

## CHAPTER VI

### PRACTICES OF NEGOTIATION AS SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

This chapter will discuss on how local people cope with their situation when they are marginalized, dominated, and subjugated. I will present various forms of negotiation used by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. For this purpose, the chapter will discuss individual acts or behaviors ranging from subtle, indirect, nonconfrontational forms to organized and confrontational ones as well as thoughts and meanings, which actors had given to their acts. For me, collecting data for this chapter was hard work that I had to do during my fieldwork because it is very difficult to determine the purposes behind an act. I spent a lot of time carrying out conversations and observation to accumulate enough data on people's behaviors in order to gain a fuller understanding. Then, I also tried to put what the people did into the context of the changing social conditions. My discussion in the following three parts will focus mainly on a small number of actors. However, I hope that the stories can provide some insights about how the Bahnar people in Buon Luoi have negotiated in order to maintain their life and that their culture.

#### 6.1 Diversity of Reaction to Resource Losses

It was in the middle of an afternoon of June 9, 2005 when I carried out an interview with members of a forest checkpoint of SPSFE located at the head of Buon Luoi village. One member of this forest protection team (FPT), who was sitting and talking to me about how members of team protected the forests, stood up suddenly, ran to the road in front of the station and shouted, "Fuck your mother, H'Mo! If you continue to cut down our forests for your plantation, we will catch you and bring you to prison!" I looked up in the direction where the member of the FPT was shouting at, and saw a small man with rumpled hair in ragged clothes produced for the Vietnamese soldiers. It seemed to me that the man did not hear any insult that was thrown at him as he kept walking silently along the deserted road. Seeing the attitude

of the ethnic man, the protection staff was very angry, so he again shouted loudly, “Remember about my warnings today, H’Mo!” Then, he turned to me and explained, “You know, H’Mo is one of the forest destroyers with a number of very complicated tactics. We face many difficulties in dealing with forest destroyers such as this guy.”

H’Mo, according to the members of FPT, cleared three large areas of forests and sold them to the Kinh people within the first half of the 1990s. In 1997, H’Mo cut down another two hectares of “SPSFE’s forests” with the reason that his family did not have enough cultivation land. The area of forest he cut down was the site of Buon Luoi in its early history. From thence on, this cultivation land had been enlarged day-to-day. Nowadays, H’Mo’s cultivation area had increased to more than 4 ha. The So Pai SFE and the Communal Executive People’s Committee (CEPC) of So Pai commune had tried a number of ways to stop his enlargement of cultivation land including to cancel a contract on forest protection between the H’Mo family and SPSFE, and to call him to the office of the CEPC, and give him a stern warning. However, such attempts apparently did not matter to H’Mo. His cultivation area continued to grow with more sophisticated tactics. Meanwhile, the SPSFE could not bring H’Mo into the court because the area of forest destroyed at one time was small and unclear, and the national laws did not have a punishment for this mode of forest clearance.

In fact, it was not at the time of my visit to the forest checkpoint that I had a chance to learn about H’Mo. I had heard a number of stories relating to everyday activities of Bă Bu. Commonly, H’Mo is called Bă Bu, which means father of Bu (Bu is the name of his first son). In his mid thirties, Bă Bu was one of the well-known men in So Pai commune. He became a well-known man not only because of his cutting of the forest, but also because of his minor forest product harvesting, drinking, and debt.

It is said that Bă Bu was one of the most experienced hunters at Buon Luoi. He could hear animals’ sound or even smell them from a one-or-two mile distance. He had four excellent hunting dogs, which made support him very well during his hunting sessions. Besides his hunting experience, Bă Bu also had good skills of harvesting natural bee’s honey and forest fruits. He could climb up tall trees easily by moving around small trees for his gatherings. Annually, he hunted a large number of wild animals, and he gathered large amounts of natural honey, forest fruits, and other

minor forest products, and was one of the important suppliers of those products to traders.

Within the communal sphere, Bă Bu also appeared as one of the people who knew how to eat and to drink well. I was told that Bă Bu usually went to the most delicious and expensive food store at the center of So Pai commune for eating and drinking. Sometimes, he spent the whole day eating and drinking in this food store with his friends. Moreover, when he had hunted good game, everyone could be his drinking friend.

In addition, Bă Bu was the first person of Buon Luoi that attempted a claim for an official recognition of his family as a poor one. While people of the poor families in his village were afraid of borrowing money from the National Fund for the Poor created by the government, Bă Bu quickly borrowed ten million VND (the maximum amount that a poor household could borrow without collateral from the National Fund for the Poor) after he got the official record as being the poor. Bă Bu had used his borrowed money to buy a good pump, which cost seven million VND, for watering his coffee garden, and a cow for a long-term income.

Actually, it was not at the time of my visit to the forest checkpoint that I had a chance to learn about Bă Bu. My first talk with Bă Bu was on April 28, 2004. The purpose of the talk was to collect some general information on household economy and land use patterns of his family. When I came to his house, it was 8 o'clock in the morning, Bă Bu had gone out to work for a Kinh family; and there were his wife and four children staying at home. I tried very hard to talk with his wife but she did not want to talk to me, and told me to wait for her husband. But Bă Bu also did not want to talk to me when he came back to his house. Moreover, his attitude towards me was very impolite. Recognizing his impolite behavior, I decided to stop my interview and left the house.

My second talk with Bă Bu happened three days before the day I did interviews with the staff of the forest protection team, when I came to help Bă Nhang, a son-in-law of the traditional village headman and a younger brother of Bă Bu, planting upland rice. Seeing that Bă Bu and his wife were sitting silently in a group of people who came to help Bă Nhang, I came to make a greeting to them. But both of them did not say a word to me. I tried to talk to Bă Bu by asking the question about if

he had some drink in the morning. Some women sitting around were laughing at Bă Bu after hearing my question. I did not catch the meanings of the women's laughing. While they laughed, I told him that I had just wanted to make a joke and I was very sorry if the question bothered him. But, instead of seeing his acceptance of my apology, I saw that Bă Bu seemed to be more worried. Moreover, Bă Bu and his wife were moving away from the group. During the planting time, I noticed that Bă Bu and his wife tried to keep a distance from my place. Later I saw Bă Bu's wife, Mê Bu, coming alone to the small thanksgiving party given to people who had helped planting upland rice by Bă Nhang's family in the evening of that day. I had felt very sorry for my joke. After the greeting drink of the party, I came to talk with Mê Bath, one of the villagers coming to help Bă Nhang's family, to find out why the women were laughing at Bă Bu when I talked to him. She told me that the women had thought that I wanted to mention a funny story known among the villagers at Buon Luoi, which described Bă Bu as a motorbike and alcohol as petroleum, and that the motorbike would not run without petrol consumption. Then, I asked her if she could ask Mê Bu where Bă Bu was. After a short conservation with Mê Bu, Mê Bath turned to me and said that Bă Bu stayed in the forest cottage to keep an eye on forest fires in their area, where the family was preparing for their upland rice plantation. I had felt better after hearing this information.

When all people had had some drink and shared stories among themselves, and I became more open, and Mê Bu had learnt more about me, I suppose, she turned to me and said that she and Bă Bu did not want to talk to me in the morning because they were afraid that I was a cadre of the local authorities coming to observe how they had cut down the forest for agricultural cultivation. The reason for this worry, according to Mê Bu, was that one week before four members of the forest protection team carrying two guns came to cultivation area of her family to investigate the forest clearance. They produced a record to deforestation for the cultivation of Bă Bu's family in order to make an official punishment. Then they asked Bă Bu and his wife to sign it, but both of them had resisted by saying that they did not know how to write. The members of the FPT got very angry. They cursed and threatened the couple in order to obtain their signatures. Both Mê Bu and Bă Bu had just kept silent and concentrated on their work, weeding grass in the coffee area. Finally, the members of

the FPT left the cultivation area without any signatures. Before leaving the cultivation area of Bă Bu's family, the members of the FPT said that they would come back to destroy the crops planted in the invaded land as they used to do with other families in the village.

In the evening of that day I interviewed the members of the FPT, and I decided to go to visit Bă Bu's family again to collect data. I reached the house of the family at the time that Bă Bu and his wife were arguing with each other, which I concluded from the sound of their voices. The couple stopped their argument when they saw me appear at their doorstep. Because there was a small oil lamp hanging on the back wall, I could not see the faces of the couple clearly to predict if the argument was serious or not. Therefore, I asked them: "You are sharing stories with each other, aren't you! May I come in?" While Bă Bu just said "Come in!" Mê Bu gave me a more polite invitation: "Come in, Trung. It is a normal story in our family whenever Bă Bu comes back from the forest cottage (*nhà đậm*)."<sup>1</sup> As I have learnt various stories about this couple before, I said to Mê Bu, "Bă Bu has stayed in the forest for more than two weeks, Mê Bu has to know how to pamper Bă Bu. Mê Bu also has part of the drink that you buy for Bă Bu, don't you?" "You are right! She even drinks more than me," chimed in Bă Bu. Responding to our jokes, Mê Bu explained, "I have bought some Kinh made wine for Bă Bu and he has drunken it all. I cannot buy more whisky for him because I have to save some money to buy a chicken and some meat for the meal for when we plant rice next week." Pausing for a while, she continued, "We raised some chickens to be used for the ritual of the planting of upland rice, but all of them were stolen last night. Thieves have stolen many of our products. Poor us!" I then asked why their good dogs could not help them to protect the chickens. Bă Bu told me that: "My dogs are different from the dogs of the Kinh people. They have been trained with some skills for hunting, but not for attacking people. Even if they were trained with skills of attacking people, they would not confront thieves in this area, because the thieves are very smart and they can 'bite' the dogs easily." When Bă Bu was talking to me, I realized that his voice was angry and indignant. And I decided that I should not continue talking about this issue, since I was not a good friend of the family.

While I was thinking how to change the topic of our conversation, a man came to Bă Bu's house. It was Mr. Rong, commonly called Bă Di (father of Di), "one new emerging hunting expert of Buon Luoi" (from an interview with members of FPT). It was said that Bă Di has just become a hunter after all the cultivation land of his family was sold to pay for the health treatment of his wife, who had a serious illness for two years after she gave birth to their second child, and she died in 2001. Bă Di has struggled very hard to survive with his two young children, a four-year-old and a two-year-old, after his wife's death. The everyday life of Bă Di and his children depended on the small income collected from carrying out odd jobs for families in the village, and hunting and gathering of minor forest products. According to Bă Di, as I had learnt from my talk with him in the past, he had received great support from Bă Bu's family as Bă Bu usually lent his hunting dogs to Bă Di and Mê Bu's wife took care of the two children while Bă Di went on his hunting trips.

In an attempt to stay away from the previous subject, I told Bă Di that I would like to participate in his hunting activities in order to learn about the forests of Buon Luoi, if he did not mind. After he had sat down on the mat, Bă Di told me that Bă Bu had made a plan of organizing a hunting session for the next day, and I had to get permission from Bă Bu if I wanted to participate in it. When I turned to Bă Bu to ask for his permission to allow me to participate in the hunting, his answer was non-committal. He gave me various reasons, from which I assumed that he meant that my participation would lead to some difficulties for his hunting. But I was not discouraged. I tried to tell him that I would not be a burden because I was trained to be a forester and I had participated in hunting games in many places with different ethnic people.

While Bă Bu and Bă Di were reconsidering their decision, I asked both men if I could go and buy a liter of wine as small gift in return for receiving their permission. I saw that the face of Bă Bu brightened up when he heard of my offering. He then said to me: "Ok! You can join our hunting. But if you cannot follow us, you have to come back to the village by yourself." Seeing that I was preparing to take off to buy the wine, Bă Bu told me, "we will lose a lot of time to wait for you here because it is very dark and you are not familiar with the road here. Let Bă Di go and buy it for you." I gave 30,000 VND to Bă Di and told him to buy one liter of good wine and to use the

remaining change to buy some snacks for the six children, including the two children of Bă Di, who were sitting and listening our talk.

Bă Di went to a wine store and came back very quickly. While all the children were very happy with their own snacks, Bă Bu carefully poured the wine from the plastic bag into a bottle. When he realized that I was watching how he poured out the wine, he smiled happily and told me, “this is very delicious wine. It is twice as expensive as the type that we usually drink. I cannot afford to waste even a drop.” Bă Bu poured the wine from the bottle into four small cups and he gave one to me, one to Bă Di and one to his wife. After we said some words of cheer to each other, I saw the three of them finish their cup quickly and all of them shout at once “what a delicious wine!” After each of us had two cups of wine, I started to ask Bă Bu and Bă Di about the hunting plan on the next day and their experience in hunting with a hope that I could learn something about the changes of hunting styles or ecological changes. But this intention was brought to an end quickly. Bă Bu just gave me very short instructions about what shoes and clothes to wear, and the he told me that their hunting game was very simple and I could learn when I participated in the hunting.

Different from the stories that people told me about his drinking, Bă Bu got drank after each of us had five cups of wine and he sprawled out on the mat and slept. Seeing Bă Bu’s situation, I said goodbye to his wife and Bă Di, and went back to the house of the traditional village headman to take notes and prepare for the next day.

I woke up at six o’clock in the morning of the next day. Following the instructions of Bă Bu, I wore casual clothes and Vietnamese slippers and brought with me a small notebook, my camera, and a bottle of water. At half past six, I left the house of the traditional village headman. On the way to Bă Bu’s house, I bought a half of kilogram of sea fish and a cabbage from one vendor to cook for breakfast with Bă Bu’s family. When I arrived at Bă Bu’s house, Bă Bu and Bă Di had already cooked rice. The fish and vegetables were quickly cooked and we finished breakfast quickly. If I did not bring fish and cabbage, the two men would have eaten the cooked rice only with some salt, as I learned during our meal.

We left Bă Bu’s house for hunting at eight o’clock with hunting tools, which included the four dogs, a slingshot, and a knife. Bă Bu guided us to a shortcut through numerous large coffee gardens to a hunting area. Walking though the coffee gardens,

I learnt a number of stories about how the forests had been transformed into coffee gardens. As provided by Bă Bu and Bă Di, one half of these beautiful gardens were established illegally by the staff of the SPSFE and Kinh immigrants, while the remainder was developed from the fallow lands of the Bahnar people. All of these coffee gardens were small individual vegetable gardens at first. They grew very quickly within one or two years, and then became one big coffee garden. The Bahnar in Buon Luoi had voiced up against these coffee gardens when they tried to claim agricultural land. But everything remained unchanged. I had also observed that these coffee gardens were still being enlarged as some trees were being cut and were lying around disorderly in the gardens.

After one and a half hours of crossing coffee gardens, we arrived at a forest area. When we were walking in the forest, Bă Bu and Bă Di told me that twenty years ago the forests were full of hundred-year-old hardwood trees, such as trac (*dalbergia cochinchinesis*), giang huong<sup>1</sup> (*pterocarpus macrocarpus*), xoay (*dialium cochinchinense*) and sao (*hopea recopae*). All of those trees disappeared because of the exploitation of the SPSFE. Nowadays, only very small trees are left. This forest area is called a protection area for natural rehabilitation by the SPSFE. For the SPSFE, “this is an economic way to rehabilitate the forest to be regenerated to its previous stage.”

It took us another one hour of walking into the deeper forest until we arrived to an area covered by bushes and grasses, where Bă Bu believed that there were two or three porcupines. According to Bă Bu, his belief was derived from signals that he had heard in the forest and by the barking of his dogs when he came to fish in the area one month ago. He did not immediately organize a hunting team to catch these porcupines because he thought that it would be better if he could catch one when his family had to do upland rice planting. It was also the custom of the Bahnar. Moreover, he could exchange hunting products for other market product necessities.

After a whistle from Bă Bu, the four dogs started working. They searched for the smell of the porcupines in the bushes while the three of us just walked behind the

<sup>1</sup> According to my knowledge, one kilogram of timber of the *trac* and *giang huong* species is selling at the market for various prices ranging from 1 US \$ to 3 US \$ in the forests at Buon Luoi, and from 7 US \$ to 10 US\$ in suburban Hanoi. At the borderline between Vietnam and China, this price is raised to 20 US \$ or 30 US \$.

dogs. Sometimes Bă Bu and Bă Di picked up small stones and threw them into bushes to draw attention from the dogs. At eleven o'clock, one dog had pinpointed a strong smell of porcupine and it barked excitedly. Bă Bu turned to me and said: "You cannot run with us, can you! So, listen and follow the dog's barks to define the right direction to follow. And be careful with your steps in order to protect yourself from the traps that the Kinh and Tay people put around this area." Then the two men rushed forward to the place where the dogs were barking excitedly. Ten minutes later, I heard dog barks and the voices of Bă Bu and Bă Di calling each other, and after that I only heard running footsteps. And a short while later, the noises had moved to the other side of the base of the hill.

I spent almost one hour to reach the place where the two men and the dogs were sitting for a rest. Bă Bu told me that they had almost caught a porcupine to the point where the dogs could restrain it and Bă Bu could behead it. However, because the porcupine was quite big and strong, it had gotten away and crept into its hole by the place where they sat. The hole was small and about three meters deep, thus the dogs could not get in to take the porcupine out. Bă Bu and Bă Di were thinking of digging a hole to catch the porcupine.

We ate our lunch quickly. Then we started to dig a hole in order to catch the porcupine. Since we did not bring any digging tools, Bă Bu and Bă Di cut a small tree and made a digging crowbar. The three of us took turn to dig the hole. Our work was slow due to the hard soil. At four o'clock in the afternoon, Bă Bu told Bă Di and I that we should stop our work and to go back to the village. We could come back to catch the porcupine the following day. We cut down some tree branches to fence the hole to prevent the porcupine from running out of the hole. Before we left the area, I had been instructed not to say anything that may relate to the porcupine hunt. This was to prevent other hunters from hunting the targeted porcupine first. This was because, according to Bă Bu and Bă Di, other Kinh hunters and Tay hunters usually went hunting at night and we could lose our porcupine if they received the information.

Our hunting team was bigger the following day. The new member was Bă Nhang, who I have mentioned earlier above. The team was also equipped with some more tools, such as a steel crowbar, a bucket, and a fishing-net. We left Bă Bu's house earlier than the previous day, at seven o'clock. We had a short break at a stream near

the hunting place for Bă Nhang to set up the fishing-net in the stream before all of us moved forward to the hole. We continued to dig the hole after Bă Bu checked carefully to make sure that the porcupine was still inside the hole. Our work was carried out smoothly. At twelve o'clock, Bă Di caught the porcupine. Bă Di and Bă Nhang quickly deplumed the quills of the porcupine and put it into a bag. We returned to the stream. Bă Nhang went to check his fishing-net, while Bă Di and Bă Bu collected firewood and prepared fire for grilling the fish. The food that Bă Nhang collected from the stream was very simple and little: five small fish and ten crabs. He was very disappointed with this result. He told me that the *Dak Tra* stream was a well-known stream in this area for its plentiful natural fish and golden turtles. But this had changed since the arrival of immigrants. Many immigrants had used electric equipment to catch even the small fish. After many complaints by the Bahnar people, the local authorities made a regulation that prohibited the use of electric equipment for fishing. However, it was too late. There were only very small fish and crabs left.

After lunch, our hunting team divided into two groups. Bă Nhang and Bă Di with the four dogs went up to the upper part of the stream to attempt another hunt, and to come back home by another route. Meanwhile, Bă Bu and I went back home directly to slaughter and butcher the porcupine.

When Bă Nhang and Bă Di came back to Bă Bu's house, one hour later, the three of them concluded that we keep the head and tripe of the porcupine for dinner, while the body of the porcupine would be sold to a Kinh trader, who resided in Hamlet 7. Bă Nhang and I stayed at home and cooked the food. Bă Bu and Bă Di brought the entire body of the porcupine to the store of the Kinh trader. But the two men came back quickly without selling the porcupine. Bă Bu explained to me that the body of the porcupine weighed 4.5 kg, but the Kinh trader only wanted to pay 200,000 VND. Therefore, they decided that Bă Nhang and Bă Di should take it to the downtown district and sell it to a "special food restaurant" for a higher price.

Bă Nhang and Bă Di used Bă Nhang's old motorbike for the trip that took only forty-five minutes for going, selling and coming back home. The selling result was very surprising to me. The porcupine had been sold at 85,000 VND/kg or 380,000 VND in total. Bă Bu accounted the working days of each person and informed us that Bă Di, Bă Bu and I would receive 100,000 VND, Bă Nhang would

receive 50,000 VND, and the remaining sum would be used to pay for the gasoline and one liter of wine. After the announcement of Bă Bu, I told them that I could not receive that amount of money. Moreover, I would like to pay for the gasoline and wine because I had my own benefits, the information from the hunting. Bă Bu gave two notes of fifty thousand Vietnamese Dongs to me and said: “We work together and we share the products with each other. This is our way of living. If you do not take this amount, we will see to it that you despise us. That is all”.

After the money had been distributed, a small party was organized at the house of Bă Bu. In fact, the party was organized for us four hunters only. During our drinking, I asked the three men how their money would be used. Bă Di said that he wanted to buy twenty-five kilograms of rice for his family’s consumption. Bă Nhang said, “I want to buy some CDs for listening to music.” Meanwhile, Bă Bu gave the money to his wife and told her to use it for a small chicken and two kilograms of pork for the day of the upland rice planting. For me, their plans of using the money had given me not only a suggestion for how to use my hunting money, but also some understanding about their everyday life of egalitarianism.

The upland rice planting of Bă Bu’s family was organized the following day after our hunting game. Of course, I was invited as an honored guest of the family. On the special day, I woke up early and went to a Kinh store in Hamlet 7. I used the money from the hunting and my own money to buy three t-shirts for my three fellow hunters, three kilograms of pork, and ten packs of cigarettes. I chose the most delicious piece of pork in the meat store that was run by a Kinh woman, and asked her to divide it into three equal shares. I put those pieces of meat into three different bags. The seller was very surprised with what I wanted her to do. She asked me where I came from and why I was doing what I was. When I told her that I came from Hanoi to carry out my research about Bahnar people at Buon Luoi and bought the meat for my three Bahnar friends, she laughed at me and said, “You are wasting your money!” I asked her why she said that. “Simply, because they (the Bahnar) are poor and backward people. They have no ability to identify what is a delicious and not a delicious cut of meat.” “Do not say anything like that any more,” I warned her, “if you want me to buy more of your pork!” The saleslady kept silent, but I heard her voice, when I came to the road, “a madman!” Then she turned to her small daughter,

who was crying and demanding her breakfast, and said, “If you do not keep quiet, I will call that madman to take you away. Eh! Madman, come and take this child from me.” I was very angry with the seller and thought that I should ask her for an apology. However, I changed my mind shortly afterwards as I remembered a comment from the Bahnar people, which said: “keep silent and go away if you do not want to be forced ‘eating something free of change’ given by Kinh women.” I was silent and went back to the village.

I came to Bă Bu’s family at half past seven, but all the members of the family had gone. There was a man with a very old motorbike waiting for me in front of the house. It was Xuan, a Muong man, who had married a Bahnar woman and lived in Buon Luoi for more than six years. Xuan had been assigned to take me to the cultivation area of Bă Bu’s family, about three kilometers from the village. On the way there, I told Xuan about the behavior of the Kinh meat-seller. Xuan laughed and said to me after he listened to my story, “I don’t want to make you angry, and however, I would like to tell you that the real weight of the one-kilogram of pork that you bought is equal to 0.8 kg only.” Then he told me that most of the Kinh traders were poor when they came to live around the Bahnar village. Many of them had earned their daily living from wages paid by the Bahnar people and small benefits from buying and exchanging goods with the Bahnar. Tricks for earning higher benefits were to cheat on the weight. They had different scales for selling and buying. For selling goods, the sellers used scales in which one kilogram measured by this scale, for instance, was in fact equal to 0.8 kg. Actually, the real weight of one kilogram measured by the buying scale was about 1.2 or 1.3 kg. These tricks had helped those people to build up their wealth in a short time. When their economy had increased, these people started to apply a more sophisticated trick to earn extra money. They changed themselves into investors for the Bahnar. They provided loans for the Bahnar or sold daily necessities, such as fish sauce, clothes, or fertilizers and seedlings for plantations on a “get what you want now and pay a higher price later” deal. The Bahnar had to sell their agricultural products with lower prices in comparison with the market price. The price of maize, for example, was cheaper than the normal market prices by at least 100 VND/kg. This new trick in combination with the other brought larger profits to the Kinh. Bă Bu was one of the first villagers who

had learnt about the tricks of the Kinh people and found some tactics to fight back. His personal experiences had spread to the other villagers. Recently, many villagers applied those tactics to negotiate with the Kinh, including reducing their debts and to make a record book of their debts side by side with the Kinh, or to use their own scale in buying and selling their products. Interestingly, as I heard from Xuan, some villagers have even called on spirits and their ancestors through performing their rituals to send punishment to the Kinh traders.

Everyone was busy in preparing for the planting when Xuan and I came to the cultivation area of Bă Bu's family. Twenty people, including Bă Bu's mother, her new husband, his younger brothers and sisters-in-law, his uncle, cousins, and some friends had come to help Bă Bu's family. I saw that some people were preparing planting tools; some were cooking food. Meanwhile, Bă Bu was preparing a ritual of planting rice according to Bahnar's customs.

The ritual for upland rice planting was organized at the center of the area where he had planned for cultivation. Materials for the ritual included a one-kilogram hen, a bowl of homemade wine with a little charcoal soaking in it, and a small beeswax candle. Bă Bu did not remember the prayer well, therefore the new husband of his mother had to sit closely to the ritual place in order to recite it just before Bă Bu could say the prayer so that Bă Bu could repeat it. Bă Bu squatted on the ground, his face faced directly to the west, both of his hands holding the body of the hen and he recited a prayer calling for the ancestral spirits. Following the prayer, he used a knife to cut the head of the hen and dropped some blood into the bowl and on a piece of a banana leaf. The chicken head was placed at the ritual place, while the body of the chicken was brought to the cooking place and grilled quickly over the fire for depluming. After the depluming, Bă Bu disemboweled the chicken and took out the liver and washed it. Following this step, he cut small parts at the rump, chest and wing. Then he used a small stick and orderly pierced it from the small part of the rump, to the liver, to the small part of the wing and chest. He grilled the stick over the fire until he decided that it was cooked enough. Then he brought the stick back to the ritual place, put it next to the chicken head, and recited another prayer. While he was using the chicken head to ask the ancestral spirits if they would support his planting, his mother came and told him to stop doing such an activity, because previous

traditional rituals of the family did not include it. Listening to his mother, Bă Bu stopped seeking the approval and support from his ancestral spirits and carried out the last activity of the ritual that was to dig some small holes and put some seeds into the holes.

After the ritual, people started to plant upland rice for Bă Bu's family. Each person had a small basket of seeds in the left flank and a wooden stick for planting. The starting point of the planting was at the ritual site. People stood in a line and each managed to plant around two meters width from the bottom to the top of the planting area. People were working and chatting with each other.

Two hours after the planting started, all planters had a break. And during this time, another a ritual was organized. People were invited to come and sit around a place, where three jars of homemade wine for the second ritual were placed inside a small hut, which had been constructed and used for cultivation purposes. Bă Bu was the representative of his family to recite a prayer inviting his ancestral spirits to partake in and bless his field, and importantly to give a special thanks to all people who had come to plant rice for his family. He also called the ancestral spirits to give support to these people. The helpers made their own prayers wishing for good health and good crops and harvest for Bă Bu's family as well as for other the helpers. Each person had to drink some wine before they continued planting. Starting from this moment, any one who was thirsty could take a short break with some wine from the jars.

At twelve o'clock, all the people had a second break for lunch. Food was put in bowls and placed around the wine jars. I saw that there were two liters of rice wine made by the Kinh people in a plastic can for people who liked stronger wine. Each person was invited to have some drink before eating. Then, everyone was eating and drinking together. During this time, people were telling each other stories relating to cultivation such as what seedling of maize had grown better or brought more productivity or product prices. People also talked about the Kinh thieves, tricks in buying and selling seedlings, fertilizers and other goods of the Kinh people. More importantly, they shared among their friends how to beat these cheatings. Some people were afraid of my presence and my recording of what they had been said. But Bă Bu convinced them that I was a good person and I really wanted to learn about

their life. I found that the stories had been more opened than before. People had discussed about resource scarcity (no timber for preparing houses, no forest minor products to collect) or landlessness. Some people provided information to the others that ethnic people had applied numerous ways to claim more cultivation land. It was said that numerous surrounding Bahnar's villages, such as Ta Kor or K8, the previous homeland of some villagers in Buon Luoi, had come to state forest enterprises to claim for their cultivable lands. On the other hand, those villages had set up new regulation to prohibit villagers selling cultivation land to the Kinh. People also exchanged their experiences in dealing with the members of forest protection team in order to reclaim cultivation lands. These experiences ranged from bringing gifts to members of forest protection team for constructing friendships to the ways to talk to the member when they discover the clearance of forests. After stories those stories, people encouraged each other to reopen their cultivation land by any tactics that would work for them. For me, these stories pointed out clearly statement that ethnic people had learned about their situations and all of them had different practices of negotiation with more powerful people for maintaining their survival.

Because it was very hot, people went back to the planting at half past two in the afternoon. The planting didn't last for a long time. It finished at four o'clock, and people came back to the small house for a rest and more drinking. At six o'clock, some people left the cultivation area of Bă Bu's family for their home in Buon Luoi. Other people, such as the mother and her husband and members of the uncle's family, whose main house was a small cottage situated in the area surrounding the cultivation area of Bă Bu's family, stayed in Bă Bu's cottage for some more drink.

Before leaving the cultivation area of the Bă Bu family, I asked Bă Bu and his wife if I could return to stay in their cultivation area to collect more information on their everyday life. Bă Bu was worried about the poor living conditions in his cultivation area and asked me whether I could stay at the village and he would come back to talk with me. I had to spend a few minutes to convince them that I had some experience with living in poor living conditions of ethnic people. Importantly, I did not want to waste their time. Bă Bu made an agreement but he also recommended that I bring some necessities, such as a mosquito net, a mat, and a blanket for my stay in

the cultivation area for the duration of one or two weeks, as it could rain and that would make my stay in the forest more difficult.

I came back to stay with Bă Bu in the forest house two days later. It was time for weeding his coffee garden and maize crop. Consequently, Bă Bu and his wife were very busy. Bă Bu woke up around half past six in the morning and started his work at seven o'clock without breakfast. His wife came to the cultivation area around eight o'clock. Then both of them worked until twelve o'clock. Lunch was quickly prepared because it was simple. It included a pot of rice and a pot of vegetable soup and some seasoning mixed with fresh chilli. Vegetables for food were collected around the cultivation area. Around every three or four days, they could have one good meal that consisted of sea fish or tofu, which Mê Bu bought from the Kinh vendors. The couple had about one hour for rest after their lunch and then they went back to work at half past one or two o'clock depending on the weather conditions. They did not stop their afternoon work until four and sometimes five o'clock. Mê Bu usually came back to the house at the Buon Luoi immediately after she stopped working for taking care of the four children. Meanwhile, Bă Bu went to a stream to take a bath. If I was not with him, he used to eat some rice cooked at lunchtime and went to sleep after dinner.

To avoid wasting Bă Bu's time and making him too tired, I usually used two or three hours at night to ask about his life story. During this time, I just asked him simple questions as guidelines for his talk and I let him tell his story freely. When he was telling me his stories, I used voice recording equipment to record all stories. In the following morning, I listened to my record and took notes and then rewrote the stories in a logical order. Before I left the forest hut of Bă Bu, I read all my rewriting to Bă Bu and asked him to correct and provide some more information.

Indeed, my ten days of living in the forest house with Bă Bu gave me a chance to learn not only about the everyday life and negotiation of Bă Bu but also about the social changes and their effects on the everyday life of ethnic people and their negotiations. It can be said that Bă Bu has had a very hard life since he was born; and his everyday life was a succession of negotiations. According to Bă Bu, his father was a H'Re of a small H'Re village located in the riverside of Kon River. Currently this village belongs to Vinh Thanh district, Binh Dinh province. The father joined the

Vietnamese Southern Insurgency when he was around twenty years old, and that he was a valiant of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. Then the father met his mother, a Bahnar woman, and fell in love with her and then married her when his insurgent unit set up a base in the remote area of the mother's village in 1968, which is now administratively managed by the Vinh Kim commune, Vinh Thanh district, Binh Dinh province. The couple had five children including three sons and two daughters, and Bă Bu is the eldest. During the wartime, the family used to move into the forests to avoid attacks by the American and the southern army. The mother had to work very hard to feed the children because the father had spent most of his time fighting against the attacks of the American and the southern army.

When the country attained reunification, the family settled down in Hamlet No. 4, the current Son Lang commune, but their stay lasted for only three years. After the father's death in 1978, the mother went to marry another man in Buon Luoi in the same year with a hope that the new husband could share her difficulties and she brought all her children to the house of her new husband. However, this strategy did not work up. Three more babies were born within the next four years. Poor living conditions and operation of the APT also caused serious illnesses for some children of the family, the two sons; one was one year old and the other was twelve years old. Both of them died at the end of 1980s. Meanwhile, the APT operated badly leading to serious food shortages for the family. The family had to exchange one buffalo out of the two buffalos of the new father for more rice to eat.

In 1984, when Bă Bu was fourteen years old, he gave up school and went to work in order to help the family. He became a main laborer working on a cultivation area where his family opened its own field to produce more rice for its consumption. He had also become an important person in carrying out activities of hunting and forest gathering to provide meat and minor forest products, such as wild honey, natural fruits and vegetables for the family.

In the late 1980s, when the national policies started to allow the sale of minor forest product freely in the market, Bă Bu's knowledge of the forests and his skills of harvesting forest products that he had learnt from his difficult life had helped him to make a substantial contribution of income for his family. However, the chance for ethnic people, such as, Bă Bu to earn good income from the forests lasted for a short

time only, as minor forest products became ‘common properties of all Vietnamese’ and the incoming immigrants rejected all customary practices relating to property rights in access to forest resources. Furthermore, the ignorance of resource ownership had become a tragedy for ethnic families, and Bă Bu’s family was one of them. The tragedy of Bă Bu’s family happened in middle of August 1988, when Bă Bu and his younger brother, who was seventeen years old and was studying in high school, attempted to earn some income for their family. To avoid any conflicts with the immigrants, Bă Bu and his brother went to a remote forest area to harvest fruits. The two boys found some trees with many fruits. They decided to stay in the forests with a hope to make a good collection. They constructed a small shack for overnight staying. At midnight, there was heavy rain with strong wind. One branch of a tree fell down on the roof of the small shack and the sharp branch went through the stomach of the younger brother. The young boy shouted with pain and died shortly afterwards.

After his brother’s death, Bă Bu gave up the collection of forest products. He went to marry a seventeen-year-old girl who resided in Xa Dong (a neighboring commune of So Pai), at the end of 1988. She came to live with Bă Bu’s family at Buon Luoi and the couple, together with other members of the family, tried to enlarge their cultivation land. They worked very hard on those cultivation areas. Since cultivation land was abundant and the family had more labor, agricultural production of the family improved a lot. The first son of Bă Bu was born three years after his wedding.

Since two younger sisters of Bă Bu married in 1991 and 1992 and their husbands came to live with the family, the food shortage of the family had been overcome. At this time, however, the small house of Bă Bu’s parents became more crowded. When one of younger sisters of Bă Bu had a child and Bă Bu’s wife gave birth to a second son in 1994, the parents made a decision to allow one of their daughters and her husband to move out. Before they moved to the husband’s side, the couple asked the parents to provide some money for buying cultivation land at the husband’s homeland. The parents sold 1.2 ha of cultivation land of the family in order raise enough money to give to the couple. In the following year, the other younger sister of Bă Bu and her husband asked the parents whether they could move to the husband’s side. They also asked the parents for some money to construct their house

at the husband's side. Following the advice of the daughter and her husband, the parents made a deal with a Kinh family to sell 1.5 ha of cultivation land. Bă Bu was very sad with the decisions to sell the cultivation areas because he and his wife had put great effort into establishing those areas and protecting them from invasion by the Kinh. But he did not oppose the decisions of the family, because the amount of money was in fact very small for two couples to start their new life.

After the two plots of cultivation land were sold, the family had around 3.5 hectares of land left to feed eight people. Since its remaining cultivation area had been used for ten years, the annual productivity of agricultural crops of the family was low. Within 1995 and 1996, the family earned two tons of upland rice and about one ton of cassava annually. The family had fallen into food shortages, again, as the planting carried out in this area did not provide enough food for its annual consumption.

At this time, more people migrated to the administrative area of So Pai commune. Local authorities recorded that the population of So Pai commune were one thousand and two hundred people. The truth of the matter was that the population of the commune had reached three thousands. The immigrants used many tricks to invade the cultivation land of the Bahnar people. Three plots of fallow land of Bă Bu's family had been invaded by the immigrants. Bă Bu and his two younger brothers (one younger brother, Bă Nhanh, married and went to live with his wife's family at the end 1997, and other brother married and went to live with his wife's family in early 1999) were thinking about clearing forest for new cultivation areas.

In early 1997, Bă Bu decided to establish a new cultivation area in an area that was a site of Buon Luoi in its early history. He and his younger brothers cut down two hectares of secondary forest for establishing the new cultivation area. Members of the FPT quickly discovered their establishment of a new cultivation area. The FPT came and made a recording of the deforestation. Then they tried very hard to take legal action with Bă Bu in order to bring him to court. At first, Bă Bu was not afraid about the court as he thought that he could present to the court that his cultivation area once belonged to his village. But he changed his mind when he learned about a harsh sentencing the court had given to a Bahnar man in Ta Kor village. He became very worried.

Following the advice of the family's friends, Bă Bu went to meet a friend of his father, who held a high political position at K'Bang district, to ask for help. Bă Bu learned that his father's friend had a high political position, but he did not know exactly the name of organization that his father's friend was working for. Therefore, he went to the district town and he tried to ask people where the house of his father's friend was. He spent almost one day finding the street where the house of his father's friend was located in. He came to every gate of the houses on the street and called the name of his father's friend. It was four o'clock in the afternoon when he found the house. The friend was in his office, but his wife was at home. Bă Bu was very afraid because he was asked many questions. He breathed a sigh of relief after he heard from the wife of the father's friend that his problem could be solved easily.

When the father's friend came back to his home later, his wife asked him to write a letter for Bă Bu. Bă Bu brought the letter back to So Pai commune and went directly to the director of SPSFE. After reading the letter, the director complained to Bă Bu. But he finally told him that SPSFE would stop the procedure to bring Bă Bu to court, but Bă Bu was not allowed to talk to any people about this concession. Thus, Bă Bu could escape from legal punishment.

Bă Bu came back to his village and he was thinking seriously about why the Kinh people had also cut down the forest but they did not encounter any trouble with SPSFE. He went to make friends with some Kinh people to try to find the answer. Applying techniques learned from Kinh people, Bă Bu constructed a small hut in his new cultivation area and he enlarged his cultivated area daily.

Bă Bu was very interested in coffee plantation, when the cadres of the agricultural extension brought techniques of coffee plantation to the villagers at Buon Luoi in late 1997. With a hope that this plantation would bring high benefits and transform his family from poverty to wealth, he sold 1.5 ha of cultivation land and two buffaloes of his family in order to have some money invested into the coffee plantation. He used the money received from selling the cultivated land and one buffalo for planting three hectares of coffee.

After he planted coffee, Bă Bu realized that the coffee plantation is not the "best cultivation" for the poor. In Bă Bu's experience, techniques of coffee plantation are very complicated and if he did not keep maintaining high technical standards of

his coffee garden, the coffee trees would produce no fruits. Moreover, coffee plantation was a production that required a large investment. The more the trees grow, the more money that has to be invested on fertilizers and pesticides. And if the family does not have enough investment in a year, the coffee trees would die. Also, the coffee plantation was a high-risk crop as the market price of coffee beans went up and down unpredictably.

Of course, Bă Bu's family applied various strategies, which they learned from different people, to deal with the market prices, such as, carrying out all the maintenance work by the labor of the family in order to minimize the wages of hired laborers, watering the coffee garden itself or drying their coffee bean and selling them after the harvest time for a higher price. However, those strategies could only help the family to reduce some small amount of its investment losses. Actually, the family had not yet collected one half of its total investment into coffee production. In early 2003, Bă Bu's family tried to obtain a status of being classified as a poor family in order to have a medium term loan (three years), ten million VND, with the interest rate at 0.8% per month from the Bank for the Poor in an attempt to maintain their coffee garden as the price of coffee beans had fallen to a very low price in a small number of years.

It can be said that Bă Bu and his wife were dutiful children. Bă Bu's mother went to marry her third husband after her second husband died in 2001. Her new husband is an old Bahnar man, who had to run from his homeland due to a hydro electricity plant construction project. In the end of 2004, Bă Bu and his wife had agreed to give her two hectares of planted coffee with some amount of money for the compensation of the total amount of ten million VND (these two hectares could be sold at at least thirty million VND for outsiders).

Currently, Bă Bu's family owned 4.32 ha of cultivation land that was divided into two areas, a residential area covering 0.12 ha used for housing and a cassava garden, and the cultivation area in the forest covering 4.2 ha. In the cultivation area was planted long-term crops including coffee, cashews, and annual crops, such as, maize, upland rice, and French beans (for more information on land area and land use pattern of Bă Bu family, see Table 6.1 below), etc.

Table 6.1 Farming calendar of Bă Bu's family

Month	Activities
January	Weeding and maintaining coffee, planting cassava
February	Preparing land for maize plantation, maintaining coffee
March	Watering coffee and planting maize
April	Preparing land for upland rice cultivation
May	Planting upland rice, weeding and watering coffee
June	Weeding maize plantation
July	Weeding upland rice
August	Harvesting maize
September	Maintaining coffee
October	Harvesting upland rice
November	Harvesting cassava
December	Harvesting coffee

Today, Bă Bu and his wife had to work very hard in their plantation area to feed their family, as we can see in the farming calendar of the family in Table 6.2 below. According to my statistics, the total revenue from the plantation of the family in 2005 was 19.69 million VND, of which 61.28% of the amount came from coffee production, 32 % came from maize production, and the remaining came from the upland rice crop, wet land rice and cassava. For Bă Bu, the upland rice plantation did not provide much income, but he still planted it for practicing rituals as well as for educating the children of the family. With their current annual income, Bă Bu and his wife had to manage very carefully every item of their expenditure. The fact was that they could not spend their annual income for any other purposes except for daily simple food and some expenditures for fertilizers and pesticides.

Table 6.2 Land area and land use pattern of Bă Bu family

Cultivated crops	Area (ha)	Cropping season
Total cultivation area	4.3	
1. Long-term crops		
1.1 Coffee	0.6	Entire year time
1.2 Cashew	0.6	Entire year time
2. Annual crops		
2.1 Maize	2	April to August
2.2 Upland rice	1	May to October
2.3 Cassava	0.1	January to November

On the day I left the small forest hut of Bă Bu's family, Bă Bu received some bad news and some good news. The bad news was that two of the good hunting dogs had been stolen. When Bă Bu received this news, he was very angry and he shouted with a crying voice: "Kinh! Don't bite my dogs!" Bă Bu loved his hunting dogs very much. He had never killed or sold his hunting dogs. Moreover, he buried his hunting dogs very carefully whenever his old hunting dogs died. However, Bă Bu had been relieved by the good news that his first son, who had just graduated from primary school, was one among five ethnic students who would receive a scholarship for going to a special school for ethnic children of the district. He was smiling after hearing the good news. It was the first time I saw a smile in the austere face of Bă Bu.

Investment for the children's studies was the most important strategy for the future of Bă Bu's family. According to Bă Bu, this strategy was constructed from his talk with other people and observations at the best food store at the center of So Pai commune. Through his talk with people, Bă Bu had learned a lot of things related to the State's supported policies for ethnic children and ethnic cadres, such as, how The State had special schools for good ethnic students in which they were provided with accommodation and other necessities, for example, books, notebooks and pens. Ethnic people with high school education could easily take position at political and administrative offices. He also heard and saw that all cadres' families in his commune became better off. Most of the cadres started their working day with delicious noodles, a cup of coffee, and some cigarettes. The total amount of money for one breakfasts of a cadre was twice as much as the total cost of daily food of an ethnic person, such as Bă Bu. A lunch of cadres was unimaginable for ethnic people. They were usually full of delicious food in accompaniment with expensive whisky and beer. All of them owned beautiful houses and large cultivation areas. Their wives and children all wore beautiful clothes and rode on expensive motorbikes. Furthermore, the higher position people attained, the more land and houses they had. Bă Bu had heard that the chairman of the CEPC, whom the Bahnar called "Tam Ruoc," was one of the richest men in the commune. (Tam is his real name, and Ruoc stood for *mắm ruốc*, a name of one kind of fish sauce he brought from his homeland, Thua Thien Hue province, to Buon Luoi to exchange for rice from the Bahnar, which he later took back to his homeland and sold to fishermen. According to the villagers, the added

word to the real name of the chairman can mean that he is a man with a petty character). He owned more than ten hectares of cultivation land, and three houses: one in the commune and two in the district town. The children of the chairman had been sent to good schools in the district.

After he had learned those things, Bă Bu asked himself: "Why does our family not seek opportunities for our children?" From then on, he and his wife made great attempts to encourage their children to go to school. They also sold a cow in order to give them enough income for their children's education. They had bought this cow by the bank loan with a hope that raising the cow could help them to pay one half of the loan to the bank three years later. For Bă Bu and his wife, although the routine and process to obtain a better life of their children would take more time and they would face many difficulties, the first achievement of their first son manifested they thought they had chosen the right way for their future.

## 6.2 Practice of Negotiation for Leadership in the Commune

August was one of the busiest months of the year for the Bahnar families in Buon Luoi. This was a time for harvesting maize and preparing land to plant French beans. Most of the time in August 2005, I moved around several families that were my key informants to help them harvest maize, prepare land, and, of course, to collect information for my thesis. I returned to the house of the traditional village headman in the late afternoon one day at the end of the month. The traditional village's headman was just about ready to go out when I arrived at the house. Before he left, the traditional village headman reminded me to close the house door and turn off the lamp when I went to bed, because he would be returning home very late. I asked him where he was going. He told me that he was going to the house of Tuy, who was holding the position of the administrative village headman. "Is there a ritual ceremony at the house of the administrative village headman, father?" I asked him. "No, it is a meeting for electing a villager to be an administrative village headman," he answered me and left the house. This information sounded very interesting to me and I decided that I had to observe the meeting. I threw my bag into the corner of the house where I slept and followed him.

When I came to the house of the administrative village headman, I saw that the meeting was organized among five people in the house. These five Buon Luoi villagers were the most powerful ones: ALia, who was holding the two highest positions in So Pai commune - the secretary of the Communal Communist Party Committee (CCPC) and the chairman of the Communal People's Committee (CPC), the second most powerful villager, Reo, vice-chairman of the CEPC, the administrative village headman, Tuy, and his deputy Đêu, and the traditional village headman, Bok Tòng. After a few minutes of sitting in the house, I realized that I was not welcome to observe the meeting as none of them said a word to me when I greeted to them. Furthermore, people were talking to each other in Bahnar language at first, but fell silent when I entered. I quickly left the house as soon as I realized the situation.

The meeting had taken more than four hours when I saw the traditional village headman returned to his home at almost two o'clock in the morning of the following day. Both of us were busy with our own work during the daytime, so I thought that I could ask him about the meeting at night. However, I could not collect any information about the meeting until the fifth night, because he had gone out and come back at the same time as I had observed above for the three following nights. Surprisingly, the traditional village headman also tried to dodge my questions about the meeting. I had spent three days with different questions in different times trying to collect a little information of the reasons, criteria and candidates for the position of administrative village headman.

According to the traditional village headman, five people in fact had spent seven nights discussing reasons to change the headman and make a decision on who would be a suitable candidate for the position. There were two main reasons for selecting a new person to hold the position. First, Tuy was holding two positions, which were the administrative village headman and secretary of the Village's Party Cell (*Chi bộ Đảng*). He was quite busy with these two positions. Also, Tuy received two kinds of monthly salary for two positions and he perceived that it was unfair to the other villagers. The second issue, which had taken the longest discussion among the five people, was who could be a candidate for the village election. Two main criteria that the traditional village headman called "to love the country, and to love the

people" (*yêu nưóc and thương dân*) had been used for considering the candidate. For the traditional village headman, "to love the country" meant "to conform to The State's policies, to have a harmonious family, and to have a good experience in cultivation and a good plantation." Meanwhile, "to love the people" means "to live in harmony with other villagers, to help other villagers, and importantly, to protect the benefits of the Bahnar village and villagers." After a long discussion, five people in the meeting made the decision that two men: Đêu and Nhêu. Both met the criteria and they had been chosen to be candidates. The five people in the meeting agreed that the village meeting for the election should be organized on the nearest Sunday, four days after the meeting of the five people or on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, and Tuy had to come to the forest cottage to inform all the villagers about the village meeting for electing the new administrative village headman.

Most of villagers came to the village meeting. The village meeting was divided into two sections, the morning and afternoon sections. The morning section started at nine o'clock in the morning. In the first part of this section, villagers listened to a report about cultivation, crop productivity, and implementations of The State's support policies on seedlings, fertilizers, irrigation systems, school, and the two suicide cases in the village. Tuy, the administrative village headman, made this presentation.

Following the report, the villagers were given a chance to make comments, arguments, and recommendations. Five villagers voiced concerns about the slow construction of an irrigation system and their compensation for this construction. The main reason for the slow construction, according to the villagers, was that the construction company had used a very small number of laborers. They also complained that this slow construction affected their cultivation as they did not plant their crops in the places where they had been informed would be used for constructing the water canals. Eight villagers voiced their concerns about the school and children. The villagers observed that the school teachers at the village went to classes later and finished their classes sooner than the class schedule. More importantly, the villagers found that the quality of the classes were very poor. Evidence for this complaint was that when the children were moved up a to a higher class annually, they could not read the books nor do the mathematical exercises of the lower classes. One villager

was very angry and commented, “they are in fact killing the ethnic children.” Four villagers had complaints about issues on the land invasion by the Kinh people and the Kinh thieves not receiving adequate attention by the communal authorities. They said, “cadres of CEPC are always saying that they have recorded all these problems and they will find solutions for them whenever they occur in our village, but all the situations remain unchanged.” At the end of the time for open talk, all villagers had an agreement on how a new administrative village headman should make sure that the local authorities had solved these problems. The morning section closed with the election of the new administrative village headman. Nhêu, a forty-year-old man, was elected.

The afternoon section started at three o’clock. It was in fact a party among the villagers, as many people had not come back to the village for more than a year. Each family contributed a jar of homemade wine to the party. People drank, danced, and sang songs together until midnight.

In observing the village meeting, I found that the Secretary of the CCPC, vice-chairman of the CEPC, and even their wives did not participate in the village meeting. Furthermore, there also had been no representative of the communal authority, as I had seen in the three meetings before. This observation made me wonder what the meaning hidden behind these behaviors was. My curiosity increased and I started to investigate the essence behind the behaviors of two ethnic cadres after I had a talk with Tuyen, a vice-chairman of the CEPC, who had the duty to monitor all issues at Buon Luoi. I received some very interesting information from Tuyen when I asked him why he was absent at the meeting. According to Tuyen, the communal authorities had informed ethnic cadres in Buon Luoi that they were not allowed to organize the election of new administrative village headman. For the viewpoint of communal authorities, the reasons for electing new administrative village headman advocated by the ethnic cadres in Buon Luoi were not convincing. From the viewpoint of the communal authorities, Tuy could undertake both positions at the same time, because the tasks given to the positions were simple. It was believed that Tuy had to spend from five to ten days per month to complete his tasks. Moreover, the two sources of salary could help Tuy to have a better income and he could give up some of his family work, and just carry out his administrative tasks. But, the Bahnar cadres living in

Buon Luoi had ignored the official suggestion and they had organized the election without permission of the communal authorities.

Since I had learned story from Tuyen, I wondered what was the strategy behind the behavior of the ethnic cadres. This was not an easy task, however. I had spent a lot of time talking with the five people, I met at the meeting and tried to ask them about the election process and find out the strategy behind the election of new administrative village headman. I found that it was a very careful calculation in order to be elected as a communal cadre. This strategy was derived from the analyses that ALia would retire from his positions in the next two years. Because Reo, the vice-chairman of the CEPC, did not have enough ability to be the chairman of the CEPC, he would be politically chosen to become the secretary of the CCPC and simultaneously the Chairman of the CPC. Politically, one Bahnar person should be chosen to take Reo's position. At that moment, Tuy was seen as the best candidate among the Bahnar people in So Pai commune who could replace the vice-chairman. However, Tuy had a disadvantage in that his qualifications were very low as he had only obtained a certificate for graduating from secondary school. This disadvantage could be an obstacle for him to be elected. One of the short ways for Tuy to improve his qualifications was to take part in some short training courses organized by the political party. Since Tuy was holding two positions at one time, he had no time to participate in the training courses. Therefore, the meeting among the five people ended with a decision that Tuy had to relegate his best position, administrative village headman, to another villagers in order to have time for participating in the training courses.

Some of the Kinh cadres realized this strategy. Thus, they tried to off set this strategy by not giving permission to have an election a new administrative village headman. This had led to the ethnic cadres organizing a village election without the permission from the communal authorities. Furthermore, to avoid argument with the Kinh cadres, the village meeting was organized during weekend, and neither the secretary, the vice-chairman or their spouses attended the meeting. In fact, four of them had gone to the district town during that day. And, when the Kinh cadres complained about the village election, both ethnic cadres said that the election was

organized by villagers and they did not know anything until the election was completed.

### 6.3 Survival in Livelihood Insecurity

My last visit to Buon Luoi was in the middle of January 2007, a month which called *Khei Ning Nong*, or the playing month. I arrived at Buon Luoi at lunchtime. The village was as quiet as I had ever seen it. The first person that I met near the village gate was Quyen, a 23-year-old woman. She was a person who used to annoy me by saying: “Marry me, if you want to have a good understanding about the Bahnar people” or “I am still waiting for you!” whenever I met her during my stay in Buon Luoi in 2005. She was in a subdued state. She looked very sad. Moreover, she walked quickly to her house when I called her name and asked, “Quyen! Are you still waiting for me?”

The second person I met at the center of the village was Xuan. He warmly invited me to his house for lunch because his family was organizing a ritual of eating new rice (*sang sa moc*). During my visit Xuan’s family, I learned a number of stories ranging from cultivation to village life in 2006. But, the most important information I had collected was that there was a year-end village meeting organized the day before my arrival. The year-end village meeting had not only talked about life and production of the village in year 2006, but also discussed punishments to be given to Quyen.

According to Xuan, villagers knew that Quyen was not simply a prostitute, but also a transporter of illegal loggers. In some past village meetings, several villagers talked about Quyen’s activities. However, there was no punishment given to her before the last village meeting due to two reasons. First, Quyen’s mother was very good in defense of her daughter. Her arguments were based mainly on asking for hard evidence of what her daughter was accused of doing. But no one in the village had any evidence. Second, many villagers thought that the Kinh people had pushed Quyen into her present situation, and it would be unfair if the village gave her a punishment. In other words, she was a victim of the Kinh people and people should not punish the victim. Different from previous meetings, the discussion of punishment for Quyen in the last village meeting was motivated by the requirements of the communal

authorities. During the meeting, the villagers were told that the local authorities had received a report that involved in illegal transporting of logs. Although there was no exact evidence, communal authorities wanted the village to stop Quyen from carrying out such activities before the situation became worse.

Also different from previous times, Quyen and her mother kept silent during the meeting. A long discussion was carried out among numerous villagers during the last village meeting. Some villagers had said that all of Quyen's activities were serious offences and that they wanted to give strong punishments to her. Meanwhile, some argued that Quyen's offences were the same as any other survival strategies which could be seen in the village. These people also warned that any strong punishment given to Quyen would make her situation worse, as she was very poor and she had to care for her seven-year-old daughter. After a long debate, most of the villagers agreed to give Quyen two punishments. The first punishment was called "laboring re-education for one month at the village," which meant Quyen had to carry out village work for one month. The second was "to contribute a jar of homemade wine for propitiating the ancestral spirits." Because the village did not have any work for Quyen, however, she in fact received the second punishment only.

Actually, I tried to learn some stories about Quyen's family and her life through my formal interviews with her, as well as informal interviews with her relatives and some villagers during my fieldwork in 2005. I could find out much information related to Quyen as I wanted to. I was careful to talk with her because of some speculation about myself. However, I had learned through some villagers that Quyen's family was one of the rich families of Buon Luoi as her father was a hard-working man. In the early 1980s, the family had ten buffalos and cows, sixty goats and large cultivation areas. But the family's economic situation collapsed after arrival of immigrants. As I learned from Quyen's mother, the immigrants had stolen five buffalos and cows and thirty goats from the family within the second half of the 1980s. The family's cultivated areas were reduced quickly due to the invasion by the immigrants.

I was told that Quyen's family was the first family to make an attempt to grow coffee, with a hope that their economic situation would be improved. The family had sold three cultivation areas for investment in planting two hectares of coffee in 1988.

Since the family did not have experience in selecting seedlings, the beans harvested were in low quality. Family had many difficulties in selling its coffee beans. Seven years after starting its coffee plantation, the family had to sell one hectare of the coffee plot in order to save some investment. To date, the family has only one remaining hectare of coffee plantation, but it does not provide much income, because the quality of their coffee beans were not good enough as demanded by the market demand.

Many people at Buon Luoi and So Pai commune said that Quyen was one of very beautiful girls in So Pai commune. In 2000, when Quyen was sixteen, her parents allowed her to get marry with a Kinh worker of the forest exploitation team with hopes that the “civilized man” would bring a better life to their daughter. The wedding was organized in Buon Luoi and the “civilized man” came to live with the family with a voice to help his wife’s family. Quyen gave birth to a daughter one year later. This time was also the end of the her dream and her parents, as they realized that the civilized husband liked to drink alcohol more than to work. Moreover, he did not pay attention to his daughter.

When the family’s economic situation was getting worse, four years after the wedding, the “civilized man” left Quyen without saying a word. She tried very hard to find out where her husband had gone because she did not know where his homeland was. But when she found him, he had already married to a Kinh woman.

Quyen’s father was very sad with what had happened to his family. He began to drink so that alcohol could help him forget his sadness. This way of living did not help him forget his sadness, however. Moreover, he became an alcoholic. When all the family’s properties were gone due to his drinking, he moved to a small cottage at a cultivation area in the deep forest. Since then he had lived alone in the forest.

At the beginning of 2005, Quyen fell in love with another Kinh man, who was a worker of a construction company who came to Buon Luoi to construct irrigation systems. Since she fell for the sweet words of this man, she moved to stay with him in a cottage of the construction team. Six month after that, she asked him for a small wedding. The man told her that he did not have money and asked her to wait. But, Quyen realized that this was a lie as she saw him spending a large amounts of money

for drinking. She ran away from him one day. It happened after he drunk a lot of whisky with his friends and asked her to provide sexual service to his friends.

Quyen returned to her village, while her mother decided to divorce with her father and married to the traditional village headman. After her wedding, the mother came to live in his house. Since that time, Quyen has become a householder of her former family and she has to take care of her nine-year-old daughter and her two younger brothers, one seventeen years old and the other eleven years old. Quyen faced with many difficulties in taking care of the family. Her being a prostitute grew out of these difficulties.

Three days after my arrival to Buon Luoi in last January (2007), when I was on the way back to the house of the traditional village headman after my visit to the family of Bă Bu, I found the door of Quyen's house was open. I decided to visit her. Quyen was sleeping. She woke up when I got into the house. She looked very tired. She asked me what time it was. I told her that it was thirty minutes past ten. She breathed a sigh and said, "What a long daytime!" Looking at Quyen's tiredness, I told her that I would leave the house if she wanted to have more rest. "Don't leave!" she said, "I am looking for a person who I can ask for some advice. Did you hear stories of me?" Quyen asked me. I told her that I had heard some stories and I thought that she had to control her activities. Quyen kept silent for more than five minutes. Then, she started to tell me that she had attempted to give up prostitution several times because she was afraid about punishments given by the ancestral spirits. But, when she saw how the poor people, such as, her and ethnic people were treated in public places, for instance, in the communal health care station or the district hospital, she gave up her efforts and tried to earn more money from prostitution.

In the middle of 2006, Quyen found that some of her Bahnar friends earned a large sum of money from transporting wood for illegal loggers. She also learned that it was a dangerous activity as transporters had to drive their motorbike with high speed on bad roads while carrying lumber. Furthermore, the transporters would be punished badly and would lose their motorbike if the forest protectors and policemen caught them. However, Quyen had decided to join her friend's band with a hope that she could earn enough money so that she could give up being prostitution. Quyen had been followed by the forest protectors and policemen several times. She managed to

escape from them because of her good knowledge of the forest roads in the surrounding areas. Because of the strict regulations of the forest protectors and policemen, the wood transportation band had changed the way to transport illegal lumber. Nowadays, members of the band carried smaller pieces of lumber in baskets and walked through the forests at night. According to Quyen, this way of transportation could help them avoid being followed. However, it also a dangerous way as they could die if they stepped on poisonous snakes on their long walk in the forests like one member of another wood transportation ban who died of a poisonous snake's bite.

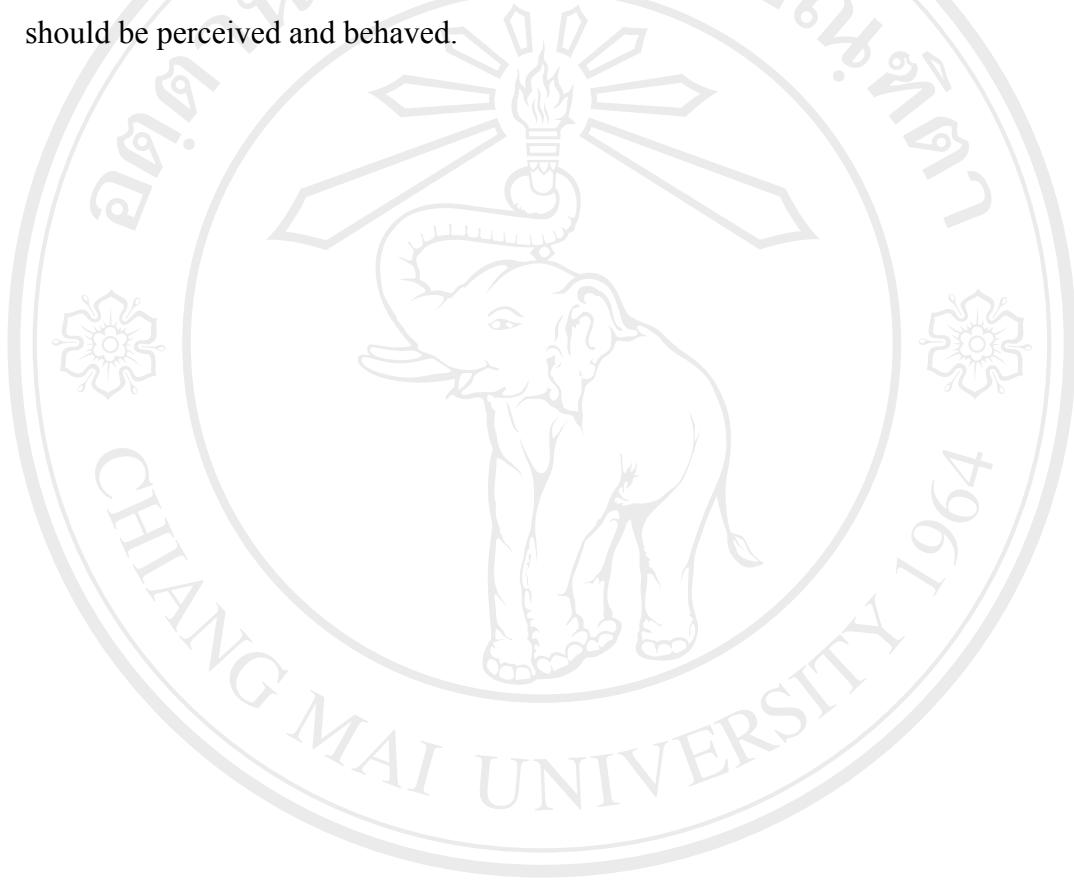
At the end of her story, Quyen told me: "My family and his life have been seriously disrupted. I am fed up with my life now. I have thought about giving up my life but then I tried to throw this thought away because of my small daughter. Can you give me some advice?" This was the most difficult question that I have faced since I started my fieldwork. As a learner in the field, I could not offer any advice for her. What I gave to Quyen, before I left her house, were just some simple questions, which she had to consider for her own answers for her future life, I hoped.

#### 6.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed three stories related to the changes in the everyday life and practices of negotiations of some Bahnar people in Buon Luoi. These stories provide more evidence of ethnic hardship came directly from the development processes created by Vietnam's socialist state. Clearly, development programs had not only taken away cultivation land for everyday life of the Bahnar people, but had also changed the place into contested site, the arena of conflicts and struggles caused damage to the villagers' life and their culture. At the same time, the stories I told also demonstrated how day-to-day negotiations of the Bahnar people had been constructed for negotiating with the people who were trying to extract their resources and dominate them.

It can be said that the Bahnar people, like ethnic people in many places of our world, had become active "agent" in coping with the loss of their resources and changes in their life. The Bahnar had applied different knowledge and ways in their negotiation. As we can learn from the presented stories, they had applied their

traditional knowledge as well as acquired knowledge from their dominators in order to negotiate and maintain their living. The ways of negotiation for their living were diverse and included the invasion of land, resource extraction, the silence of contempt, using rude nicknames and even prostitution. Importantly, negotiations of the Bahnar people at Buon Luoi were not merely negotiation concerning the land, forest resources and property rights. They were also negotiations of how ethnic people should be perceived and behaved.



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Picture 6.1 Village's meeting for electing new administrative village's headman



Picture 6.2 Playing gongs to call villagers to attend village's party after the election



Picture 6.3 Hunting in the forests



Picture 6.4 Preparing motorbikes for going to harvest fruits in the forests



Picture 6.5 Working with mother



Picture 6.6 A ritual given to ancestral spirits for avoiding illness of the family