

CHAPTER VI

DYNAMICS OF LOCAL RESPONSES IN EVERYDAY PRACTICES OF THE MAKONG IN CAROONG VILLAGE

The preceding chapter provided the cultural and political context in which the Makong people have lived. State policies related to natural resource management, economic development, and cultural conservation have had unexpected impacts upon local communities. They have been marginalized not only from their daily livelihood but also their cultural practices. How have the Makong people responded to this situation?

To answer the above question, this chapter firstly discusses the Makong views of the state officials and programs to understand the relationship between the Makong people and state authorities. Secondly, this chapter analyzes how the Makong villagers respond to their marginalization. The Makong people find some solutions to strengthen their livelihoods and to sustain their identity. The chapter focuses on how the Makong people adapt their livelihood strategies and how this is reflected in their spiritual rituals.

6.1 Local Perception about the State Officials

Thuong Trach commune has been classified as one of the most difficult communes of Area 3¹⁶ in according to the classification of the Committee for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Area (CEMMA) in 1998 (Dao 2003). In addition, being located in a remote frontier and protected area, Thuong Trach has received several

¹⁶ - Area 1 is lowland area where there has been equipped adequately infrastructure, people have settled basing on wet rice or long-term tree production. Most households have sufficient and rich life.

- Area 2 is midland area where infrastructure has been constructed; people have partly settled their production basing on wet rice and long-term tree cultivation in the supplement of sloping land cultivation. Households have temporarily settled but threat of poverty is still high.

- Area 3 is remote, highland and special difficult area, where infrastructure is very poor. People's literacy is low with more than 60% illiteracy. Their economic life is mainly based on shifting cultivation. Over 60% households are classified as poor.

'special attention' from the government. The presence of the border police in the Thuong Trach people's life is evidence of its border area status. In addition to the ever-present border police, there have also been a series of policies and programs aimed at improving the living conditions of the poor communities. The Decree 38 CP on Sedentarization and Fixed Cultivation in 1968 is considered as the first poverty alleviation policy of the government targeting the ethnic minorities. However, as presented in Chapter V, the Settlement Program in Thuong Trach commune was nullified due to casualty of the war. Villagers left their villages to live in caves for several years. When the Phong Nha forest was declared a protected area in 1986, people in Thuong Trach commune were resettled and simultaneously introduced to the state's modern and scientific forest conservation and protection programs. In addition, they are supported by Program 135, which is designed especially for the economic development of communities in the Area 3. The objective of the Program 135 is to improve the material and spiritual life of the people, create opportunities for the poor communes to escape poverty and backwardness, and to integrate them into the development of the whole country (Dao 2003).

However, broadly speaking, if we look at ethnic minority communities in Vietnam, each ethnic group develops unequally. Though the proportion of poor people in the whole country has been reduced from 85% in 1993 to 75% in 1998, the poverty rate in ethnic minority community has increased from 20% to 29% (Dao 2003). Several barriers have been raised in relation to the policy making and policy implementation. Local people's participation in making poverty alleviation policy has been inadequate. Therefore, local knowledge has not been recognized or incorporated in the development programs. Instead, a macro development program designed by the Kinh people has been implemented in different ethnic minority groups. Moreover, state development programs have concentrated on infrastructure construction but have not invested enough in agricultural production to generate income for the poor (loc.cit.). In relation of policy implementation, Dao comments that

There has not been appropriate and creative application of the policy in the practice. Development policy for mountainous areas is modeled on that of the plains. For instance, Sedentarization and Fixed Cultivation Program for mountainous ethnic groups has been practiced based on the awareness, living style, culture and so on of the Kinh officials. (Dao 2003:106)

In the context of Thuong Trach commune, the Makong people have not had an opportunity to learn about the state policy and law as scholars like Dao has observed. However, they have developed their own evaluation of the policy and its implementation through their experience. On one hand, they contend that the state has brought some progressive lifestyles for their community. But on the other hand, they argue that state officials who have worked in their community have not fully and effectively implemented state policy.

Initially, I thought that the Makong people accepted their marginalization and the enforcement of state policy. They always seemed to impress on outsiders that their life is improved by the support of the Party and the State. One Makong woman told me that

The Party and the State bring civilization to our community. In the past, we did not have enough food and clothes. We used bark clothes and blankets. We did not have even salt to eat. But nowadays, we are provided with salt, clothes, agricultural production tools and blankets. You can see that a family now has at least five blankets. Salt is sufficient for a cow too.

(A 40-year-old Makong woman, Nov 2003).

She emphasized several items that her families and neighbors received from the state programs. However, going through their daily life, we will see more clearly the Makong people's real perceptions of the state in the new context. The Makong people as individuals have their own perceptions and have their own reactions toward what has happened in their village and their life. In the eyes of the Makong people nowadays, the image of state officials is different than they were when the country was still experiencing difficulty. Several Makong people contend that state authorities who implement state policies do not exercise their full responsibilities. They also recognize that some officials take advantage of their legal power to do illegal things for personal gain.

6.1.1 Changing behavior of state officials: ineffective working

The Makong people compared the past and current work output of state officials. In the mind of villagers, state officials were friendly, enthusiastic and helpful during the war. They worked closely with Makong villagers. They helped

villagers to cultivate their crops, and to build houses. One key informant recalled a former doctor of the border police force. She said that if a person in the village was sick, the border police doctor would rush to provide medical examination even though it was midnight and the villager was far away. In contrast, she contended that the current health service staffs just stayed in the station and always scolded the patients. Also, she commented that

Contemporary officials just put their hands in their pants pockets and stare down on the Makong villagers who are working. They seldom visit poor families. They just stay closely with rich families. They eat chicken, sleep, and gather together to gamble or drink wine.

(A 40-year-old Makong woman, Nov 2003).

Another woman complained that doctors and teachers in the commune often came to her house and asked her husband for a chicken. She said that

My husband is very honest; he cannot lie to them and say that we do not have any more chicken to give them, even for us to eat. They do not want to pay after they take our chicken away. Meanwhile, we do not want to ask again for the chicken payment because we are afraid that they will not help us when our children are sick. Therefore, it is better to say no when such people ask whether we have something to give them.

(A 25-year-old Makong woman, Nov 2003)

Looking at the relationship among villagers and communal health service staff, I found that villagers are not comfortable using the services. According to the state policy, ethnic minority villagers do not have to pay when they are treated in the commune clinic, but few people want to come to the clinic station. The state officials blame this low usage of free services on the villagers superstitious beliefs that worshipping spirits will help them to recover from sickness. Indeed, the Makong people have widely practiced spirit worship when they are sick. But if the clinic staffs did their job effectively, curing people from the illness, and if they were friendly and gentle toward them, villagers would surely go to the clinic station. Villagers always ask for or exchange medicine with lowlanders who visit their village. They do not totally reject the lowland health system. They do not go to receive free health care from the clinic because they always receive unsatisfactory service from the staff.

During my fieldwork time in the village, I heard about death of two babies in nearby villages. When they were sick, their parents just worshipped without bringing them to the nearby health clinic station early enough to save them. I did not have an opportunity to interview them about this incident because I did not want to reopen a deep wound and renew their grief. However, another child from Caroong village also got sick with similar symptoms later on. His parents treated him at home by worshipping spirits and asking me and some other lowlanders for medicine. Worried for the baby, I mentioned the previous deaths and persuaded the parents to take him to the clinic station. It was very difficult to change their minds. I asked the wife's older sister, with whom I was staying, to advise her to bring the child to the clinic before something terrible happened. After several days of being persuaded to bring her son to the commune clinic station, and in front of her son's seriously worse health, the mother was worried but still hesitant to take her son to the clinic. She said that she was afraid of the clinic staff because they scolded her when she first went to ask for their help. She felt that they were very distant with patients and disregarded them. She thus did not feel comfortable going to the communal clinic station when her children were sick. However, with the help of her older sister, I was able to persuade her that the doctor was a quiet but nevertheless a helpful person. We explained to her that the doctor's aloofness made other people misunderstand him. The parents of the sick child in the end agreed to take him to be treated at the commune clinic.

This case shows the villagers' complex perceptions of the representatives of state agencies in the commune. It depends very much on their personal relationships. The woman who was able to change her sister's mind about health service's staff, regards border police and forest conservators as those who take advantage of their official position to earn extra money. She also contends that former cadres were very helpful and responsible but the current cadres lack such characteristics. For that reason, she was not open to talk with them when they visited her house though she was always friendly with other guests. When I visited her at her house, her ways of talking with me were different from the way she talked with border police and authorities. This observation was confirmed when I witnessed a conversation between her and a border police official.

Her husband is a lowlander from Hue city. This mixed marriage seemed to be strange to several people. In particular, those who first come to work in this area did not understand why an urban man got married to a poor Makong woman and settled his life there. I was also very curious to hear their story. She was very happy to tell me and my colleagues about her love life and her marriage. She was proudly told us that they would not have become a couple if she had not been able to cure of two snakebites in 1987. Here is her story.

After being saved from snakebites, he said that his life belonged to me and he wished to marry me to show his profound gratitude. Persuaded by his heart-felt sincerity, I accepted his marriage proposal. After just a few weeks, he brought back from Hue some dowry offerings to my family and married me. His Hue family likes me a lot and several times asked me to move to live with them in the city of Hue. But I cannot because my life has been deeply rooted to this mountain and forest. My husband thus has pleased me and adapted his life here with me.

(A 40-year-old Makong woman, 29 Oct 2003).

A border police official once visited her family. He was in fact a friendly man. He visited her family several times but it seemed that he had never asked her any personal questions. Knowing that I came from the same hometown as her husband, he asked her how she and her husband became a couple, and whether she had visited Hue. She answered that she had never left her home and it was by chance they fell in love. In reality, she visited her husband's family in Hue every two years since their marriage. She even went to Daklak province where her husband's sister was working. And she did not mention anything about their romantic love which she called "predestined love".

After the border police left, she explained that she did not want to prolong the conversation with him. When I asked why she did not want to talk with the police, she smiled and answered that she did not want to "waste her time". This shows that her relationship with the border police is a very distant and formal. It is far from the slogan that Vietnamese people promote "military and people are similar as fish and water".

Indeed, inefficient and irresponsible attitude of some officials have changed behaviors of the Makong people toward state authorities. It seems that the distance between state officials and the Makong people is widening. Especially, some officials

who abuse their powerful positions to exploit forest resources for their personal gain have undermined the Makong people's faith in the state agencies.

6.1.2 Exercise of Power: Corrupt officials

According to the Makong people, border police, national park staffs, district and commune authorities are representatives of the state in their commune. These institutions have a responsibility to protect the forest, and maintain security of the border area. Instead of cooperating, these agencies try to exercise their power for their own personal gain as much as they can.

The Makong people recognize that border police do not stop forest encroachers who come to exploit forest products. The border police have instead created a system to generate more income from these encroachers. A hunter or a logger who wants to work in the border area must register and pay a 10,000 VN dongs fee to the border police. Sometimes, they must contribute a few labor hours for house repairing, fence mending, soil digging, vegetable growing, etc. This does not mean that they are free to transport what they harvest from the forest down to the lowland market. They have to bribe border police and national park staff if they harvest precious forest products. Otherwise, they lose everything if they are arrested by the border police. The following case, which I witnessed personally in Cu Ton village¹⁷, clearly indicates how the Makong people perceive the border police.

Some villagers in Cu Ton village organized an evening meeting to discuss community house construction in the presence of one border police officer. After the meeting, another officer came and whispered something with him; then they left. At that time, I was sitting outside with some Makong women; I recognized that he had left the meeting without saying anything. Two Makong women beside me whispered into my ear: "they are going to arrest some loggers who are sleeping in the field. They are going to earn some extra money". They explained that loggers normally had to buy their freedom and a space to earn a living by bribing the state forest officials and border police. Without the bribe, they would be arrested, fined and have all forest

¹⁷ Cu Ton village is around two hours climbing from Caroong village

products they harvested confiscated. The women told me that the border police had discovered some loggers who were sleeping in the villagers' field on their way back home from the forest. They assumed that the border police had left to ask the loggers for money. In the villagers' minds, when they see border police going to arrest forest exploiters, it is not for forest protection but for their own pocket money. It is worth noting that not all border police behave the same way and several of them have very good relationships with villagers. Only some of them abuse their power for personal gain. However, their corruption has created a negative view of the security force.

The Makong people claim that not only border police behave inappropriately, but also the district officials who work in their commune. Such officials have even taken advantage of the state policy to serve their own purposes. One Makong woman told me the following story about the former head of the Resettlement Program

He became rich since he has posted as a chief of resettlement program of the district. He did not tell us how much the central government supported our villages but provided the unfit rice for human beings to eat. We were also provided with unhealthy cows. He counted quantity of cow's heads but did not pay attention to their health and age or whether they could be raised. In my village (Caroong), only eight households still raise cows provided by Resettlement Program. I also received one thin and weak cow in 1998 but it has luckily survived and produced three calves in three years. However, only very few families are as lucky as me.

(A 40-year-old Makong woman, Nov 2003)

The former head of the Resettlement Program has been replaced by another young man who has not yet demonstrated that his approach is any better. This replacement leads Makong people to think that officials who do not behave according to the central policy and the Party ideology¹⁸ will be replaced and punished in according with the state law. However, not all Makong people have the same confidence. Several of them distrust state officials. They have created counter discourses to express their attitude toward the state representatives in their area. Below are some examples, which indicate the Makong's negotiation with state officials.

¹⁸ Makong villagers believe that the Party and the State try to implement development programs that will bring them to a better life.

*Story of Mr. Dinh Chau*¹⁹

Mr. Chau married a lowland Kinh woman who first came to Thuong Trach as a trader. He is now in charge of odd jobs including fetching water, cooking, cleaning, etc, in the Commune People's Committee. His family no longer cultivates rice like other Makong households but lives on income from grocery trading (he has a small shop) and cattle raising. He also trades wild animal if any villagers sell it to him. In reality, there are always some monkeys, porcupines or weasels, etc. in his house waiting to be transported to the lowland or to be sold for food whenever the commune people's committee organizes a meal for special guests. His involvement in the 'illegal' minor forest product trade sometimes brings him into confrontation with state forest 'protectors' that makes him angry. He thus gossips about them whenever he has the opportunity. In a meeting with one of his lowland friends, who is also a hunter, his brother-in-law and sister, conversation became more ebullient after drinking a few cups of wine. He told them several stories about how he has behaved to protect himself from the pressure put on him by forestry officials. He had used not only his own relationship but also his knowledge about ancestral land and local traditional rights to fight against forestry officials.

Mr. Chau said that he had once witnessed one national park staff who stopped a lowland hunter in possession of a precious tortoise. The official confiscated the tortoise and took it for his own use. Mr. Chau contended that the way the official used the tortoise was unacceptable because he only took the liver of the tortoise and then threw away the rest of meat. He claimed that such wasteful practice was a main cause of wild animal extinction. In this point, Mr. Chau showed an unequal relationship between the state officials and people. A hunter spent a very long time in the forest to catch a tortoise that represented his family's income source, but he was considered illegal; meanwhile the official took away other people's source of income to satisfy a luxurious habit that was still considered legal. The story of his experience reminded his audience to rethink about the real role of the state forest as 'protectors'.

As if showing his understanding of the true nature of the state forestry protector, he eagerly recounted how he saved himself from being taken advantage of

¹⁹ This is pseudo name

by the national park's staff. He said that last year he luckily found one valuable yellow tortoise. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to smuggle it through the checkpoint of the national park on the way into town where it could be sold. After thinking all night to find a solution, he decided to tie the tortoise around his belly and pretended to take his wife to the district hospital. When passing the checkpoint, they were stopped by the officials. An official checked his wife's bag where he had put some bottles of honey and one normal tortoise. The official pointed out that these products were illegal to harvest. He argued that his wife was sick and he needed honey to feed her. He worried that if he had to remain inside the checkpoint for a much longer, the situation might have been worse because the officials would probably have discovered the yellow tortoise tied around his belly. He thus decided to offer the officials one normal tortoise. But he suspected that the national park staff secretly followed him to the town. So, he sold the tortoise carefully. In the end of the story, he concluded that he should not have left anything to the officials. He had to leave one ordinary tortoise for them to avoid getting caught with the yellow tortoise. To him, it was wasted on the unworthy.

To prove that the state officials are not always able to exercise their power, Mr. Chau told another story about how he fought against a national park official. After his confrontation at the checkpoint, he accidentally met the official in his village. Recognizing that the official was smuggling a forbidden monkey out of the forest, he replicated the official's behavior towards him and his wife when they smuggled the yellow tortoise into town. Mr. Chau also stopped the official and asked what was in the bag. When the official answered that was only one chicken, Mr. Chau got angry and said the following words:

Here is our ancestors' land for a hundred years. Your protected areas under your regulations were set up only few years ago, how you can know everything here better than we do. Cheating must not be done, if you say that you have only one chicken in your bag, open your bag.

(A 36-year-old Makong villager, 15 Jan 2004)

Mr. Chau said that the official must change his attitude and soften his voice by saying that "it (a monkey) is cute, I just want to raise it at home". Mr. Chau did not push the situation for the official because it would probably cause him more problems in the future. However, through this story, I found that this kind of power is not only

in the hands of the authorities. In certain cases, powerless people can become the powerful ones. It shows that poor people do not passively accept all the rules imposed on their lives.

Story of Mr. Dinh Hang and Mr. Nguyen Xuan Giang²⁰

Mr. Hang has held the position of vice leader of Caroong village for 5 years. According to villagers, because his brothers have worked in the commune people's committee, he was selected as a village vice-leader even though he is in fact a weak person. Villagers blame him for not being forceful in dealing with the forest exploitation of lowlanders. However, when I interviewed him, he accused some higher authorities who are directly involved in supporting illegal loggers. He said that

I am an authority and a member of militia team but I cannot do anything to protect forest and the village food security because some higher authorities have received kickbacks from illegal loggers who operate very openly here. Lowlanders drink, gamble and fight against one another but our villagers cannot restrain them. We know that they come to exploit our forest with proper authorization papers so we are not able to stop them. Moreover, we do not want to get involved because in several cases we would probably see adverse effects because the authorities 'eat' money of lowlanders.

(A 41-year-old Makong man, Nov 2004)

The opinion of communal forester Mr. Nguyen Van Giang is also similar to Mr. Hang's. During my stay in the village, I witnessed him, his wife and brothers discussed his resignation no fewer than three times. He contended that it was very difficult for him to complete his term in this position because there was no close cooperation among different state agencies. He cited an example that took place a few months ago, when he joined an arrest of illegal loggers. It seemed that the loggers were informed in advance; they had escaped right before the ambush took place. He contended that some border police had been bribed to help them avoid the raid. Though there was no evidence to prove what had happened, his doubt indicates a hidden conflict among different state agencies in this small commune.

Story of Mr. Dung

²⁰ These are pseudo name

Mr. Dung is a Kinh lowlander who has been working in Thuong Trach area since the 1980s. He is a wild animal trapper. He has a family in the town but spends most of his time alone in the forest where he traps wild animals. He seems to have a good relationship with the villagers; he returns to the village to buy supplies and spends some days in the village whenever he has finished his food supply. I met him during my second fieldwork trip. He helps the household with whom I stayed to harvest rice. He was aware that the forest in Thuong Trach area had been seriously degraded compared to its condition ten years ago. He contended that the forest depletion was caused in part by slashing and burning, illegal logging, and hunting, but mainly by legal timber concession. He claimed that Truong Son, Bong Lai, Thuong Mai Enterprises, etc. which have operated legally in this area since end of 1980s, played a very important role in destroying the forest in Phong Nha – Ke Bang area and in Thuong Trach in particular. These enterprises even invested money in road construction to improve the timber transportation. Mr. Dung calculated that each enterprise had around ten modern sets of saws, which were used to harvest hectares of forest in only a few hours. Through this argument, he explained who the real exploiters of the forest were.

Though identifying himself as an illegal forest harvester, Mr. Dung did not hesitate to point out that the state's present forest conservation methods were doing nothing to improve the situation. The state has attempted to stop illegal forest exploitation by recruiting forestry teams from lowland. Even though all of the officials graduated from Forestry College, they did not understand local practices in the area. Meanwhile, minor illegal forest harvesters like him could live in the forest for several months that help them to learn how to escape from the control of state officials. Therefore, according to this wild animal trapper, in order to protect the forest, national park staffs and foresters should be local people because they know very well what happen in their area and their forest. In addition, they know how to stop illegal exploitation. He said that "the present forest protectors are outsiders; they just drive motorbike along a main road when they do their work. So how could they arrest illegal exploiters?"

6.2 The Makong's View of State Programs

Most state agencies who have introduced programs to the Makong community aim to improve the life of the Makong people. They perceive the Makong people as poor, underdeveloped, backwards, and in need of change. However, the question is that whether such programs are accepted by the Makong people. This section discusses of the Makong view of the state programs.

First, villagers' opinions of wet rice cultivation, which the district government has implemented as a part of the Sedentarization and Fixed Cultivation Program, vary. Some of them support wet rice transformation while others contend that they are unable to survive if they are not allowed to cultivate upland rice. The head of the Cooc village contended that wet rice cultivation would be good if the state constructed an irrigation system and provided villagers with a buffalo for ploughing. He said that "wet rice cultivation is good because its productivity is twice or three time higher than that of the upland rice cultivation. However, if the state forbids us to grow upland rice, they must construct for us the wet rice field like that in Champu village²¹".

He compared the advantages and disadvantages of the two agricultural systems. According to him, the conditions in the upland fields are suitable for shifting cultivation while a lowland field is more appropriate for wet rice production. If the government forces them to change to wet rice in the upland fields, the government has to take responsibility for preparing a better production environment. Though he said that he is not against the transformation to wet rice, it does not mean that he would be willing to do it if the government does not have a sufficient investment in it first.

However, practically speaking, the material investment of the government is not sufficient. It is clear in the case of the Sedentarization and Fixed Cultivation Program, which has invested billions dong, and has not achieved expected result. For instance, in 1999 the Phong Nha – Ke Bang National Park settled Arem people in Tan Trach commune in a defined area, constructed houses with metal roofing, provided

²¹ The state has constructed three hectares of wet rice field in Champu village and allocated to the Champu villagers in preparation for terminating shifting cultivation.

them with various materials, but they still returned to their former villages and caves. This failure has not made the authorities reconsider their approach. It has even made them more prejudiced towards the local people. National park officials used the term “primitive people” to refer to the Arem after their settlement failed. An official used to tell me that “whenever such primitive people (Arem people) are still living in the forest, it is still very difficult to protect the forest”.

Meanwhile, the Arem people contend that they cannot live in the settled village because there is not enough water. In addition, they could not get used to the heat, which was more intense under the metal roofed houses. Therefore, a successful strategy to transform a mountainous ethnic group from upland rice culture into wet rice culture must incorporate adequate cultural adaptation processes and approaches for them to follow.

In the conditions of sloping land and forest, the Makong people have developed their own culture that grows out of their daily livelihood and their shifting cultivation system. If the government makes them change to wet rice production or moves them to a different environment, it means that they have to change their cultural values and everyday ways of life. The authorities have not recognized this aspect; they have focused too much on how to help people to have a better economic life (though in reality it does not). The authorities rationalize that the traditional life of the local people has restricted their progress in the modern process of the development. Therefore, it is necessary to

“improve the mode of cash crop production aiming to secure more for food security. Planning agricultural land, developing gardens, establishing wet rice fields and introducing high yield dry rice species are forthcoming activities”

(QBMER 2002:15).

The current statistics of the state points out that shifting cultivation yields only 600 – 800 kg per hectare, which is considered very low productivity (Center for Resource and Environment Research of National University of Hanoi 1999, cited in Dao 2003). Moreover, shifting cultivation is also considered a cause of deforestation. In colloquial Vietnamese, the word for dry rice farming (*làm rẫy*) is often preceded by the words *phát nương*, clearing, which literally refers to clearing the forest or destroying the forest. Therefore, transitioning to sedentary cultivation is considered

the only solution to improve the economic life of mountainous ethnic minority people and to protect the forest.

Secondly, when the state sets up a national park, they extend protected areas and strengthen state control over the forest. Initially, they focused on setting up a team of professional forest guards and developing regulations and principles for forest management. However, the forest has not been well protected and has become even more degraded. Illegal forest exploitation has become a serious problem that is seen as out of the control under the national park supervision. One solution is to involve local people in the forest management. The national park and district authority have implemented a forest allocation policy in the Makong community. They claim that providing enough supplementary rice for households would involve the Makong people in the forest protection effort, and limit the forest area of their shifting cultivation. So, how do the Makong people perceive this program?

From my interviews with Makong villagers about forest allocation program, I learned that different people have different understandings. Some people stated that they have never heard about it. They knew that the forest belonged to the state, and the national park. Meanwhile, other people contended that the state has allocated an area of forest for their village to protect but they did not know where the border of protected area was. The forest allocation was done with only Mr. Kham, a secretary of the party at village level. Even the village leader and vice village leader were unsure how many hectares of forest their village was allocated; they guessed that maybe it is around one thousand hectares. In reality, Mr. Kham and the commune forester said that their village was allocated two thousand hectares of forest for protection. Each household receives around fifty kilograms of rice twice a year as a payment for forest protection. However, some people said that they knew about this but they have never been seriously concerned about it because it was only on paper. They have had no real power to manage the forest because they cannot stop illegal loggers. Moreover, they contended that they could not stop practicing slash and burn upland rice cultivation because that was their way of life. A middle age woman said to me

We do not want to receive rice provided by the state because we do not want to be controlled by the state. Moreover, if we protect forest but state agencies provide licenses for loggers to cut forest, how can we complete our task? Therefore, it is better not to be involved in the state program.

(A 40-year-old female informant, November 2003)

In the current context, villagers' perception of forest protection seems to change when forest is managed by the state. Several of them contend that it is very difficult for them to protect the forest because they have not had enough power and rights. They have recognized that there is a contradiction among the state staffs. Though the state policy aims to conserve forest resources, several officials have taken advantage of their position by cooperating with illegal forest exploiters. In addition, the forest management program has been introduced into the Makong community without a clear understanding of the Makong culture. In addition, it has not provided enough power and rights for villagers to work as real forest protectors.

Moreover, while officials perceive deforestation as caused by local people, the local people hold different views. They argue that the current forest degradation is due to the lowlanders. They contend that they have protected the forest well but the lowlanders have overexploited the forest. Even the Chairman of the Thuong Trach commune also contended that

They (lowlanders) came to cut all our forest. Local people have practiced good forest protection but they cannot impede the lowland exploiters. He said that there are no longer precious resources in the forest. Since lowlanders came to exploit, forest has become quiet because there are no more sounds of pheasants, birds and wild animals. In the past, going to the forest, we saw several animals; when weather changed, we heard the moan of stag and deer. Nowadays, we no longer see any deer or wild pigs on the way to the field. Snakes and foxes have disappeared while rats have increased and caused crop loss.

(Chairman of Thuong Trach Commune, Dec 1st, 2003)

The Commune Chairman repeated the sentence "these problems are caused by lowlanders". He thought that lowlanders are resourceful. Though the state agencies have intensified forest protection, the lowlanders still find ways to encroach the forest. In order to avoid confrontations with state officials, some lowlanders operate only in the evening. The Commune Chairman said "they fix a torch on their forehead that provides enough light for moving their two feet. Timber and their body blend with the darkness. Later on when they are arrested, they argue that they harvested those pieces of timber in Laos".

The head of the commune felt it was very difficult to arrest them if they exploited forest product from Laos. He has no power to retain them. The issue was submitted to the district and province but the situation has not changed. He claimed “the district and province should have some definite solutions to solve this problem; otherwise, our villagers will ‘die’”. By this, he means that his villagers will suffer the consequences of deforestation. Crop loss is just one of consequences. Moreover, several lowland loggers have threatened local people because they know that the Makong people are very timid. Makong villagers will not cooperate with the authorities to protect the forest if they are threatened. Looking back at the case of the forest protection team that I mentioned in the Chapter V (see more in 5.3), a member of the village forest protection team was very upset after he accompanied the state foresters to arrest illegal loggers. He arrived at the house of the commune foresters in a state of extreme anxiety because the loggers had threatened to burn his field and poison his children.

In sum, the Makong views of the state authorities and state programs show that the Makong people do not believe in state agencies who are working in their area. They contend that when the state takes away their rights to use the forest, the state has policies to support them. However, they recognize that some state officials have taken advantage of their position to earn money for themselves rather than for the Makong people. Therefore, Makong villagers do not rely on the state agencies instructions. They have their own ways to survive. Following is a discussion of the Makong’s responses to retain their livelihood and their cultural identity.

6.3 Changes of Livelihood Strategies as Local Reactions to the State Policy

6.3.1 Agriculture-Based Activities

Living in a remote area where outside contact is very difficult, the economic life of the Makong people is subsistent. Their main economic livelihood is year-round agricultural activities²².

²² See Seasonal Plan of the Makong community.

According to a commune forester, each household cultivates an average of one hectare of dry field per year. But according to the statistics of the district forestry department, the agricultural area of the commune is 255 hectares (Quang Binh People Committee 2002). In reality, local people do not have a concept of hectares. The area of their field is measured by how many baskets of rice or how many seedlings of cassava are planted. Each household grows an average of three to four baskets of rice (each basket is around ten kilograms) per year. The productivity is unstable because it depends on several conditions such as weather, pests, and soil fertility. In 2003, some households harvested only 600 kg rice, and other households harvested nearly 2,000kg, though the sizes of the paddy fields are similar. On average, each household plants 30kg seed and harvests around 1,300 kg rice (see appendix c).

Since state agencies strengthened forest management programs in 1998, the area of shifting cultivation has been reduced. Eighteen villages of Thuong Trach commune are allowed to practice shifting cultivation in a certain area. According to the Makong people, the cycle of rotational shifting cultivation has been shortened from around ten years down to four or five years. Therefore, some families have attempted to adapt to the situation by adopting new crop species to improve crop yield. Besides looking for high yield rice varieties, the Makong people also started to set up domestic vegetable and cash crop gardens and raise more domestic animals.

Adopting New Rice and Cash Crop Species.

As mentioned in the Chapter IV, the Makong people have variety of local rice species. Presently when they have to struggle to survive under several pressures and when their social relationship has been expanded to other communities, villagers have adopted several new rice variety and cash crop species aiming to increase productivity. In addition to rice species from a Makong community in Laos, Makong villagers have experimented with new species from other ethnic groups. One family in Caroong village has replaced local rice with a new rice variety from Daklak province after visiting their relatives there. This indicates that the Makong people have attempted to find a new way to survive in the modern world. They are not passively waiting for the support of the government as the authorities believe. However, families who

adopt new rice and cash crop species are those who have more contact with outsiders, and more opportunities to travel to different areas to learn about the outside world. The case studies below can illustrate this observation.

Case study 1

The family of Mrs. Y Nhoan and Mr. Nguyen Van Dieu is composed of five persons. Mrs. Y Nhoan is a Makong. She has one eighteen-year-old daughter and one sixteen-year-old son from her first marriage. She is remarried to Mr. Dieu, the second husband who is a Kinh lowlander. After getting married, they have adopted a seven-year-old son whose mother died when he was only one-month-old, meaning that according to the Makong custom, he should have been buried together with his mother. Their first daughter and the second son are now studying in sixth grade at the commune school and the youngest son has just entered the village primary school. Therefore, the parents provide most labor in the family. The husband of this family contends that when forest use is strictly prohibited in the near future, they will face difficulties if they grow only local rice varieties because local rice varieties are good to eat but low yield. They are thus trying to look for a higher yield rice varieties. In 2003, he persuaded his wife to plant a new rice species from Daklak provided by one of his relatives. In the year 2004, they sowed about 40kgs of the new rice variety and they harvested 50 bags (equivalent to 2,000kgs). They said that since they grew the new rice species, they have more rice than the previous year. When they harvested rice in 2004, they have still had rice leftover from the 2003 harvest, while several families had to eat cassava instead of rice. According to the wife, if her husband is healthy and able to help her like other Makong husbands, her family can harvest even more rice. She said that she is very happy with the high yield of the new rice variety and she is willing to provide enough rice seeds to those who want to try it.

In addition to adopting new rice varieties, this family is also considering how to construct a sustainable economic base when the forest prohibition is really enforced. One strategy they may adopt is to invest in growing cash crops. In 1998, they planted over 1,000 coffee seedlings, which were bought from Daklak. Unfortunately, coffee plants were destroyed by wild animals and domestic cows. Though they built fences around their coffee garden, they could not stop the encroachment of cows. However,

the husband says that he will not give up growing coffee. He will plant prickly plants around the garden before re-planting coffee. In addition, he has asked his lowland friends to buy "*mat trees*" whose nuts can be used for fishing. He plans to grow this kind of tree on his fallowed fields. He contends that this tree species do requires little investment in labor and time to care. Meanwhile, the current market demand of the *mat* nut is very high. One kilogram of *mat* nut costs 30,000 VN dongs (3 US dollars) and one tree probably provides at least 50 kgs of nut per year. It means that he can earn 1,500,000 VN dongs per year. Though this calculation seems to be too optimistic, it indicates that villagers have gradually approached the market and built relationships with outside communities.

Case study 2

The second case focuses on the diversity of local livelihood strategies used by the family of Mr. Dinh Son and Mrs. Y Hun. They have three children; the first daughter is five years old, the second daughter is three years old and the third son is four months old. Mr. Son also has one boy and two girls from his first wife, who are living with their paternal grandfather. In 1986, Mr. Son was encouraged by lowland traders to become involved in rattan and wild animal trading. However, he failed and became a poor man. He said that he did not have an opportunity to understand the fluctuating price, which led to his bankruptcy. Moreover, several lowland traders bought his goods on credit but did not pay him.

Presently, he is investing in creating a wet rice field. He flattened a plot of land in the front of the village, cut down all big trees in it, and dug out their roots and stumps. He analyzed that wet rice cultivation requires less labor input than upland rice cultivation. He calculated that

To grow upland rice, in one year my family invests around 250 to 300 man hours of labor, out of which 150 man hours of labor are for slashing, burning and cleaning and over 50 man hours of labor are for weeding, and around 100 man hours of labor are for harvesting and transporting rice home. All members of my family have to help. Meanwhile, if I cultivate wet rice correctly, I do not have to invest such huge man-hours of labor, only myself can complete the farming. Moreover, after harvesting rice, I can grow tobacco and sesame. On my wet rice field, I can grow 1000 tobacco plants per year which can bring about two or three million dong. In addition, I plan to grow cassava to raise pigs and chicken. I think that I have to prepare basic income first because I also would like to invest in gardening that needs a longer time.

(A 43-year-old key informant, December 12, 2003)

He impressed me as a strategic person and who was aware of how to improve his family's income. His livelihood strategies reflect the influence of the market economy because he uses cash as a criterion to evaluate the efficiency of various livelihoods. Indeed, looking at his social life, we can see that he has more opportunities than other villagers do. He finished grade seven, which is a high level of education found among the Makong people. He had many lowland friends who were traders, rattan collectors, wild animal trappers, etc.

Maintaining Traditional Cropping Pattern

Besides growing the new crop species, most of Makong households in Thuong Trach still maintain traditional cropping patterns. They still grow upland local rice, cassava, and maize and raise domestic animals.

An average Makong household grows 1000 -2000 cassava plants per year. It is mainly used to raise domestic animals. Its root is chopped up for pigs and chickens. Villagers said that they have never run out cassava in their fields. Before 2001, when they did not have enough rice, they used to eat cassava instead. Cassava is normally cooked together with rice as the main staple for the Makong people. Besides, cassava root can be made into one kind of local wine as well, which the Makong people drink within the family rather than to entertain guests or worship spirits. They contend that cassava wine does not indicate enough respect towards the guest.

With abundant cassava supply and available grassland in the forest, all Makong families raise pigs, cows and goats. Only some newly independent households do not have cows. According to the Makong people, cattle are perceived as asset; so they kill pigs, cows and goats only for special occasions such as weddings, funerals, ancestor worship, and house building. Some households have not had any cows or goats because they are newly nuclear family or their cattle died of disease. Four of eight households have no cow and have been living independently for 1- 2 years. One household does not have cow because they have just finished their matrilocal residency. The Makong culture regulates that a groom who is poor and unable to afford the dowry demanded by the wife's family has to live matrilocally for

at least three years in order to pay off the bride's price. In addition, assets created by the new spouses belong to the wife's family when the husband finishes his matrilocality residency and takes his wife and children back his natal village. Another family has just found a wife for their son. The remaining household is a divorced woman with her three daughters. When she decided to divorce her husband, she left all her assets to him.

Cattle are normally sold to lowland traders, lowland teachers or local authorities. Money from cattle sale is often saved for house building or emergency expenses. All interviewees agreed that men were decision makers of the family, and that men decided everything in the family. In reality, this perception is an ideal type of Makong custom but not always true. For instance, I witnessed an argument about the final decision-making in the family with whom I lived during my time in the field. The husband planned to sell two pigs to local school teachers at a cheap price (400,000 VN dong) because he sometimes drank and played chess with the teachers. His wife disagreed; she asked him to refuse them if they did not pay 450,000 VN dong. She argued that he did not feed two pigs; so, he did not have any right to sell them without her agreement. At the end, the husband had to re-negotiate with the teachers and got a higher price for the two pigs.

In another family, a wife said that she had rights over their cattle provided by her parents. If the cattle are provided by a project or bought by the family's money, her husband would decide how to use the money from the cattle sale. However, she contends that because her husband sometimes foolishly gambles, she keeps all the money to prevent him from wasting it.

Livelihood of the Makong people is not limited to the above sources. They grow several kinds of crops including bean, taro, cucumber, etc. However, villagers do not focus on those crops because they do not have enough labor and time to fend off the wild animals. Moreover, those kinds of crops cannot be kept for long, and villagers cannot transport them to the market to sell. The Makong grow these crops to be used as their daily supplementary food.

6.3.2 Market-Based Activities

Minor Forest Product Collection

In addition to on-farm activities, minor forest products such as rattan, honey, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, wild animals, aloe wood, and bastard cardamom are very important income sources for several families in the Makong community. The Makong people use forest resources not only for their daily food and house construction, but also for trade that links them with other outside communities. Since the French occupation, villagers have collected bastard cardamom to exchange for salt and some other goods with lowlanders. Mr. Keo (the *Dung Dzang*) said to me that when he was a boy, he used to follow his father to gather minor forest products that were exchanged with the lowland traders. He remembered that going to the town was very difficult and took two or three days because there was no road. However, he remembered that he felt happy because he was able to see many lowland people, to eat a bowl of hot noodle soup, to buy manufactured tools, cloths, salt, and so on.

During 1980s, several local people became forest guides for Kinh lowlanders in search of aloe wood. Their close relationship with lowlanders was established. They knew several Kinh people from Hue city and they traveled there to visit their Hue friends. When I introduced myself to them as someone from Hue, most of men in the village said that they knew several sites in Hue. They said that their 'Hue brothers' who came to harvest aloe wood invited them to visit their house in Hue city. Some of them even asked me how their 'Hue brothers' are doing because they thought that I must know those people. They tried to describe where their 'Hue brothers' houses are located as if to prove that they had visited Hue city. They also may want me to realize that they are 'somebody' even though they are Makong, because they have 'Hue brothers'.

In the beginning, I noticed that they were very polite to me. However, I later observed that when they meet new outsiders, they behave differently toward them based on where they are from. They consider Hue lowlanders as friends while they do not respect those who come from Cu Lac commune (near Phong Nha town). They contend that people from Hue are kind and faithful, while those from Cu Lac are not honest. They contend that when Hue people came to work in these areas, several of

them died but their friends always tried to carry the corpses back to their family or carried out a proper burial in a difficult situation. According to the Makong, this shows the faithfulness and kindness of the Hue people in their friendship. Meanwhile, several Cu Lac people have never returned their friends' corpses to their hometown when they died in the deep forest. Moreover, some people from Cu Lac who set up their business in the Makong community have cheated the local people. For instance, when the local people guided them to an aloe wood area, the Cu Lac exploiters told them that such aloe wood could not be exploited or sold. Later, Cu Lac exploiters secretly harvested the wood without sharing any profit with the local guides.

Since 1986, economic transformation in the lowland has seriously impacted the life of the Makong people. Demand of rattan products for export stimulated more rattan exploitation in mountainous areas. Proper rattan collection involves all labors of a family. However, a number of men involved in this work is higher than that of women because women are busier with their works such as, weeding, feeding animals, and caring for children. According to the result of PRA of LINC project in 1999, 80% of those who participate in rattan collection are men while only 20% are women.

In the beginning, lowland traders cooperated with the local people to collect rattan, creating an important source of income for local people. Local people collected rattan to exchange for lowland products such as, monosodium glutamate (MGS), agricultural tools, rubber slippers, and food items. It is said that in the past rattan collection was easy because there was a lot of rattan near their homesteads, and that its price was high. However, nowadays, price is low and that the collection is difficult because not much rattan remains near the homestead. Moreover, if local people want to sell or exchange rattan, they have to depend on buyers' demand in regards to time, quality, and quantity. In the year 2000, lowlanders purchased rattan during the rice production time. Several households spent their time in rattan collection but not in rice production; as a result, they lacked rice to eat. In 2004, the traders also wanted to purchase rattan during the rice cultivation season. Some households responded by not involving themselves in the rattan collection. They said that they would not help those who lacked rice to eat because they collected rattan for cash rather than focusing on rice production. They even called for the intervention of

the authorities in keeping traders out of their forest. However, the commune authorities and border police explained to them that traders had a permission letter from higher authorities. They therefore did not have enough power to stop their exploitation.

In addition to rattan, honey also brings in a substantial income for the Makong. But this job requires skill and technique that only a few Makong men in the community possess. Around March to July, people start to collect honey. Before harvesting a beehive, the collectors ritually request permission from the spirits of bee and tree under a tree holding the beehive. They pray for good luck and thank the spirits for their kindness in allowing them to harvest the honey. They normally bring the first honey of a year to a clan leader for worshipping the forest spirits and informing their ancestor's spirit of a new honey season.

In Caroong village, there are four men²³ who are considered as the most skillful in honey collection. However, those who want to accompany these men in order to learn the necessary skills and techniques of honey gathering are partly share the profit. It is said that the income of those who do this job well is around 400,000 – 500,000 VN dongs per season.

In recent years, due to the growth of tourism in Phong Nha cave, wild orchids have become saleable items. Both local people and lowlanders collect this forest product to sell. In Caroong village, a young Makong man named Dinh Quang worked as a middle man to collect orchids for lowland traders. One orchid plant is exchanged for one packet of cigarettes but Mr. Quang normally exchanges two orchid plants for one packet of cigarette. In some cases, he does not pay local people, that has caused a distrustful relationship between him and other villagers. Another important lesson from this activity is that the Makong way of orchid collection is different from that of the lowlanders. Local people protest that lowlanders often cut a whole tree to get a small orchid. Meanwhile, the local people climb the tree using a rattan ladder to collect an orchid. It is very interesting to hear how the Makong people consistently claim that the lowlanders cause deforestation. For instance, on seeing a fallen tree

²³ Mr. Hung, Mr. Eng, Mr. Son and Mr. Ca

across the road, villagers think that lowlanders caused the destruction. They attempt to point out further that the lowlanders are forest destroyers.

It is also necessary to present daily food sources that the Makong people collect. It is said that preparing food is women's work but in reality men and women share responsibility for food collecting. As a habit, a Makong man or woman always carries a bamboo basket behind his/her back when he/she goes out. On the way from home to the field, going over or through the forest, they collect what is edible and put it in the basket. For instance, in the family of Mr. Eng and Mrs. Y Loan, in the early morning before going to the field, Mr. Eng goes to the forest to check traps and shoot a bird if he has a chance. Sometimes, he sets up a fish trap in the Caroong stream to catch some fishes for a meal for his family. Meanwhile, his wife often stays at home with their four young children to prepare food. With the youngest child on her back, she pounds rice for the whole family. Sometimes, she has to carry him to work in the field. On the way back home, she collects bamboo shoots, vegetables and even some snails. In the farming season, food collection is combined when they work in the field. If they are too busy or tired, they just eat rice with chili and salt. However, during the off-farm season, women always go together to catch fish or collect vegetable and bamboo shoot. Men also organize themselves to set animal traps or go hunting.

However, the above activities were carried out when the Makong people still had rights to access the forest resources. When the authorities informed them that slash and burn is illegal, the community raised many questions. Most of them believed that they could not survive without rotational cultivation.

The solutions differ among these people. Some old men say that they have to follow the state law even though they claim that they do not destroy forest. They can grow more varieties of vegetables and raise more chicken and pigs to sell to the commune officials. A former commune chairman said that

If the state forbids me to practice slash and burn, I will have my own way to survive.
It is impossible to stop planting rice, I will cultivate rice on small plots in deep forest.
In addition, I will grow more vegetables to sell to the commune authority and to lowlanders, and grow cassava to raise more chicken and pigs.

(An 80-year-old former commune chairman, January 2004)

Meanwhile, some young and old women said that they prefer to move further into the forest where no lowlanders or authorities can reach them. They think that in the deep forest, they will be free to do what they want; moreover, they will not suffer diseases that are brought by lowlanders. They perceive that the recent outbreaks of previously unknown pig and chicken diseases are caused by the increasing number of lowlanders coming to do business in their village.

Unlike the old men and young women, young men believe that they can survive without doing any shifting cultivation. They contend that if they calculate labor and investment very carefully, shifting cultivation is inefficient because this form of farming requires a substantial labor investment. One family in the village began to practice wet rice cultivation. The husband explained that every year, his family needs over 300 man-days of labor (around 60 man-days for slashing and burning, 60 man-days for sowing, 60 man-days for weeding and 120 man-days for harvesting and transportation). Meanwhile, wet rice cultivation requires fewer man-days of labor because people just plough, and do not have to spend time selecting, slashing and burning land. Moreover, because wet rice cultivation decreases labor, one person can plant a whole field within a day. After harvesting the rice, the field can be used to grow tobacco and sesame that can be sold easily to lowland traders. He said that in his field, he planned to plant around 1,000 tobacco plants that can bring him about 2-3,000,000 VN dongs per year. In addition, he also implants enough cassava to feed his chickens and pigs. However, according to him, these above activities just meet basic food security needs of a family in one year; his longer-term plan is to construct an agro-forestry garden, which will require some capital investment. He said that he is waiting for capital support from state programs.

Another young family in the village has invested in coffee and fruit trees. However, they failed because they were not able to protect their coffee plot from the cows. The husband of this family said that he has still pursued the idea of vegetable and coffee gardening. He will construct very stable fence around his garden, and plant banana trees. He contends that demand for bananas as ritual offerings on Buddhist days²⁴ in lowland towns is very high but the bananas are mostly imported

²⁴ Buddhist days: the 1st, 14th, 15th and 30th every month of lunar calendar.

from the south. With improved roads, he thinks that the transportation will be more convenient and more traders will come to his commune to buy this kind of product.

Meanwhile, several families have no strategies to cope with the state prohibition of shifting cultivation. They do not even accept that the ban on shifting cultivation is a real policy because they believe that they will continue to do what their ancestors did. They just answer that “if the state does not allow us to do shifting cultivation, the state has a responsibility to provide some kinds of care for us”.

Trading

With the expansion of market economy, several Makong households in Thuong Trach commune have taken up trading as a new livelihood. In the case of Caroong village, two families are professional traders. However, both are mixed Makong and Kinh families. In the first family, the husband is Kinh and the wife is Makong; and in the second family, the husband is Makong and the wife is Kinh.

Trading of Mr. Nguyen Van Dieu and Mrs. Y Nhoan

The wife of this family said that in 1989 she used to go to Quang Tri province to purchase factory clothes and other goods from Laos to sell in her villagers. Her trading started when she made friends with mobile traders who used to come to her village. They taught her how to trade and where to buy goods. She remembered that traveling to Quang Tri was not simple and safe, especially for women. She often went there with her friends and brothers who also involved in trading activities. They set up a trading group. She said that in the beginning of her business, profits were high, but because the state later increased the tax on imported products, they were forced to give up this kind of trading because most of profit was used to pay taxes.

Currently, together with farming like other Makong families, this household sells groceries such as soap, MSG, cooking oil, manufactured cigarettes, instant noodles, candy, liquor and so on that are on consignment from lowland traders. The wife said that with this trading she could earn around 200,000 VN dongs per month. However, she complained that her husband did not know how to save money; and that he bought several wasteful consumer items without her control.

This family has generated income by making rice whisky since last year. They could increase their income both by selling wine and raising pigs. The wife said that she learned how to make wine from local school teachers. According to her, in the shops of Kinh lowlanders, there is rice wine available, but it is low quality. Lowland traders often mix rice wine with alcohol to increase the alcohol content, which makes villagers not want it. Meanwhile, demand for rice liquor instead of *ruou can*, traditional jar wine, is increasing. She thus thought that it was necessary to adopt new wine making methods to earn a living. In the Makong community, she is the only Makong person who has adopted this form of livelihood. It is probably because her husband is Kinh and she has had more contact with outsiders than other Makong villagers.

Trading of Mr. Dinh Chau and Mrs. Ho Thi Suong²⁵

This case is a different from the one above. This family no longer practices traditional agricultural activities like most Makong families. Their economic life is now totally dependent on income from their business. The husband recounted that in the first few years of their marriage (in the early 1990s), they planted upland rice but crop yield was very low. He explained that his wife was a lowlander unfamiliar with slopping land farming techniques and that he did not have many choices to select a fertile field because several areas were off-limits as protected areas. In addition, he learned that it is important to protect forest, and that slashing and burning caused deforestation. Therefore, his family decided to stop upland rice farming to invest in trading. They opened a shop near the People's Committee Office. In their shop, they sold consumer goods including rice, candy, soap, clothes, production tools, etc. In addition, they also traded illegal forest products including wild animals, and different types of forest products collected by villagers. Sometimes, the husband acts as butcher if a household's cows or pigs die unexpectedly. In addition, he sometimes helps villagers sell large wild animals they have trapped in the forest. In order to maintain a trading business, this family has built relationships with lowland traders, authorities and local people.

²⁵ Pseudo name

Trading has not been a popular livelihood strategy in the Makong community. According to the commune authority's data, in the whole commune, only the two local households who have marriage relationships with lowlander have turned to trading activities as one of their livelihood strategies. Meanwhile, the local authorities believe that the trading should be more widespread in the villages because it helps to improve the living conditions of the local people. They therefore have adopted a policy to encourage both local people and lowlanders to develop trading in most villages. The commune authorities have allowed lowland traders to build shops and have the same access to natural resources as members of the village. This has created several disagreements among villagers. In the case of the Cu Ton village, a lowland family that produces wine and raises pigs has polluted the village environment. Cuton villagers contended that it was the mistake of the village leader and commune authorities to allow the lowlander to live in an upper part of the village. The waste from this family spreads to the whole village when it rains. Sometimes in the summer, bad smell from wine dregs and pig waste makes them to evacuate the village during hot days.

There was a lowlander's shop in Caroong village before 2004, but it was closed when the female owner was pregnant. During my time in Caroong village, another lowlander who had worked in Thuong Trach area for more than ten years asked a permission of the commune authority to build a shop in the village. It was interesting to learn that the Makong villagers have shown their collective power to resist the power of commune authorities after they heard that the trader had received a permit from the chairman of the commune. Caroong village leader called for a village meeting. After the village leader raised the question of whether or not to accept the lowland trader as a part of their village, several serious discussions took place. Normally, Makong women do not talk much in the village meeting but in that meeting, several women raised their voices. A middle-aged woman said, "if we allow Mr. Thu, the lowland trader, to build his shop in our village, we have to accept the influence of lowland lifestyle that would have some impact on our young children". Indeed, according to Makong villagers, this male trader has not only gambles, but also been inappropriately intimate with several young Makong girls, whom he has seduced and impregnated. In Makong traditional morality, it is an insult to her family and

community for a woman to have baby without husband. It will be very difficult for those girls to find a man who will accept them as wives. By the end of the meeting, everyone disapproved of the incorporation of the lowland trader into his or her village. They contend that lowland traders not only take advantage of their position to exploit forest resources, but also undermine traditional Makong morality. Therefore, though the trader had a permission letter from the commune chairman, he would not be allowed to build his shop in Caroong village. According to one Vietnamese proverb, “law of the King is less powerful than the local rights of the village”. In this case, we can see that the Makong people have applied their local rules and collective power to counter the power of the commune authority. Villagers are not passive at all; they have constructed protective measures and regulations for forest use. Outsiders who cut a small tree without permission of the village will be fined 5,000 VN dongs and a bigger fine for cutting down a larger tree. Though this regulation is unwritten, it shows that villagers exercise their rights and do not always obey the authorities.

6.3.3 Improving Political Status

Currently, several Makong people would like to have jobs in one of state departments. It is probably because they have recognized new challenges to their traditional shifting cultivation. If they work for the state, their life will probably be secured by their monthly salary; and they may also have a stronger voice in the community. Of twenty-two households of Caroong village, eight households²⁶ receive monthly salaries from the state. For these reasons, several Makong people want to promote their children into certain positions within the authority system. For instance, the head of the village recommended his son for representative of the People’s Council at the village level as soon as he left his secondary school in the district. This act generated whispers and comments in the village. Several people contended that the village head’s son was a lazy and weak student. He gave up his study because he could not keep up with the school program. Though they argued that

²⁶ 1 retired teacher, 1 retired commune authority, 2 commune authority, 1 commune forester, 1 clinic station staff and village leader and vice leader.

the village head was merely trying to protect his position, they still grudgingly accepted the new arrangement.

Another family, which has a good relationship with the commune authority, has nominated their daughter for chairperson of the Commune Women's Union though she is now only 17 years-old with sixth grade education. This behavior shows that the Makong people consider political status important for their future. It provides them not only a salary but also partly secures their livelihood. It seems that villagers recognize the influence of social change on their traditional life; they therefore see a need for political security. Indeed, looking back at the social structure of the Makong community presented in Chapter IV, we can see that the Makong society has been influenced by a new system imposed by the state. Besides the traditional roles of *Dung Dzang*, elders, and clan leaders, there are new state agencies that have played an influential role in the everyday life of the local people.

A possible consequence of this development is that the power of traditional local institutions including *Dung Dzang*, clan leader, village elders, and so on are replaced by modern political power. This raises a question of whether the Makong traditional society and culture can be preserved with this new power in the future.

6.3.4 Negotiating Social Relationship to Strengthen Livelihood Strategies

In the modern context, the Makong people have built social relationships to adapt to the social change at both household level and community level.

A Makong village was traditionally constructed by households within a single clan. However, as a result of population growth and neighborhood expansion, the multi-clan village has gradually replaced the one-clan village. Meanwhile, the village is increasingly influenced by outside factors including state agencies and Kinh lowland traders. Their life is no longer limited to their own ethnic group but expanded to accommodate with several ethnic groups. Moreover, Thuong Trach is no longer a territory where the Makong people have supreme rights to decide how to practice their traditional and spiritual ways of life. Now that it is classified as a frontier and national park, those who live in Thuong Trach commune must follow state laws

governing natural resource management. This is problematic when the state has narrowed living space of the Makong people and prohibited shifting cultivation, which is closely linked to their economic and cultural life. In general, the Makong people have adapted to the new context. They have opened many doors to adopt state programs and constructed relationships with other ethnic communities. Trading networks have been established; contacts have been made to exchange crop species; community institutions have been adjusted to suit the new situation.

At the household level, people have set up new relationships with different actors in the society as a strategy to find out new sources of income. Some individuals have become involved in the trading network to generate more income. Instead of subsistence built on only upland rice and minor forest products, they have increased their income by participating in the market economy. They have harvested rattan, aloe wood, bamboo shoots and bastard cardamon, and hunted wild animals to sell. Some people have become professional traders because they can no longer farm. Instead, they have set up relationships with other communities that supply them with market goods. A female informant told me that she used to go to Lao Bao town in Quang Tri Province, in the border area with Laos, to buy factory goods such as clothes, mono sodium glutamate, and so on. Presently, she no longer travels as before, and instead her clients from Hoan Lao town deliver manufactured products including mono sodium glutamate, cooking oil, instant noodle, dry fish, soap, etc to her house at least once a month. Mr. Dinh Chau said that merchandise in his shop is delivered in a similar way. Moreover, he knew where he could safely sell "illegal" forest products in town for a higher price. Another young man became a middleman who exchanges wild orchids for factory cigarettes supplied by lowland traders. The Makong people in Thuong Trach have also strengthened their relationship with the Makong people in Laos for kinship ties and also for commercial relationships. For instance, Mr. Giang and Mr. Hoi (vice-chairman of the commune) were informed by some people in Laos that they had discovered aloe wood trees. Mr. Giang and Mr. Hoi therefore went to Laos to buy them.

In addition to setting up trading networks with residents from other communities, some Makong people have built relationships with authorities at

different levels. Through this, they can increase their political status in the community, which in turn provides them a salary. Moreover, it seems that they recognized that the forest is now under the modern management of the state, and their access to the forest may be made easier if they work with the state authorities. As mentioned above, several villagers complained that they could not protect the forest well because they lack power and rights. Indeed, a person with a strong political position will have more power in her/his community. Though this perception is not very popular in the Makong community, it shows that they are no longer limiting themselves to traditional ways of living. In addition, it indicates that individuals have their own ways of adapting to social change. Though several people have had no intention of being involved in state work and have even kept a distance from state cadres, some people have attempted to engage in official work.

6.4 Ritual Practice as a Spiritual Response

Forest is an economic source for the Makong people and also a place where they practice spiritual rituals. The Makong perceive the forest as a cultural landscape embedded with relics of their ancestors and their spirits. However, with the declaration of national park, and the ensuing social transformation, the Makong are being forced to abandon their traditional livelihoods. They have lost the rights to practice their traditional shifting cultivation. At the same time, their spiritual life has also been altered and threatened. Therefore, their responses are expressed through their changes of livelihood strategies and also through their spiritual activities.

In most of the Makong's activities, we still can see their belief in cosmic forces including their ancestral past and spirits. This belief is expressed through their spiritual rituals at both household level and community level. In this section, I will analyze changes in the sense and form of the Makong's rituals and their adjustment of moral norms of behavior.

Ritual at household level

The traditional community of the Makong people has been redefined by the transformation of the society and the intervention of several factors including state policies, market economy and lowland migration. The Makong people have thus sought more strength in their spiritual life. It seems that they find more solace in their life by observing particular rituals. The Makong people believe that they are under the protection of their ancestral beings and spirits. Thus, many of their daily activities relate to worshipping their ancestors and spirits. For instance, before slashing and burning a field, harvesting rice or collecting honey, the Makong perform rituals requesting permission, praying for protection, thanking the spiritual beings for their support. These rituals provide the Makong necessary spiritual strength and assurance that they are not marginalized, that they are still protected by spiritual forces. Moreover, observing rituals in their daily life helps the Makong people overcome the pressure imposed on them by outside forces. Moreover, the Makong practice rituals to reaffirm their ethnic identity.

However, Makong culture and ritual practice are not static but accommodate changes over time. They have adjusted some ritual practices in accordance with changes in their living environment. In order to change their image in the eyes of outsiders and to prove that they are not static and backward, they have adjusted their ritual practices in birth and marriage.

Birth ritual

In the Makong culture, if a mother dies within two weeks after giving birth, her newborn baby must be buried with her. The Makong perceive that the baby needs its mother's milk to survive, and the mother also needs to be with the baby. If the baby is not buried, the mother's soul will return to claim her child and will bring bad luck to the whole community. Outsiders consider this custom evidence of backwardness, superstition and inhumanity.

Nevertheless, the Makong people do not passively accept what outsiders think of this cultural norm. They have altered this traditional practice to match the customary standards of outsiders. In Caroong village, two babies whose mothers died

a few days after their births have been raised by their relatives. One baby named Đường (meaning “sugar”) has been raised by his maternal aunt since 1997. According to his adoptive mother, raising him was initially very difficult because he was too young to eat rice. She had to feed him sugar water instead of milk. She said that it was very lucky that he survived and grew up healthy. When I asked why she went against the traditional custom, she said, “now it is a civilized time, we have to behave more civilized. The ‘backward’ customs should be demolished”. However, she also mentioned that she had to worship Đường’s mother to ask her to give up her child. In particular, when he was sick, she had to sacrifice a small pig as an offering to his mother’s soul because she believed that his mother wanted to take him to be with her. This shows that even though the Makong people have changed some aspects of their customs, they still believe in spirit worship. They have just adapted this practice to be more in keeping with modern society.

Y Vuun is another infant that was saved from ritual death when her mother died only two weeks after she was born. Presently, she lives with her maternal grandparents. These babies are treated as children of the family. Their adoptive parents love them just as much as other relatives and children in the family.

In reality, one must take into account when exploring local context of the Makong people, that they live in a remote area where daily life is always threatened by disease and hunger. A newborn baby can hardly survive without the breast milk of its mother. Even children who are cared by their parents have a very high mortality rate. However, as the Makong people’s conditions have recently been improved, they have set aside their custom of burying the infant together with the mother.

Marital ritual

Makong people have also adjusted their marriage customs. In the past, a woman who became pregnant premaritally was considered a violator of Makong marital norms. She and her boyfriend would not be accepted by the community because they had humiliated the ancestors and spirits and violated community’s moral norms. The Makong believed that their ancestral spirits would be offended and that the whole community would face crop failure, disease or natural disaster, etc. Therefore, in order to ask for their forgiveness from the spirits and people, the couple

must sacrifice one 60 kg pig, some wine and several other items. In addition, the offending woman must observe other rituals to cleanse the bad omen from the whole community. In the end, she must build a fire and step across it while the community witness.

However, the above practice has changed with modernity. Young Makong people are freer to carry out pre-marital relationships with their partners. Several girls have had babies before marriage. Moreover, the tendency of Makong girls to have babies with lowlanders has been on the rise. Several young Makong people believe that if they have more contact with lowland people, they will be treated as modern people. Especially, several young Makong girls want to establish relationships with lowland men because they believe that lowland men may bring to them a better life. However, several lowland men who come to harvest forest products, to construct infrastructure and to trade goods in the Thuong Trach area have taken advantage of these innocent young local girls. Consequently, several unmarried Makong girls have had babies with lowland men. In Caroong village, there is one twenty year old girl with an illegitimate four-year-old son whose father is a lowland trader. After she gave birth, he seldom visited her family though he has still been working in the area. Other villagers blame the situation on her parents, who allowed the lowland trader to stay in their house. It is said that when the girl's parents built their house in 1998, the trader helped them by buying and transporting some construction materials from the lowland. Therefore, they could not stop him from flirting with and taking advantage of their only daughter.

I would like to discuss here how the Makong people perceive premarital pregnancy. According to a forty-year-old female informant, it is becoming more normal for a Makong woman to have a baby without a husband or before getting married. She said that in the past, premarital pregnancy was seen as a violation of spiritual and moral norms. This kind of offence would be punished and certain rituals had to be performed. Nevertheless, nowadays, though those women are not respected by people, they are still accepted as members of the community. They are not forced to sacrifice offerings as they would have had to in the past. However, some rituals have to be performed within their family to pray for the support of the ancestral spirits.

This change shows that the Makong people have adjusted their customs to their new context. I wonder whether they changed their belief or just changed practices to show outsiders that their way of living is similar to that of lowland people. They also probably perceive that the forest landscape has been invaded by the lowland illegal loggers and taken over by the state. As a result, traditional customs and beliefs are losing their relevance. Whatever the true reason, this custom has changed, which can be understood as a reaction of the Makong people to the new context in which their community has more and more contact with outsiders. They must adjust their perceptions and their customs to accommodate the change.

Ritual Responses at Community Level

Changes take place not only on the individual and household level but also in community ceremonies. This section focuses on the participation of Makong villagers in traditional ceremonies and on what they think about the sense of current ceremonies. Community participation in the 2004 Drum Beating Ceremony was much lower than previous years.

One researcher from Hue was very impressed by the Drum Beating Ceremony of the Makong people in Thuong Trach after he had observed it in February 2003. He said that he had not planned to attend. He was introduced to this ceremony when he was doing research among the Arem people in Tan Trach commune. However, when visiting Caroong village, he was extremely attracted to the sacred space of the ceremony and the animated climate created by all Makong participants (Hang 2003). He recounted that in the evening of January 15 of lunar calendar the *Dung Dzang*, representing the whole Makong community, performed a ritual to worship the God. After that, one person was assigned to worship at the sacred stone site in sacred stream to start catching fish for the ceremony. In evening on the sixteenth, everybody gathered in Caroong village to celebrate the festival. The preparations had been made in previous months; all households contributed some sticky rice for the *Dung Dzang* to cook for the wine making. They also slaughtered a cow whose leather was used to make the drum.

However, when I participated in the ritual in January 2004, the atmosphere was totally different. People's participation was less than enthusiastic and very slack. Only children expressed their curiosity and eagerness. Adults seemed indifferent to the ceremony. According to Caroong villagers, many people from other villages did not come to join this ceremony. A forty-six year old woman said that at the previous drum beating ceremonies, participants in the ceremony in Caroong village were crowded as "ants". She said that from her house she saw just black heads of participants because the village yard was full of people. Having seen the same thing, a Makong man expressed pity for me because he thought that this year's ceremony was not enough fun, and I had taken a long trip from Hue to join them. A son of the *Dung Dzang* also complained that very few villages contributed offerings. He said that a village traditionally contributed two chickens, one wine jar, rattan shoots, etc, but this year, 18 villages contributed only four chickens. Nobody collected rattan shoots, so in the end he had to go to forest to get some for the ritual himself. He contends that people blamed the lack of offerings on the rainy and cold weather, but in reality, they thought that the authorities would have supplied several things for his family to organize the ritual. He said that those who were assigned to construct a ritual stage required his family to share with them one wine jar and cigarettes that were provided by the authority instead of doing it as their traditional responsibility.

The ceremony would traditionally last until noontime of the next day, but because the district delegation wanted to return to their home early, the commune authorities asked the *Dung Dzang* to wrap up the closing ritual at 7 am before seeing them off. The authorities redefined the sense and the rhythm of ritual procedures with their request. The spiritual sense of the Drum Beating Ceremony was changed by the intervention of powerful authorities.

Spiritual responses of the Makong people can be seen in how they performing these rituals. As mentioned in Chapter IV, the Makong people have their own legends about their cultural landscapes. The Makong expressed their rights to occupy the forest, which has recently become Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park. I would argue that the Makong people use the traditional landscape myths to demonstrate that they have lived in the area longer, and that their ancestors created the Thuong Trach area.

Therefore, they have more legitimate rights to the forest than the state. They also show that they want to claim their ancestral rights over the land. For instance, the myth about how the Makong's ancestors fought the magic serpent to save the whole Thuong Trach area is a way to legitimize their rights over the cultural landscape. They want to remind outsiders and the authorities that their ancestors have rights over the forest in the Thuong Trach area.

Summary

Under the pressure from external factors including national park policies, development programs, market intervention, the Makong people have still expressed their power and their strength. They do not passively accept the arrangement of the rulers but instead try to look for solutions, which are appropriate for their livelihoods and their cultural values.

In terms of economic livelihood, they have used several survival strategies. Some people have begun to trade by opening grocery shops or harvesting minor forest product for cash. Those who have relationships with lowlanders are involved in wild animal trade. This sometimes brings them into confrontations with state forest conservation officials. However, most Makong families continue to maintain their traditional livelihood and have adopted some new crop species to improve their production.

In terms of spiritual life, the Makong people believe in the ancestors and spirits. Their ritual practice has brought them strength in facing different pressures including constraint of forest access, state intervention, and the influence of the market economy and the Kinh majority culture. The Makong people express their identity and spiritual beliefs in most of their daily activities. However, they have changed some customs to improve their cultural ties with the rest of society. They no longer bury newborn infant together with their mother if the mother dies. In addition, they do not expel unmarried pregnant woman. These adjustments are a way in which they aim to improve their image in the mind of outsiders who think that they are backward and superstitious. They want to demonstrate that the Makong also behave as the dominant Kinh people do. Yet, they still retain their Makong ethnic identity.