

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters provide a view of the impact of state 's hegemony on the Makong people who live in Phong Nha-Ke Bang national park. The Makong people have experienced many changes through different historical periods. Mountainous areas in Quang Binh and Quang Tri provinces were not of interest to the feudal and colonial rulers. The Makong people had little contact with the outside world before the First Indochina war (1945 – 1954) when mountainous areas were recognized as strong bases for the growth of the communist party in Vietnam. Several highland ethnic minority groups were seen as supporters of the national revolution. Several young Makong people in Thuong Trach commune participated in the revolution against the French. During the American war, when the country was politically divided into south and north, the Makong area was a base for Vietnamese communist revolutionaries trying to liberate the south from American control.

However, during the American war the Makong people suffered tremendous damage. Their villages were located near the Truong Son trail, which was built by Vietnamese communists and youth volunteers to transport supplies from the North to the South. The American army bombed this area continuously to cut the connection between the southern and northern communists. Consequently, those who lived near the Truong Son trail were the most affected. Specifically, the Makong people were forced to seek shelter in caves; their farming was interrupted and their life depended more on gathering forest products.

The Makong returned their villages after the war ended in 1975. However, they faced new difficulties when the state declared Phong Nha a protected area in 1986. The state has used different strategies to legalize their control over forest resources. They blamed deforestation on the traditional shifting cultivation of mountainous ethnic minorities and the Makong people in particular. The state

demarcated protected areas as a legitimate way of prohibiting traditional shifting cultivation. Most of forests of the Makong people in Thuong Trach are territorialized as core zone of the Phong Nha-Ke Bang national park. The Makong people's rights to use the forest have been narrowed in a certain area that does not allow them to practice their traditional shifting cultivation.

The exclusion of the Makong people from the forest indicates that the state has ignored their traditional practices. It has not recognized that there are local institutions in the Makong community, especially the role of *Dung Dzang* and traditional regulations that help control resource overuse. The forest protection that emerges out of the spiritual beliefs of the Makong people has not been identified. The cultural and spiritual sense of forest of the Makong people has been redefined as an economic resource and ecological system by the state. Presently, both material and spiritual lives of the Makong people have been disrupted by state policies. However, this does not mean that they are totally controlled by the dominant Kinh culture. They have their own ways of maintaining their survival and identity. Following are three main findings of this study that concentrate on how the Makong people are excluded from their traditional life and how they reconstruct their way of life.

7.1 Major Findings of the Study

After national reunification, the Vietnamese government recognized forest as a primary potential revenue source for national economic recovery. The declaration of protected areas is also a strategy of legitimizing state ownership over the forest. The state forest policy has given control and management of forests to the state forestry enterprises as representatives of the state. Even though the 1986 *Doi Moi* policy introducing a market economy has allocated land use rights, highland ethnic minority people still face several challenges with the state forest protection programs. Local communities living inside and around forests identified as a protected area or national park have been relocated to non-protected areas or allowed to live in a limited territory. Different state programs interfere in their lives in the name of 'development'.

Such programs aim to improve the lives of local people, but in fact, they are marginalizing from their traditional life.

The Makong people in Thuong Trach have been deprived of their right to use the forest. Most of their forests have been declared strict protected zones of the national park where any act of forest use is prohibited. In addition, their traditional shifting cultivation has been discouraged because it is seen as a cause of deforestation. Meanwhile, Makong people's lives have been based on forest resources. Therefore, one of their reactions to exclusion from the forest has been to find new survival strategies. Different individuals have different strategies to solve economic difficulties, based on their conditions and backgrounds. Makong families who already have relationships with lowlanders have engaged in trade, opening grocery shops or selling minor forest products. Most Makong households are involved in harvesting rattan, aloe wood, hunting wild animals to sell or exchange with lowland traders. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, several Makong men worked as guides for lowland aloe wood exploiters. The increasing number of lowland traders and forest exploiters has brought the Makong people into contact with market economy.

However, households whose members involved in state work at the commune or village levels have attempted to seek positions in the system of the local authorities. A monthly salary from state work provides them a stable income stream. In addition, they hope that this strategy will bring them power in a new context.

Most of Makong households have gradually adapted to the state intervention. They have accepted new crop varieties to increase productivity rather than expanding the production area. They are looking for higher yielding rice and also developing gardens. Each household has a small garden near their house where they grow vegetables, tobacco, banana, mango, lichee and custard apple provided by resettlement programs and border police. Gardening has not yet brought income for local people but it shows a tendency to settle their farming. This is illustrated by one household that invested a lot of money in growing coffee plants, which they bought from Daklak Province. Wet rice is one of crops that the authorities have used to replace upland rice in some Makong villages of Thuong Trach commune. The authorities have invested in three hectares of wet rice field in Champu village. In

Caroong village, wet rice has not been introduced by the state but one household has started to create a wet rice field.

Meanwhile, several Makong people, particularly old people, have expressed a refusal to conform to the state policies. Several Makong people contend that they may move to the deeper forest if the state attempts to force them to stop traditional slash and burn cultivation. They claim that they cannot stop practicing their traditional shifting cultivation because it is a part of their life and their identity.

When the Makong people are excluded from the forest, not only their traditional livelihood but also their cultural practices are affected. According to the Makong culture, forest is not only a subsistent material source but has spiritual being meaning. Forest is a place where they practice rituals and ceremonies. Moreover, it connect to their community's history which expresses through myths about landscape, stone, big trees, etc. Therefore, under the state hegemony, their cultural landscape is no longer meaningful because local perception of the forest has changed. Several Makong people perceive the forest as state property rather than their ancestors' dwellings. They seem to no longer hold the belief that overuse of forest resources and violation of spirit dwellings will be punished. Many Makong people contend that if they do not harvest forest resources, nothing remains for them because forest is now controlled by state officials and exploited by lowlanders. It is made worse when they realize the corruption of state officials who work as forest protectors and take bribes from illegal exploiters. Villagers contend that forest protection just enriches the state forest 'protectors'. Therefore, instead of protecting forest according to their traditional custom, several Makong people have engaged into forest exploitation to sell. This commercial forest use is also different from their traditional practice. For instance, hunted animals were traditionally divided for all households in the village but now people sell the animal for cash and some villagers hunt as a career to earn money.

The Makong people are seen as inferior and most activities in their community are not decided by them but by the state officials who do not recognize local institutions, such as *Dung Dzang*, elderly people, and clan leaders. For instance, the Drum Beating Ceremony is a traditional Makong festival, but the celebration of which

was recently guided by the authorities. It indicates that local people are even deprived of rights to exercise their own cultural practices. The sense of the ceremony seems to be changed by state intervention. Consequently, the participation of the Makong villagers in the Drum Beating Ceremony is limited.

Moreover, in the context of the market economy, several lowland traders see Thuong Trach as one area where they can gain many benefits from local forest resources. Together with reduced forest assess rights, several Makong people engaged in trading as a new livelihood strategy. The intervention of traders in the Makong society has changed their social relationships. Moreover, individualism affects the neighborhood among households. People no longer voluntarily help each other, but instead exchange assistance for cash or kind. They even compete with each other for positions in the Commune People Committee. Villagers have set up relationships with other communities including authorities, lowland traders and villagers in surrounding villages such as, the Arem people in Tan Trach commune, Van Kieu people in Truong Son commune and Makong people in Laos.

Traditional social norms and moralities are also changed when local people have frequent contact with lowlanders. Perceptions about marriage, relationships between children and parents, young people and old people, etc. is changed. People have gradually accepted unmarried young Makong mothers who used to be considered a shame of the family and the community. Children fighting or quarreling with their parents has also become normal. Young people seem to neglect the teachings of elderly people because they want to learn the lowland way of life instead.

7.2 Theoretical Discussion

Issues related to natural resource management have been widely studied, especially in Southeast Asia. Vietnam in particular has recognized the importance of natural resource in the development. It is identified forest resources as state property. As Peluso (1993) stated, the nation-state has the capacity, the internal legitimacy, and the will to manage all natural resource within its territorial boundary. Indeed, developing states use conservation as a rationale to justify their intervention into the

lives of local people. The government defends threatened resources. The legitimate intervention in the name of resource control also helps the government control people, especially marginal groups, or minority groups who contest state resource claims (Peluso 1993).

The Vietnamese government has issued several policies to manage the forest. Setting up protected areas is considered as one of the most important of these strategies, and the state has demarcated and given title to the forest, in the form of national parks, natural reserves, and cultural historical sites. By such territorialization, according to Vandergeest and Peluso (1995:388), the state is "excluding or including people within the boundaries and controlling what people do and their access to natural resources within the boundaries". Vietnamese government has also used territorialization and mapping as tools to take control of resources. Recently, the state has allocated some forest for people and included local people in forest management. Simultaneously, they have also developed different regulations to exclude people from the forest use. Under this exclusion, villagers have to adopt different strategies consistent with those witnessed by Scott (1985, 1990). According to Scott, the poor also have their own power, their own weapon to resist marginalization. In some cases, they use collective strategies but in some cases, individual tactics are common. The change in their everyday livelihood, the gossiping about the state officials, the intentional ignorance of state policy, the demonstration and violent fighting are ways of indirectly expressing their response.

However, the Makong people do not react violently to state policy. Individuals have different solutions and tactics to avoid the challenges to their survival. This is similar to what Piseth (2002) saw in the response of the Cambodian fishers in Tonle Sap Lake. Fishers around the Lake used individual tactics to survive after the Cambodia state declared the lake state property. Though living in a different context, the Makong people have similar reactions. Each household has identified their own way to maintain their survival and their livelihood. Most of them have attempted to adapt to the new situation. However, because changes in state forestry management and development policies have affected traditional practices of local people, their adaptation is also a threat to their traditional values. For instance, as

Vien (2003) states, ethnic minorities have continued to practice their traditional livelihood by gathering, fishing, hunting but their present access practices are totally different from what is defined in their customary law. Vien (2003:208) contends that “in the former time, they (local people) had equal rights to access to their common resources, but now their resource access is referred as ‘theft’. With this change, they also shift in their attitude on utilizing resources; they try to reap as much as possible”.

The above studies apply political economy approach to analyze the impact of state policies upon local communities. With a different approach, I use the cultural approach to look at the research problem in my thesis. My argument is that the local communities have two dimensions: physical world and spiritual world. The latter one is less paid attention by most of researches. For instance, in the case of the Makong people, forest is not a material source but a dwelling of their ancestral spirits. Forest has cultural meanings for them.

I agree with Morphy (1995) argument that landscape and ancestral past of the Aboriginal people have a close relationship. Morphy contends, “they recognize the existence of ancestral forces in the land, and they feel the spirits of generations of the dead in the surrounding land” (loc.cit, 186). He contends that in Aboriginal society, every place, every ceremony and every creature on the land is cemented with mythological stories as original histories. Similar world view is found in the Makong community, they perceive that physical form of the earth was created by their ancestral beings. As their ancestors traveled, they made the landscape of hills, valleys, rocks, pools and streams, the plants and animals that inhabit on the landscape, and the elements on which all life depends.

Kahn (2000) points out the relationship between the Tahitians and the land. She recognizes that Tahitians perceive land as a nurturing mother of human and that personal identity and social relationships of the Tahitian people are defined by the genealogical ties to land. For the Tahitians, their ancestral past and their current life are grounded in the relationship between people and land. When a child is born, his/her mother will bury the placenta and umbilical cord in the ground where they live so that the land can take care of the child. They contend that the land feeds them; it provides them with means to survive and care for their offspring. In addition, it

provides them with a moral and spiritual feeling of identity and genealogical connection because many topographical features on land were imprinted by their ancestral movements and settlements (loc.cit). With such belief, the Tahitians view their task as caring for the land.

In sum, to study about the cultural landscape and ritual practice of local communities is significant. It helps to understand their worldview. In addition, it also helps to analyze how they organize their society and their response to the outside intervention.

7.3 Recommendations

Upland ethnic minority groups in Vietnam have their own culture. They have their own cosmology that defines their perceptions of forest and nature. Therefore, any intervention into the local environment of ethnic minority people should take into account the local context and culture. The specific case study of the Makong people in Thuong Trach commune is a foundation for the following recommendations.

1. Development programs that have been applied to the Makong in Thuong Trach and in most of ethnic minority communities generally are imposed by the central government. They are designed based on a view that differs from the local people's. Therefore, they have not succeeded. Forest continues to be depleted though state agencies have strengthened their management measures. People's lives have not been improved though many state development programs have been implemented to support them. More than that, traditional culture of the community is threatened. Therefore, it is very important for development programs and forest management programs to be concerned about the local culture and people. In addition, local knowledge should be respected and integrated into such programs because it represents the accumulated experiential wisdom of a long period of time.

2. The attitude and understanding of the state officials may contribute to or contrarily decrease the effectiveness of the development programs. It is very important to reorganize and improve the capacity and attitudes of state officials who work directly with local people. Observations in the Thuong Trach commune show that state officials have applied the perception, way of life and culture of the Kinh

majority in implementing development programs and forestry management programs. They ignore the existence and culture of the Makong people. Moreover, several state officials have taken used their position for personal gain rather than to complete their tasks. Makong people in Thuong Trach have seen state forest protectors as those who promote deforestation. Consequently, they do not involve the participation of the local people. Many villagers have ignored forest protection programs and even attempted to exploit as much forest as possible. Therefore, it is very important and necessary to train knowledge on local cultures for state officials. In addition, state policies should respect the local cultural practice. In order to involve the participation of the local people in state policies, the state should provide them a space to practice their rituals, their cultural activities. That is also a way that they can conserve their community's identities.

3. The involvement of local people in forest protection is extremely crucial. They are those who live in the forest; they are thus better able to control what happens in the forest than outsiders. Though the state has allocated some forest for the local community, they practically do not have rights over the resource or power to enforce the laws. Therefore, land and forest should be re-allocated to local people with the participation of the whole community and clear regulations about duties and benefits of specific parties. In addition, in case of forest protection teams, it is also worth considering the opinion expressed by wild animal trappers and Makong villagers "the present forest protectors are outsiders; they (state forest officials) just drive motorcycles along a main road when implement their task, how they arrest illegal exploiters!". This statement underscores that the forest protection will not succeed if it does not involve local people.