, there is a short cut road leading to Laos regularly used by illegal loggers. So, many outsiders overnight in this village and carry out different activities, such as trading, goods exchanging, drinking, and gambling.

Caroong village includes 22 households with 122 persons. Most households in the village have paternal or maternal kinship. Most of Makong villagers do not remember when Caroong village was established. They just knew that their ancestors were born and grew up in this area. Only the Sel clan contended that their ancestors came from Huong Hoa, Quang Tri Province. Their legends tell how their ancestors moved to the Thuong Trach area and became *Dung Dzang* of Makong community in Thuong Trach area. An elder of Sel clan says that

The Sel clan's ancestor was good and intelligent but some bad people harmed him. He thus left his village and moved to Thuong Trach where its people were suffering a disaster caused by a snake. He killed the snake to save everybody. The former *Dung Dzang* gave his daughter in marriage to the Sel and transferred the power to him. Since that time, the Sel clan established Caroong village and developed his family in Caroong village

(A Sel elder, 15 Jan 2004).

Makong villagers recall that before the American war, dense forest surrounded Caroong village. They could see wild animals and hear them even from inside their houses. Nowadays, wild animals are rarely seen even in deep forest. Since the current of lowland traders, loggers, and wild animal hunters increased in 1986, the forest has become seriously degraded. It is said that wild animal have become scared and moved to other areas because lowlanders have exploited the forest beyond its capacity. Makong villagers contended that they have cultivated rotationally on small rice plots. They claimed that the rotational shifting cultivation and their practice of labor shortage indicated that they did not destroy much forest as outsiders blamed them. As a part of Thuong Trach commune, villagers in Caroong village have experienced the country's historical changes and policy transformation as the whole country do. Especially, the post-independence communist government in the North implemented several policies to develop the country. Caroong village was reorganized and

established as a settled village of the Thuong Trach commune according to State Resettlement policy.

In 1968, the government established an agricultural collective in Caroong village. Makong people were encouraged to participate in this collective. All households were encouraged to contribute their assets (animal, production tools, etc.) to the collective. The Makong villagers said that they had to work very hard but received little rice. Most of the product was managed by state cadres to transport to the south. As a result, villagers faced several difficulties including starvation and disease during the collective period. The collective only existed for three years because villagers could not gather to cultivate during the war.

Toward the end of 1960s when American forces bombed seriously in an attempt to cut supplies from the Northern government to the communists in South Viet Nam, The Makong villagers had to move out of the village and live in caves for their own safety. Production at this time was very minimal, and they depended heavily on minor forest products. Forest in this area was devastated by bombs and the dioxin dropped by the American planes

When the war ended in 1975, villagers started to return to Caroong village and reorganize their community. The government posted a border police station in Thuong Trach area, increasing Makong people's contact with state authorities. Several villagers contended that border police helped them by teaching literacy, farming and providing medical care.

Around 1976, under the subsidy policy, the district government built up the first state commercial shop in Thuong Trach commune, called "*cua hang mau dich*". This shop sold salt, oil, clothes, and production tools to local people. However, lowland mobile traders replaced the state commercial shop when the government decided to transform to market economy in 1986. More and more lowland mobile traders appeared in remote mountainous villages and Caroong village in the particular. Several of them built shops in Makong villages of Thuong Trach communes. At present, there are 20 shops of lowlanders in 18 villages.

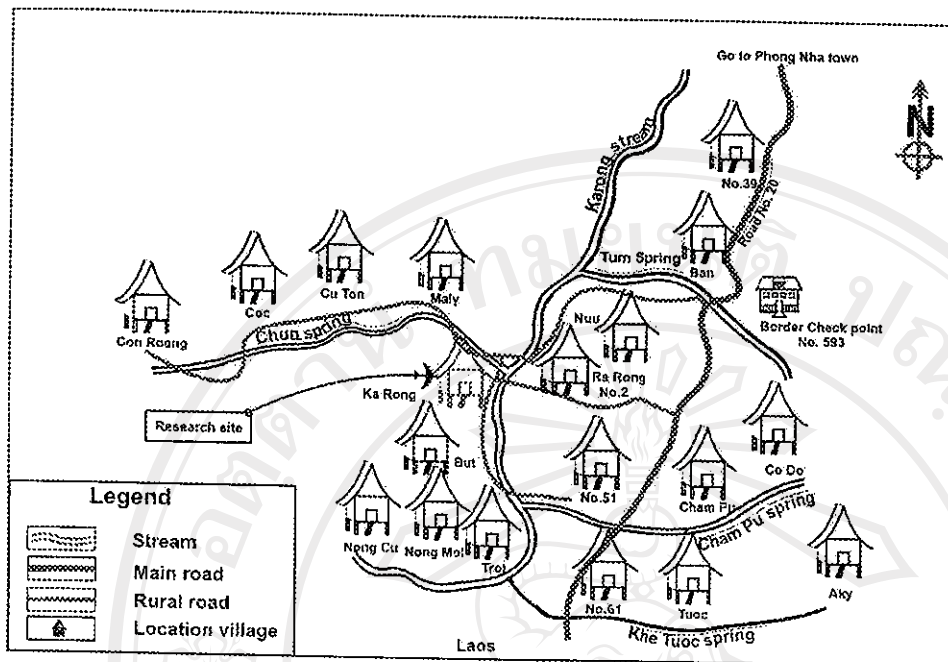


Figure 5.1 Map of Thuong Trach commune

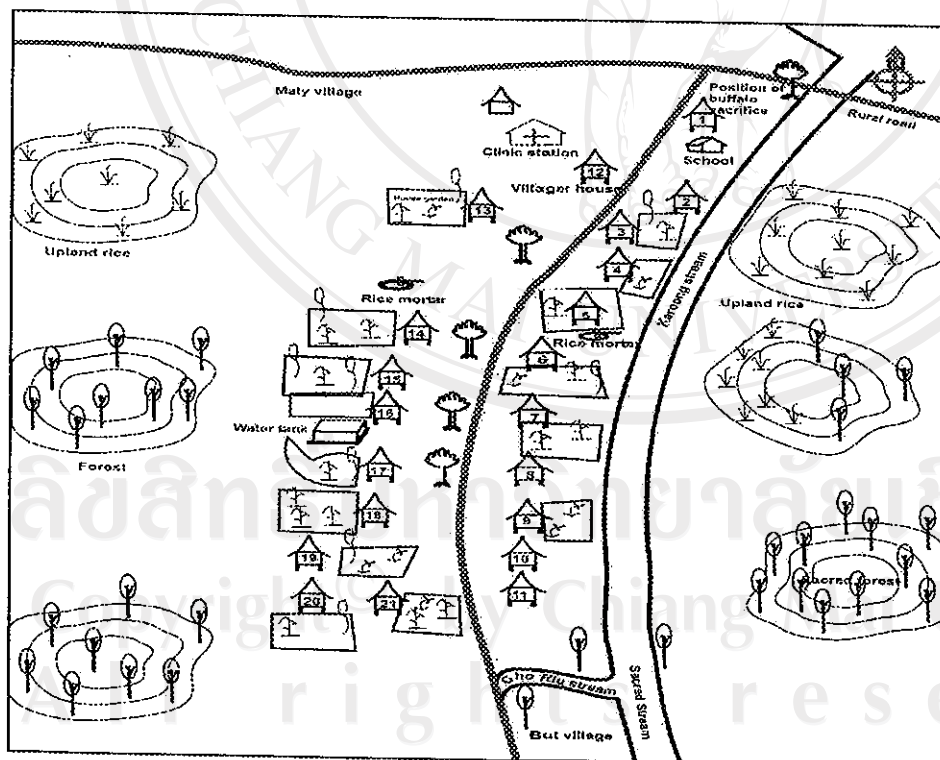


Figure 5.2 Map of Caroong village

In the 1990s, logging increased the area of baren hill in Thuong Trach commune. Natural disasters and diseases (e.g. malaria and diarrhea) occurred for Caroong villagers. For instance, draught led to crop failure which caused a serious famine for the Makong people in 1999. During this period, villagers could not expand their production because forestland was managed by the authorities. Their difficulties increased when the Phong Nha Natural Reserve management board strengthened forest protection regulations. They have strictly prohibited any encroachment on the forest.

5.2 Authorities' Views of the Makong People

As mentioned elsewhere, Thuong Trach is a border commune located in Phong Nha-Ke Bang national park; the local community is under the management of many different state units such as border police, district security forces, district armed forces, and district officials assigned to work in Thuong Trach commune. Those agencies are assigned to help develop the Makong. They thus have influential roles in the Makong community. However, their degree of influence on the Makong people depends on their views toward the Makong people. I found that state officials working in Thuong Trach area often referred to the Makong people in my interviews as culturally backward and lacking capacity.

A 'Backward Culture'

Most of authorities working in Thuong Trach area have similar views about the Makong people. A district security official who has worked in Thuong Trach almost ten years contends that

People here are very backward and not willing to learn. The government has invested a lot of money to improve their life but they have still kept their traditional living styles. They do not want to change according to the state programs. For instance, a lot of forest trees and fruit trees were provided in 1998 but they did not grow and take care of them carefully. The cow support program is another case. When they were provided cows, some families did not care that they can improve their income from raising the cow but killed them for meat and exchanged wine to drink. Those who still raise them do not want to construct breeding facilities. They let cattle wander dirtily though the district and commune authorities have taught them how to raise animals several times... The Makong people here have several superstitious customs and traditions. For instance, they do not want to change their house style because they are afraid that their ancestors will get angry. Or when they

are sick, they often worship the spirits rather than getting a cure at the clinic station. The backward customs are also expressed through their weddings. Normally, the bride's family raises very high price and the groom's family bargains as in the market. The higher price of the bride is, the more it indicates her value. However, after the wedding, the woman has to work very hard for her husband's family. In many cases, the wives work as slaves. A wife can leave her husband's house if she cannot tolerate it, with a condition that she has to return enough the wedding presents to her husband's family... Villagers here do not have sentiments like lowlanders. If a mother dies, her newborn baby will be buried together with her. Nobody wants to take care of the baby even though she/he is their relative. In daily life, men are very lazy; they drink the whole day while women work very hard. Men can go out for several days in high season and do not pay attention to their family.

(A 39-year-old male official, Nov 2003)

This official was attempting to point out evidence of the backwardness of the Makong people. However, he has used the cultural lens of lowland Kinh to look at the Makong culture in this remote mountainous area. He has never put himself in the shoes of the Makong people to understand why they have not implemented what the Kinh officials advised them. For instance, the house and its inside arrangement reflects their culture, beliefs and religion; when local people build a house, they have to perform several traditional rituals. State officials have not recognized the ceremonial importance of this practice; they just build houses to provide villagers as a part of forest protection program as a way to sedentarize people. As a result, villagers did not feel spiritually safe and happy in houses provided by the state, so they were left unused. Local people contended that their ancestor's spirits could not come to live with them in a house built without performing traditional rituals.

In the case of animal husbandry, the officials do not understand that in their current condition, the Makong people do not have enough food to feed cattle. If they fence the cattle in breeding facilities, cattle will not have sufficient food to survive and grow.

After expressing a negative perception about the Makong culture, the official claimed that Makong men are lazy while Makong women work hard. In fact, this judgment is correct in some cases, but not all families. In a traditional Makong family, activities are divided appropriately. Men do heavy work such as slashing and burning. Meanwhile, women do light work as weeding rice and corn. However, this division of labor does not mean that they do not help each other. Women also help their husbands to cut trees, and men help their wives weed grass. This is seen when

Makong couples go to the field together. In addition, we can see several Makong men pounding rice, caring for children and cooking.

The lowland officials' lack of understanding of local culture has caused several problems. They have interfered in relationships within traditional Makong families and violated the cultural practices of the whole community. In some cases, lowland officials forced Makong women to drink and sing even though singing is taboo for married Makong women. The Makong believe that when a married woman sings, she rouses a quiet space of her husband's ancestors, which is disrespectful to them. In addition, it is behaving as if she wants to attract men's attention, which is also taboo for a married woman. Consequently, one of the Makong women who worked as a communal official was accused by her husband of being unfaithful and immoral after she sang a song in a meeting with government officials. He decided to divorce her because he could not accept a wife who violated the taboos of a Makong woman.

The authorities, especially lowland officials, contend that the Makong taboo on singing is ridiculous and should be changed. After the above incident took place, instead of apologizing for forcing the wife to violate the traditional rules, the officials used their position to frighten the husband. They fined the husband for beating his wife and disciplined him as a Party member. Acting on the perception that the local people's culture and tradition is backward, lowland officials have interfered inappropriately in the traditional life of the Makong community.

'Lack of Capacity'

Criticizing the culture of the Makong people, a district recruiting official who has worked in Thuong Trach commune complained that

Working with the Makong is difficult because they cannot distinguish lowland traders and lowland officials. They always say that state cadres are not good but in fact, they refer to lowland traders. When we work with village authorities, they cannot report the situation. They just say that they do not know or do not remember what happens. However, I think they do not really work. Many times, we have intimidated them by saying that 'if you can not report the situation of your village, you can not receive salary from the government'. Generally, it is very difficult to implement activities in this area.

(A male official, 15 Dec 2003).

This official complained that the Makong people are poorly educated and unaware of the world around them. He said that villagers are lazy and incapable of completing state work. According to him, village leaders do not even know how to report the situation of their village in the commune's meetings. Meanwhile, Makong villagers do not know the difference between traders and state officials. In reality, several state cadres have taken advantage of their positions to collaborate with traders and loggers to exploit forest products. Villagers are aware of this reality and they do not want to cooperate with state agencies. They do not distinguish between traders and state officials because they perceive behaviors of these actors are the same.

The authorities contended that Drum Beating Ceremony was an interesting cultural event that should be preserved. The Party Secretary of the Thuong Trach commune, an ethnic Kinh and the commune's Chairman, an ethnic Muong contended that the Makong people have insufficient capacity to celebrate the ceremony. They claimed that the current *Dung Dzang* was an old alcoholic; so, he was unable to celebrate the ceremony. Therefore, the communal authorities, under the consultancy of district officials, became involved in organizing the Drum Beating Ceremony.

However, if it is true that the Makong people are backward and lack of capacity, I wonder how the Makong can have maintained their traditional values up to now. For instance, the Makong experienced great difficulties during the American war. They lacked everything and did not have enough food to eat because they could not farm. Their area was daily bombed by the Americans. Yet, the Drum Beating Ceremony was still celebrated during the war period.

The practice shows that the authorities not only view the cultural practice of the Makong people ethnocentrically but also try to change their economic life. The authorities see traditional shifting cultivation of the Makong as primitive and destructive toward the forest. For instance, a forest conservation official stated that the Makong people destroyed more forest than the Arem people who have lived in a nearby commune. That official contended that the Makong have received less training than the Arem; so, they have less forest conservation awareness than the Arem people do. Moreover, according to him, the Makong are less controlled by the national park because their villages are located far from the forest conservation station

of the national park. Therefore, the authorities have attempted to stop the Makong's traditional cultivation. They have told the Makong people to cultivate wet rice and set up gardens, though the geological conditions of the Thuong Trach area make it very difficult to do so.

The authorities have also strengthened measures to control the Makong people. The current Party Secretary of the Thuong Trach commune has set up new coercive regulations to force local people to implement state programs. He contends that the Makong people are very afraid of being fined; so financial punishment is the best way to force them to implement state law and policies. For instance, those who slash and burn forests in defined protected areas will be fined at least one million Vietnamese dong. Violators of community's security are also fined money and labor in according to level of violation. Besides, since this official has taken up been in charge of the commune, women have been mobilized to work in the commune administrative mechanism in addition to men. Participation of both local men and women in social work is good. However, how to involve them and how to behave with them is another problem altogether.

5.3 Policy Practice in Caroong village

One of ideological goals of the Vietnamese government is to develop an equal and united Vietnamese society. Resolution of the Communist Party Politburo indicates that "all ethnic groups who are living in Viet Nam have equal rights and duties to help each other to resist against the foreign aggression and develop the country" (Party Document on ethnic policies 1978 cited in Dang 1996: 11). After the Northern Viet Nam gained its independence, President Ho Chi Minh in the 11th Meeting of First National Assembly declared "our country is a unified nation of different ethnic groups. All ethnic groups in Viet Nam have the equal rights and duties. Our national policy aims to an equal society and to help each other to reach a socialist country" (loc.cit. p.13). The ethnic policy was re-stated in the Third Assembly Congress that "the Party and the State need to develop a long-term and wholly economic and cultural development plan for mountainous areas... It is very necessary to stimulate mountainous areas to develop as same as the lowland areas, the

ethnic minorities catch up to the majority...". In the Fourth and Fifth Assembly Congress, the government also determined that the key issue of national ethnic policy is implemented equally among ethnic groups, and help each other to develop. In order to carry out the above policy, it is necessary to improve economic and cultural life of ethnic minority communities. Generally, the Vietnamese national policies toward ethnic minority people are very positive. The government's ideology is to construct an equal society in which all citizens have equal rights and duties. However, the Kinh majority also have discriminatory and paternalistic attitudes toward the ethnic minorities. Because ethnic minority peoples are seen as inferior, the majority has responsibility to help them, which represents the imposition of policy on the minority people.

The imposition is quite clear in Resolution 71 issued by the Politburo on February 23, 1963. It indicated clearly that mountainous development could be considered to have taken place only when the traditional agricultural system and "backward" living style has been transformed. Shifting cultivation should be stopped and cash crops should be introduced into the communities. The Resolution identifies that

To construct mountainous areas into new agricultural regions, changing the subsistence economy to multi-cash crop economy, continuously improving the people's life. Resettlement is an urgent task that state departments need to promote as soon as possible.

(Resolution 71 on Feb 23 1963, cited in Dang 1996:14)

The Party and the Government have also issued policies related to the management of mountainous resources. Forest conservation, reforestation and forestland allocation programs have greatly affected the traditional life of the mountainous communities.

In Caroong village, specifically the Makong people have also been influenced by both national ethnic policy and forest management policy. In the 1960s, there were several intervention programs of the state into Caroong village. A Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization program (FCSP) was implemented in 1968 by the provincial and district authority. Caroong village was officially recognized as an administrative unit of Thuong Trach commune.

Under the FCSP, Caroong villagers were mobilized to implement agricultural production collectively. The cooperative system, based on the Cooperative Establishment Act (38/CP dated on March 12, 1968) and explained as a form of reciprocal labor, was also introduced in Thuong Trach commune. Each village was set up in a reciprocal labor group. However, the Makong villagers in Caroong village reported that the cooperative mechanism did not help them. Instead, it caused problems and conflict among villagers. The quantity of rice distributed to households was insufficient because the majority was diverted to the front lines. The inequality in the cooperative system created discontentment among Makong villagers. The cooperative system operated only three years into the increasingly tense war. Early in the 1970s, most of Makong villagers in Thuong Trach commune abandoned their villages and lived in caves where they were protected from bombings. When the war ended, the provincial and district authorities in combination with the border police coaxed Makong people back to their villages and reorganized the Thuong Trach commune as well as its village administrative system. The Resettlement program granted resettled households production instruments, blankets, mosquito nets and rice. Up to the year 2000, each Caroong household was also provided a cow and a goat as a means to improve the resettled life.

Since 1986, when the Phong Nha forest was declared a protected area, the province came up with several laws to promote forest preservation. The district authorities have been assigned to implement programs to reduce shifting cultivation. In 1995, they implemented a credit program supporting fruit tree orchards as a replacement for traditional shifting cultivation. No orchards were actually planted, but all Caroong households were in debt because none of them could return the loan. The Makong people complained that the communal and district authorities forced them to grow fruit trees even though they were not acquainted with gardening.

In 1998, the authorities carried out a reforestation project in Caroong village territory. Lowlanders were hired to plant trees, presumably because they realized a failure from the fruit tree project that the Makong did not know how to grow trees. This project was also failed because nobody took care of the reforested area. The Makong villagers saw no reason to protect the forest from animal destruction because

the project had excluded them from the resource and clearly communicated that forest was no longer their property, but that of the state'.

In the same year, Thuong Trach was listed as one of the project sites of Program 135 which aims to “improve material and spiritual life of ethnic groups in remote and mountainous area; provide opportunities for these rural areas to alleviate poverty and backwardness to catch up the national development; contribute to the social and national security” (Decision 135, 1998/QD-TTg). A road to the commune, a school, a clinic station, a communal office was built; and rice, cows and goats were given to each Makong household. However, the benefits are dubious. The clinic station has not been used though it was built a year ago. Children have been studying in very poor classrooms. The road is still in the process of construction.

Similar to the 1995 project, the Program 135, in cooperation with the border police, also provided fruit trees for all villages in Thuong Trach commune in an attempt to transform the upland rice economy. However, like the credit project in 1995, this project failed. In Caroong village, all households planted the fruit trees but they did not tend them. Caroong villagers explained that their time was better spent on their rice cultivation than caring for fruit trees because their benefit was both uncertain and insufficient for survival. The Makong villagers did not think that fruit trees would help to improve their income. They planted them because the officials imposed upon them.

Indeed, in the current context of the Thuong Trach area, it is very difficult to guarantee that fruit trees are a good solution to replace upland rice, since there has not been a market for such products. Moreover, for the Makong, upland rice is integrated with their life, their culture and their belief system; so, to introduce a new crop involving new farming techniques, the authorities should involve more participation of the Makong people. In addition, they should transfer technical trainings on the new crops.

Both border police and district authorities are involved in forest management in Thuong Trach commune. The border police are in charge of the eight frontier villages and the district manages the remaining areas, including Caroong village. However, local authorities and villagers did not know exactly where protected areas

were. Different persons told me different information about the protected areas. According to the commune forester, the district allocated 2000 ha to Caroong village for protection. However, the commune Chairman said that the district just verbally allocated 500 hectares to the border police and 500 hectares to the Commune People's Committee for protection. This confusion indicates that even local authorities do not know exactly where the protected area is.

However, the Chairman of the commune said that though the boundary assigned by the district is not clear, the commune has entrusted forest protection on villagers according to their traditional boundary. Villagers are ordered to stop slashing and burning mature forest for their farming. The communal authorities set up regulations to enforce forest protection upon the villages. If any member of a village violates the regulations, the village leader is fined 200,000 dong and his monthly salary will be suspended. Anyone who contracts with outsiders to exploit timber in restricted areas will be fined 200,000 dong. Nevertheless, such regulations have not yet been effective in improving the forest cover in Thuong Trach area. Several lowland loggers and hunters continue to illegally exploit forest products in this area. This practice is beyond the control of the Makong villagers as well as communal authorities. According to a forester, there are around 100 professional forest exploiters (hunters, loggers and rattan collectors) encroaching upon the forest everyday.

In 2002, the district authorities made the commune to set up local forest protection teams at the village level. Caroong village recruited seven men¹² as member of the team responsible for informing the authorities and stopping anyone destroying the forest. In reality, this strategy has been ineffective, as explained by the vice-leader of Caroong village:

"We could not do anything to stop illegal exploiters because they have permission letters from state agencies, if we seriously do our forest protection we may receive unexpected punishments from those who provided them because they already ate money for that".

(Vice leader of Caroong village, Nov 30 2003)

¹² Dinh Heng, Dinh Hung, Dinh Eng, Dinh Ca, Dinh Uon, Dinh Pheng and Dinh Kham.

He thought that all problems in his village were caused by the Kinh lowlanders (both state agencies and traders). He feels powerless to change the current situation because state officials “eat money” of traders and forest exploiters. He complains that the village-level forest protection team is assigned to work as forest protectors, but they do not have any power to actually arrest illegal loggers. The formation of forest protection teams has created conflicts in the village because several households have been working with lowland traders and loggers. Meanwhile, some villagers assume that the forest protection team did not work because they were corrupted by the loggers. In general, members of the forest protection team have been pressured by both the authorities and villagers. Therefore, most of them want to withdraw from this work.

Members of forest protection team are not provided with enough power to work, and they are even intimidated by loggers if they try to report them to the authorities. On a November 2003 morning, an agitated middle-aged Makong man arrived from a neighboring village to talk with Mr. Dieu, the commune forester. The first sentence he said to Mr. Dieu was “I do not want to work as a forest protector anymore. I am so frightened. They said they will burn my field and poison my children with rat poison”. He repeated several times that he must quit the forest protection team for his family’s security. This indicates that Makong villagers are facing a dilemma; on one hand, they know the importance of forest protection; on the other hand, they feel unsafe if they practice it. Even the commune forester wants to withdraw from his current work because he is unable to do his job well. He is pressured by different powerful forces including both illegal exploiters and state officials. He told me “I have tried to stop illegal loggers but authorities and more powerful agencies provide permits with them. So there is nothing I can do”.

Indeed, looking more closely at the involvement of state agencies, it seems that there is inadequate cooperation among the different agencies working in this area. For instance, while the District Forestry Department and the National Park unit attempted to stop illegal encroachment, border police still allowed lowland loggers to enter the forest. Their rule is that any encroachment must be registered for a 10,000 VN dongs fee. People recognized the non-cooperation of different state agencies.

The commune forester revealed to me that “in several cases, border police informed loggers when the state foresters and commune authority planned to arrest illegal forest exploitation”. He was very disappointed and considered to stop working as a forester.

A wild animal trapper told me that most of them had to “make law” for themselves by bribing state officials. Otherwise, they risk losing all products harvested from the forest and possible arrest. Their continued existence in this area depends very much on their relationships with state official and their bribes.

The above practice shows that the authorities control the forest management for their own interest rather than for villagers. Indeed, the implementation of forest management programs has not involved traditional institutions of the Makong people. The presence of state agencies has hidden the presence of local people. This has undermined forest protection efforts. Villagers have perceived that forest protection is not their responsibility but state’s. They have ignored state policies on forest management, and some even engage in exploitation. Those involved in official work wanted to withdraw from their position, explaining that it was for their own security.

5.4 Marginalization of the Makong People in Caroong village

Authorities’ view of the Makong and the policy practices show that state policies selectively exclude the traditional practices of the Makong people. It is clear that the state has attempted to stop shifting cultivation and to manipulate ritual practices of the Makong people. As discussed in Chapter IV, forest is a cultural landscape of the Makong people. It is a space where the Makong construct their identity. They see their ancestral history in the forest landscape. Most of their daily activities in the forest are related to their spiritual beliefs. For this reason, I would argue that the authorities’ intervention of ritual practices like the Drum Beating Ceremony is a way to control over the forest ideologically. When the authorities can redefine the spiritual life of the Makong people, they can manage the Makong’s activities. In this case, in order to stop shifting cultivation and to control the forest, the state authorities must alter the spiritual practices of the Makong people.

This strategy has marginalized the local people. The marginalization is a consequence from the process of coercive control over their physical world and the state's ideological intervention of their spiritual world.

5.4.1 State Coercive Control over Forest Use of the Makong People

When the Phong Nha – Ke Bang forest was declared a protected area, it was the state policy to include local communities in forest management. They have theoretically involved local people in forest protection by providing rice and money. Since 1998, Thuong Trach villagers have received rice twice annually that is understood as a payment for their forest protection efforts. In reality, this is a way to exclude people from forest access because the state legitimizes their policy prohibiting traditional shifting cultivation with these payments. It is thought that when villagers receive material supports from the state, they would discontinue the traditional shifting cultivation that is perceived as a major contributing factor in forest destruction. However, the Makong people's life is connected with forest and shifting cultivation is a part of their culture. It is impossible for them to stop shifting cultivation. Ignoring the Makong practice, the State territorializes the forest area and forbids any human activity. The 72,571 hectares of the Thuong Trach commune has been classified into different types of land. 51,471 hectares is demarcated as core zone of the national park, of which 44,787 hectares is located in the strict protection number one zone; 660 hectares is identified as strict protection number two zone; and 6,024 hectares is planned as ecological restoration zone (Quang Binh People's Committee 2002). Through this classification, the state has excluded the Makong from access to two-thirds of their traditional area. The remaining 21,100 hectares is planned as a buffer zone. However, according to the buffer zone policy, forest protection must be prioritized in that area. As of 2002, the Resettlement Program and Border Police have implemented forest protection on nearly 5,000 hectares. Cultivation area is limited to about 255 hectares (QBMER 2002). Generally, living space of the Makong has also been reduced. In spite of these regulations, Makong villagers have still maintained their traditional shifting cultivation for their own survival. It is significant for their not only material survival but also for their spiritual

life. The Makong people continue to practice their shifting cultivation outside the designated area, but their legal rights to access the resources are not recognized. Ironically, they have become illegal users on their own forest.

5.4.2 The Drum Beating Ceremony as the State Manipulation of Cultural Practice

Preservation of the cultural diversity is one of the important policies that the Vietnamese government has propagated to the whole country. This is a strategy to strengthen inter-ethnic relationships and help develop all ethnic groups in the country. However, practice of cultural preservation has affected local beliefs and traditional values. State officials have controlled the form and meaning of traditional rituals, leading to the marginalization of local people from their cultural practices. In this section, I use the Drum Beating Ceremony to illustrate the state's intervention and manipulation of the spiritual world of the Makong people.

The Drum Beating Ceremony is one of the Makong community's most important rituals, through which they express their belief in god and the spirits. Practicing this ceremony, the Makong people express their gratitude to their God and spirits to bless them in production, and their well-being. In addition, they bless for a lucky new year. The ceremony is traditionally organized by the *Dung Dzang*, a land manager of the Makong territory. Makong people from all Makong clans have to participate in the ceremony and contribute offerings. Generally, the Drum Beating Ceremony is considered a sacred ritual for the Makong people, and the authorities want to conserve.

In order to show their support of the Drum Beating Ceremony, the District and Province authorities assigned a delegation including representatives of several district departments¹³ to participate in this ceremony. Because that was the first time the provincial and district representatives participated in a cultural activity in Thuong Trach commune, the local authorities were very nervous on how to impress them.

¹³ The delegation includes Head of Culture and Information Department, Head of Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization Department, Head of the Organizing Office of the District People Committee, Head of the Father Land and Front department and some other officials.

Especially, lowland Kinh officials who were assigned by the district to work in Thuong Trach wanted to show the delegation their influence on the 'backward' Makong people. Therefore, they tried to interfere into the celebration of the ceremony. Before the Drum Beating Ceremony, local officials, village leaders, and the *Dung Dzang* were called for a meeting to discuss how the ceremony should be organized. I had no opportunity to participate in the meeting nor observe nor listen to their discussion. But later, I was told that the commune officials had instructed the Makong people how to celebrate their own ceremony. They perhaps contended that the Makong people did not have enough capacity to organize successfully their Drum Beating Ceremony. The intervention of state officials into the cultural life of the Makong people took place quite clearly during the ceremony.

When I arrived in the village on the afternoon of January 15th, I saw a group of border police in uniform walking through Caroong village toward the village central ground where the annual Drum Beating Ceremony would be held. Their task was to keep security during the ceremony.

I also met a delegation of district officials whose presence seemed to be deemed as prestigious for the ceremony. Villagers told me that this was the first time the district authorities traveled such a long distance to spend their 'precious' time participating in a local festival. The district delegation gave 10 liters of wine, a big box of candy, a box of biscuits, and some packages of cigarettes to the ceremony. The *Dung Dzang* and Makong villagers had to prepare several dishes of wild animal meat and local rice wine in order to express their gratitude to the gifts and their presence at the ceremony.

In the *Dung Dzang*'s house, three big wine jars were opened to honor the three high-ranking officials of the delegation. The guesses drank and insisted all participants to drink with them. Under those circumstances, people could not refuse. After they enjoyed the drink and foods, they returned to the commune's office. The *Dung Dzang* who drank to please the authorities was so drunk that he could not perform the rituals in time in the next morning. Usually, he had to begin the ritual at 02:00 AM to invite their God and ancestral spirits to join the Drum Beating Ceremony and ask for a permission to harvest natural resources. However, in this time, he could

not perform this ritual until 5:00 AM after he was able to slowly wake up. Then his son and some villagers started fishing at the sacred stream to catch fish for the ceremony. I wondered then that whether the Makong people felt satisfied with the delay of ritual practicing because they were very much concerned about auspicious time in performing rituals. They believe that if they do something at an inauspicious time, they will face bad luck or difficulties.

During the whole morning, it was raining and cold. Most villagers stayed in their houses. I perceived no festive atmosphere. The *Dung Dzang* could do nothing but sleep, abandoning his traditional role of an organizer of the ceremony. His oldest daughter just shook her head when asked where her father was, as if she did not want to talk about him. She tersely answered "he's sleeping, he's drunk". Only few young men were behind in gathering some materials, such as bamboo and palm leaves to build a temporary stage for the ceremony, while the second son of the *Dung Dzang* was repairing the drum in the village ground under the curious scrutiny of children.

At noon, the commune authority, border police and district authorities returned to Caroong village. They seemed to be bored by the quiet atmosphere; so, they gathered in the clinic station to play cards. At 4:00 PM, some of them returned the village, asked villagers to hang a flag and a banner with a sentence "Welcome to the Drum Beating Ceremony". They then connected light to a generator symbolizing modernity. Traditionally, the Makong people lit the ceremony with firelight and moonlight.

The ceremony started at 7:00 PM after the drum was hung on two columns on the stage. I had heard from villagers that the *Dung Dzang* was traditionally the person who opened the ceremony. This time, one of the commune officials took control of the stage and played master of ceremonies. Instead of introducing the *Dung Dzang* to perform the ritual as is traditionally the case, he introduced commune leader and representatives of district departments, who gave speeches. Remarkably, most of speeches mentioned that slash and burn cultivation destroyed the forest, and that Makong villagers were urged to cooperate in forest protection by stopping this practice. This clearly showed that the spiritual space of the Makong people was threatened. It was officialized to propagate state policies.

After the speeches of the Party Secretary of the commune, representatives of district, the border police, and head of commune police, the *Dung Dzang* and two other assistants practiced the traditional rituals. One of them was leader of the original clan of the *Dung Dzang*¹⁴ (Mang Coong clan), and the other was leader of Cu Sau clan, who was seen as assistant of the *Dung Dzang*. Six food trays of offerings including a half boiled chicken, 2 grilled fishes, 1 bowl of boiled banana flower, some boiled rattan shoots, and 1 bowl of wine were prepared. Together with six trays of offering were six jars of wine. The *Dung Dzang* and his two assistants began chanting and dancing, which was crucial for the ritual. I was told that their incantations prayed for good crops, good health, a peaceful life, etc. After making offerings to the God and spirits, the worshippers invited adult to drink wine. One jar was used to specifically for women. While elderly people were drinking jar wine, children and young boys and girls beat drums. At that moment, it seemed that there was no gap between boys and girls and that was also an opportunity for young people to express themselves and to learn first hand their cultural practice.

The ceremony would have traditionally lasted until noon the next day, but because the district officials wanted to go back their home early, the commune authorities asked the *Dung Dzang* to practice a closing ritual at 7:00 AM. It is ironic that the purpose of the closing ritual is to thank the spirits for their participation and see them off, but the authorities perceived this as a ritual to see off the official delegation.

The intervention of the state in traditional ritual of the local community had unexpected impacts. Firstly, discrimination and doubt appeared among Makong households¹⁵. Some Makong villagers contended that the *Dung Dzang*'s family was financially supported by the authorities and should thus pay for the whole ceremony. Different from previous years, very few people participated in this year Drum Beating Ceremony. Secondly, the prestige of the *Dung Dzang* decreased. He lost his face

¹⁴ It is said that position of the *Dung Dzang* (traditional land manager) belonged to another clan called the Mangcoong. However, the Mangcoong clan transferred the power to manage land and nature to the Sel clan to express their gratitude when one of their young men saved their village and got married with an ugly and seriously sick daughter of the Mangcoong clan. Therefore, the Sel clan (Mr. Keo) must invite members of the Mangcoong clan to participate in the rituals to show their memory to the ancestors.

¹⁵ See more in "Marginalization of the Makong people"

because he was drunk during the whole ceremony. His daughter said that he has been an alcoholic for just a few years. He was too drunk during the rituals. Nevertheless, nobody asked why the *Dung Dzang* changed his behavior. In his case, he could not decide how to practice traditional rituals of his community though he is a traditional leader of the Makong community. The dominance of lowland Kinh has constrained his traditional role in the community. The ritual practice of the Makong people has been de-traditionalized and the spiritual space of the Makong people has been de-spiritualized.

Process of marginalization of the Makong people is not only expressed through the exclusion of forestland rights and ritual practice but also through changes in local institutions and traditional morality. The Makong traditional society is ruled and managed by their own local institutions and traditional morality. However, the domination by the Kinh culture and state law has changed these practices. In the next part of this chapter, I discuss how local institutions and traditional morality of the Makong people are influenced.

5.4.3 Changes in the Makong Traditional Institutions

Under the intervention of Kinh lowland forces, the role of the traditional institutions seems to be unclear. The *Dung Dzang* has had his traditional position undermined by the perception about cultural preservation policy of the state; and as a consequence, he has marginalized himself by drinking wine. He is no longer respected by his children. His youngest son used to fight against him when he scolded him for his vagabond ways. His daughter often complained that he drank too much and said that if he did not stop drinking, she would not help him face his problems. At the community level, his voice became less powerful. His villagers even speculated that he received a lot of presents from the authorities that he did not share with other people.

Since the presence of state agencies has been felt in the commune, the role of *Dung Dzang* and village elders have gradually decreased. When interviewed about the role of the *Dung Dzang*, most of villagers contended “*Dung Dzang* had a role as a

founder of the community. In the past, when there was not a country, there was not a state to lead, *Dung Dzang* organized the Makong together and managed them". In addition, he was considered the most powerful person in the community. He solved problems related to resource use and management in Thuong Trach area.

However, his role has currently not been recognized clearly and he is no longer a person who can deal with or control what happens in his community. For conflicts within the Makong community, *Dung Dzang* is still able to use traditional regulations to solve. But he has no voice in activities related to outsiders.

Two cases that I observed during my time in the village will illustrate this argument. In the first case, villagers used collective power to resist a lowland trader who had been given permission by the commune authority to build a shop. After hearing of the decision, villagers called for a meeting by themselves and decided not to accept the lowland trader into the village. They also developed regulations to limit activities of lowlanders in the community.

Nevertheless, when a villager wants to move to another village, before asking permission from villagers of the destination, he/she must consult the *Dung Dzang*. For instance, Mr. Dinh Tua's family in Cu Ton village was isolated by other villagers after his son created an un-redeemed relationship with one woman in the village. His family was isolated by Cu Ton villagers. Being ashamed and uneasy to live in that situation, Mr. Tua decided to move to another village. However, I heard that the *Dung Dzang* did not agree because Mr. Tua's family had not practiced rituals to atone for his son's mistake. The *Dung Dzang* explained that a person who violated a taboo but did not want to correct the mistake would not be accepted by the Makong community.

However, *Dung Dzang* has also changed his view about his role. He always says "land and forest now belong to the state and party who have knowledge to manage it well. We villagers should follow what the state and the party requires us to do". It is not surprising when he raised this opinion. It is because he used to be a commune Chairman and often proudly tells outsiders that he was recognized as a forty-year old party member.

Similarly, the role of village elders has become invisible in the current Makong society. Perceptions of the role of elderly people have also changed. Some villagers contend that village elders have withdrawn from state work by themselves. However, other people think that they are ignored by state officials. A male forester in Thuong Trach said that “village elders are now like puppets because they are invited in official village meeting but they do not have any influence on the state policy implementation” (interview dated Nov 16, 2003). Using the same image as the forester, a young Makong man also used the term “puppet” to refer to elderly people in the current society. He is said that they are also invited to meetings but authorities decide everything. A middle-aged Makong man also said that “elders are invited to participate in official meetings but their voice has no meaning”.

However, some old and middle-aged people contradicted the above opinions. They contended that

“Authorities manage activities in the village, and work as arbitrators for villagers. But elderly people are those who decide activities related to tradition and customs. Even village security also needs the involvement of the elders”

A 55 year-old male informant, , Nov 14, 2003).

Indeed, I observed that elderly people remain very influential in some cases. In official meetings, they appear to be silent but they would have reacted if issues related to the existence of their community’s culture. For instance, a commune plan designed by the district officials in 2002 called for the construction of a commune clinic station on an area where there was a big hundred years old tree. It means that the tree would be cut to clear a space for the construction. Elderly people did not agree because they saw the tree as a relic of their ancestors. They used a story about the origin of the tree to protect it. They argued that the tree is the heritage of the Makong ancestors; therefore, it is impossible to cut the tree. I participated in two village meetings. The first meeting discussed selection of representatives of Commune People Council. Elders kept quiet during an intense argument among families who want to promote their children to the post. In the second meeting, villagers discussed whether they should allow a lowlander to construct a house in their village. The atmosphere was different that the first time I participated. While village leaders seemed to agree with the request of the lowlander, old people strongly

protested. They argued that if lowland traders lived for a long time in their village, it would be difficult to protect their forest because the lowland trader's main objective was money. They would probably establish a station for forest exploitation. Moreover, the lifestyle of lowlanders is different from the Makong's; they may drink, gamble and fight each other, which would all have negative impacts upon the security of the village and the young Makong generation.

An old Makong man said that before the establishment of state administrative system in his village, all issues were managed by the village elders and clan leaders or by *Dung Dzang* if village level could not deal with. He said that village elders were those who had experience and prestige in the village. Though they were not formally elected as in the modern system, their voice was very powerful in the village. "Village elders have traditionally had important role of people's life including solving conflicts, witnessing for weddings, celebrating ceremonies, educating young children about the traditions and customs of the Makong community, etc", a middle-aged man commented.

Though old people have not accepted their changed role in the community, it is still a challenge for this traditional institution when young people have different point of view from the old people. Young Makong people tend to apply the state law system rather than the traditional system, especially when the presence of lowlanders and state agencies is part of their daily life. I wonder whether the future Makong community will be able to preserve their traditional culture, or whether they will be acculturated to the majority Kinh culture. This issue also concerns the Makong elders.

Another remarkable issue is the marginality of traditional regulations in resource use and management. The Makong people have had a close relationship with nature; their life depends on nature; they thus have a strong belief in natural spirits that regulates their morality of natural resource use. Their way of farming and hunting is also related to their religious beliefs. Villagers never slash and burn in sacred forest because that is where spirits live. Or they believe that if they kill a tiger, their family members will die. This means that the Makong people have constructed traditional rules to control forest resource use, even though outsiders think that the Makong people destroy the forest. Traditional forest management is also reflected

through a practice of limiting a person to forest resources in the area of his/her village only; if he/she encroached on the areas belonging to other villages, he/she would be fined by community committee of those villages. Villagers contend that though there was no help from authorities in the past, nobody violated the traditional regulations of the community and forest was very well protected.

However, when the Kinh people appeared in Thuong Trach commune, and the state strengthened the implementation of state law, the situation seemed to get worse; the forest became more and more degraded and traditional regulations seem not to be as effective as before. Nowadays people act based on the state law more than traditional rules of the community. In addition, the impact of market economy and prohibition of shifting cultivation also pushed several Makong people to exploit more forest products for cash.

Some Makong people claim that they are now living in a new context in which their village and community are controlled by state authorities. They have to follow state law and policies; they have to follow direction of the Party. In addition, they recognize that the efficacy of their traditional regulation system has decreased.

Several older villagers contended that since they were resettled their villages in mid the 1980s after the war, state law has been introduced into their community, and traditional rules of their village have not been strictly implemented. People are no longer willing to help each other; the role of village elders is no longer respected and recognized. Because of the authorities' criteria, village leaders must be able to read and write Vietnamese, village leaders are mostly young people nowadays. In addition, village leaders are normally appointed by the commune and district authorities rather than selected by villagers. Therefore, most of present village leaders are not as experienced and prestigious as the traditional elders were. Some people contend that the replacement of young people, in community management who do not understand the Makong culture sufficiently has voided the role of local institutions.

On the contrary, some other people contend that current young village leaders have worked as a bridge between villagers and the state. Traditional elders have still kept very important position vis-à-vis activities related to the traditions and customs

of the Makong community. Village security also needs the consultation of traditional elders. Indeed, the presence of state law system has influenced the traditional society of the Makong people very much but this does not mean that they have totally abandoned their customs and traditions. Villagers still practice their custom, for instance, that a household wanting to move to other village must practice a ritual asking permission of that village's elders and villagers. The head of household brings ritual offerings including two bottles of wine, a chicken and cigarettes to a village elder and present the reasons for his family's move. Then, the village elder calls all families in his village together to discuss whether they should accept a new household member. If they accept, the chicken will be killed as sacrifice to the spirits. Moreover, villagers have combined the modern law with traditional regulations in managing their community. For instance, they normally resolve community issues by traditional rule first, and submit to the authorities only if the problem cannot be solved.

5.4.4 Changes in Makong Traditional Morality

In their new context, the Makong people are not only marginalized from their cultural practices but also face changes in traditional morality between old generation and young generation. Traditionally, the Makong people's norms are expressed through everyday activities. Old people taught young generation the traditions, customs and cultural values of the community. They shared their experience in farming, how to choose a field, how to slash and burn, how to cultivate, how to hunt animals, etc. On the other side, young people respected and were willing to learn from their elders. As the head of Cooc village said,

Young people always consulted elderly people before doing something. There was hierarchic behavior among generations that expressed through their daily life and traditional regulations. For instance, young people often listened to old people in meetings. Young people should serve old people before starting a meal. Or in drinking, young people should drink after all old men are invited. However, some of the above ethic standards have changed. Young and old people have nowadays behaved equally.

(A 55 year-old village leader, Nov 14 2003)

Indeed, young people have tended to learn lowland styles and ignore traditional ways of living. Many young people perceive the traditional thinking of old people as backward, and try to behave differently. Moreover, the spread of rice

whisky leads to alcoholism of many people so their behavior is over controlled. Some old people lost the respect of the young generation after repeated drunkenness. A young man said that “old people sometimes ask young people for cash when they want to drink. In the past, young people never sit at the same level with elderly people but now they can drink with each other as friends”. Several young people seem ignore elderly people’s advice and opinions. They do not focus on farming and production but follow lowlanders to collect aloe wood, hunt precious animals, etc to earn cash. But due to limited living experience, they fall into the trap of the market economy. When they have money, they are invited to drink wine, to gamble, play karaoke, etc. As a result, the gap between young people and old people is grows wider.

Moreover, relationship between households in the Makong community nowadays is not as same as it was in the traditional Makong society. Makong villagers recalled that helping each other was one of traditions of the Makong. They could share their food with those who do not have anything to eat even when they were very poor and facing famine. Most families gathered to share labor, especially in house building or field slashing. People perceived that the task of taking care of or educating their neighbor’s children when their parents were busy or went to the field was their moral task. It was the Makong way of life, easily found in the Makong traditional community. Nevertheless, this practice has gradually changed. Several contended that the tradition of helping each other has caused a dependency on other people that was viewed as an obstacle of modern development effort. Many people did not want to work hard because they knew that they could ask for food from their neighbors and relatives. Nowadays, people can help each other in term of labor exchange, or they pay by cash, wine or cigarette. The practice of asking for food still exists but those who do this are not respected. Education and caring for children is now strictly their parents’ task. Neighbors are unconcerned even when children are naughty because they do not want to run into problems with parents who have different ways of educating their children.

Summary

In sum, Caroong villagers have experienced several different forest conservation, social management, economic development, etc. programs. They have also lived in the context of market intervention. Under the pressure of outside forces, and the ideological intervention of state authorities, the livelihoods of the Makong people are affected and their ritual practices have been de-redefined.

The first change is that their access rights to the forest changed when the Phong Nha – Ke Bang forest was declared a protected area. Villagers are limited to a certain region and taught how to protect the forest by lowlanders. They are not allowed to slash and burn in a forest with high trees but they have not been adequately supported to change their economic life. The authorities limited their production area to only 255 hectares. Meanwhile their population has been increasing; they have thus faced several problems in their production. Villagers contended that in the past they planted only 10 to 20 kg of rice seed but nowadays each family plants 30 to 70 kg. This means that rate of soil intervention is increasing but the allowed production area is decreasing. Soil erosion is the unavoidable result because it has insufficient time to recover and regenerate.

Secondly, the Makong people have partially changed their perception of the forest as a result of the exclusion from forest rights and the influence of market economy. Instead of viewing forest as property that they have responsibility to protect, the Makong people have seen the forest as state property. They have ignored illegal encroachment into the forest and have not cooperated with authorities to protect the forest from lowlanders' exploitation. As a consequence, lowland exploiters have gradually extracted the forest resources around their village.

In addition, their cultural landscape has changed. In the past, forest was considered the dwelling place of the spirits; everybody thus had a religious duty to protect forest. They constructed traditional regulations and rules emphasizing their beliefs about the forest. Nowadays, several young Makong people have different perceptions from their previous generation because they have been influenced by lowland traders and exploiters. They perceive forest as an economic source where they can earn money. In Caroong village, 100% of laboring-aged Makong people

harvest rattan, honey, wild animals to sell. About 70% of Makong men used to work with Kinh lowland traders to exploit aloe wood.

Thirdly, the role of local institutions has been reduced due to the presence of state agencies and their literacy criteria. Traditional regulations have been replaced by modern state law system. The traditional roles of *Dung Dzang* and village elders are ignored in the administrative mechanism of local authorities because the modern state laws are different from the local cultural context. Moreover, those involved in the state management system are required to have a certain literacy level while 81% of the Makong are illiterate in terms of Vietnamese (QBMER 2002). For this reason, the present commune and village leadership is judged by the state as incapable of meeting the current development standards of the entire society (loc.cit.). The state has involved the Makong people in the state management system at local level but the most of important positions at commune level are held by people from other ethnic groups. The Chairman of the commune is held by a Muong man. And the current Party's Commune Secretary is a Kinh. Additionally, several Kinh representatives of district departments are assigned to work part-time in the Commune People Committee to intensify policy implementation in the commune.