

# LAHU CHANGING VALUE SYSTEM: MEANING, CONCEPTS AND PERSPECTIVES

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“Army and forestry officials who came to destroy our poppy crops would not talk about anything other than the laws that prohibited the use of our source of income and natural livelihood, the forest.”

—Lahu Na (Sheleh) highland farmer, Thailand

## ABSTRACT

*There is an increasing academic interest in Southeast Asian ethnic minority peoples' life systems, natural and social resource use, and cultural integration into the respective lowland societies. That integration, in many locations, brings rapid changes in value systems, as apparent in cultural and ethnic transformation among ethnic minority highland settlers. It turns out that in mainland Southeast Asia, and elsewhere as well, ethnic identity is an imperative variable in social inter-relationships, which is why we need to observe native peoples' communication patterns, ethnic identification, cultural expressions and social aspirations. What follows is a point of departure to understanding ethnic collectivism with a wholistic approach. This paper deals with views on highlanders' changing concepts, which came about through experience among Lahu Na (Sheleh)<sup>1</sup> highland farmers in Northern Thailand.*

## 1. INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONSHIP

In Southeast Asian highland regions there is an increasing involvement in global market systems, resulting in most unsustainable resource use patterns. Concerns about ecological developments are growing. Although highland agriculture in Thailand is moving towards modern technology, the use of natural resources is increasingly seen as an obstacle to constructive dialogue between mountain and lowland settlers. The attitude among the public, politicians and development agents has characteristically lacked an awareness that in many areas not only the natural but also the social balance of ethnic highland communities is at stake. Highland peoples' arguments concerning changes and their impacts remain unheard, while their knowledge resources, traditional problem-solving strategies and collective values lose their substance by their promoted assimilation into lowland peoples' life-style concepts. In this context it is important to understand highland communities' livelihood possibilities, options and perspectives. Since ethnic affinity informs us little about people's reasoning, we must conceive local action, thoughts, feelings and arguments by consulting the historical settings that shape interrelationships and concepts. My question has to do with changing values that highland farmers such as the Lahu Na attribute to interethnic encounters and which bring about innovative developments in the mountainous habitats.

Initially, we attached some hope to gaining our neighbours' friendship, especially because these lowlanders had come up as poor farmers who asked the Lahu for help in the acquisition of land, house construction, and later the provision of farm labour. However, the help that Lahu people gave them was never reciprocated. They have no consideration for us other than for making money. At first they traded our opium. Then, when poppy cultivation was forbidden, they bought our silver at the cheapest rate, since the substitute fruit trees had no fruit yet. Now they sell us rice at the most expensive rate, knowing that we depend on them. All families are in rice debt to the Thai mayor of our village. Yet, we cannot move away though the soils are exhausted and the yields are low.

A repeated argument among Lahu Na farmers has been that Thai lowlanders are alien to both the environmental and the social conditions of highland people. In contrast, a typical lowlander might argue that shifting cultivators such as the Lahu ignore the implications of depleting resource systems in the fragile mountain areas and watersheds. This confrontation uncovers the historical division of habitats and also the cultural distance between the respective settlers. Nothing general can be said about people's perspectives, however, without consulting the local agents' particular social memory which nurtures their arguments and guides their actions. Highlanders' reluc-

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Strassen, Carina zur. 2003. Lahu Changing Value System: Meaning, Concepts and Perspectives. In *Landscapes of Diversity: Indigenous Knowledge, Sustainable Livelihoods and Resource Governance in Montane Mainland Southeast Asia*. Proceedings of the III Symposium on MMSEA 25–28 August 2002, Lijiang, P.R. China. Xu Jianchu and Stephen Mikesell, eds. pp. 457–467. Kunming: Yunnan Science and Technology Press.

tance to adopt or reject externally designed concepts cannot be generalized though there are some commonalities according to age groups. Despite sharing common experiences, highlanders' attitudes, reasoning and interpretations diverge with regard to natural and social resource use and to land.

## 2. HIGHLAND ETHNICITY

In Thailand, there is a highly scattered form of ethnicity, with highland people following cultural parameters that are usually shared within their community or community cluster as well as their ancestors' settlements in other areas, yet usually not with their immediate neighbours. In contrast to lowlanders, Lahu Na and other highland people thus pertain to a local and at the same time a dispersed ethnic setting, herein called the highland society. This multi-ethnic setting has shaped a pluralistic tradition, which enables the creation of alliances among highlanders, who share some sociocultural practices, concepts and interests. In the past, both highland communities and centralised lowland domains were relocated toward new territories, changing not only the terms of natural resource access but also the political value attributed to places of settlement, trading routes, resources and skills. Also nowadays, the power domains of the "modern" nation state extend into the present highland society's cultural make-up, changing the highlanders' position in the overall society.<sup>2</sup> The conception of locality has changed greatly over time. It is important for understanding the highlanders' changing sense of identity. There exists a historical pattern of interrelationship with the politically dominant lowland society, which is continuously marked by sociopolitical status difference. Highland societies have long been assigned minority status in the eyes of lowland power centres.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Lahu Na culture, these perspectives are neither documented nor explicitly taught to the younger generation. Territorial loss can also mean cultural loss. For instance, the Lahu's hunting abilities disappeared along with their eviction from mountainous forests in China. And Thailand's Lahu farmers' poppy cultivation faded with the ban on opium production. Highlanders' indigenous systems have decreased whenever their homes have fallen into the sociopolitical reach of executive forces and the economic reach of global markets.

Secondly, the Southeast Asian highland habitat stretches across not only large geographical areas but also political boundaries (such as between military Myanmar, communist Laos and capitalist Thailand) resulting in differing sociocultural settings. An important aspect of highlander identity is that of their legal situation, which is defined by lowland state interests. In many Lahu Na settlements in northern Thailand, farmers struggle to be recognised and documented as national citizens. Although identity documentation is binding for every person in the kingdom, the

process is agonisingly slow for highlanders since government agents (still) tend to see *chao khao* (hilltribes) as immigrants, who may not have land ownership and other rights. Not all Southeast Asian nations offer civil rights protection to their ethnic minority populations, and in some areas of armed conflict forced resettlement is common. Though the Lahu *Thai* (i.e., those settling in Thailand) share cultural and ethnic origins with Lahu in the eastern Shan states of Myanmar or those in the southwest of Yunnan, they also differ from them in features of legal, political, economical and cultural framework. Whereas some Lahu communities live in constant fear of eviction, others are promoted as destinations of ecotourism. In Thailand, where all ethnic highland people are expected to assimilate into the mainstream society, there is both a potential threat of cultural extinction and a commercial interest by lowlanders to promote their cultures for commercial purposes.

Thirdly, highland farmers' ethnicity in Thailand primarily nurtures their collective identity by stressing an all-extending kinship concept onto the whole of their imagined ethnic society: a projection which has consolidating effects on people's social construction patterns. In the eyes of the Lahu Na people, all important social aspects are reflected in the diversity of their traditional life-world concepts and ancestral practices. There is a meaningful relation to societal space, in that "*all what concerns Lahu communities is our common fate, for we are brothers and sisters*" (*ou-ví ou-n*). This compassionate concept strengthens the traditional structures of their localities. It also provides cohesive ethnicity concepts, by means of which highland people validate their indigenous skills and knowledge systems. Lahu Na farmers say that these traditional survival skills have led them through history. In the overlapping space of social and ethnic identities, highland people have relied on particular value systems that offer not only cultural self-awareness but also the moral base for responsible relationships, thereby connecting their scattered communities. These concepts are embedded in ethnic people's mythologies across the Southeast Asian mountain habitat and may be seen as a stable term of culturally validated ethnicity, in that there has been a continuity of disruptions. Disruptive situations have produced both consolidating as well as diversifying aspects of highlanders' ethnicity. They do not provide any grounds for solving unsustainable livelihood or antagonising inter-ethnic relationships.

## 3. CONCEPT INNOVATION

Besides the understanding of homogenising concepts that are shared among members of dispersed highland peoples, a comprehensive view into the spiritual occupation of societal space is needed. A point from where to observe highlanders' change of reference system are the values which

are attributed to cultural advancements into mountainous habitats. The vast amount of cultural innovation of agricultural, economic and sociocultural practices in ethnic communities of Northern Thailand has created great expectations among Lahu and other highland farmers wanting to increase their income by means of technical solutions and also off-farm activities. These farmers tend to adopt external concepts regarding material and economically defined developments. Also, non-material concepts receive increasing attention. Members of all ethnic highland groups are receptive to lowland life-style models, with individualistic attitudes gaining ground among the younger generations. Highlanders' concept innovation addresses the complex issue of urban versus rural life-styles, with cultural destitution being linked to socioeconomic expectations in the highland village, where the local reference system loses its significance for the more marginalised and hungry or the more daring and innovative community members. With variant expression in different spaces, highlanders' shift of reference system is stronger in urban lowland localities than in the rural settings of their original highland communities. Located in the urban space, the challenged cultural self-esteem creates an ethnically alienated population among labour migrants, especially when including children's presence in town. For children can't follow the cultural track which their parents left. In Thailand, social and even physical alienation increases among migrant highlanders, including those from adjacent countries.<sup>4</sup> The social limitation of labour migrants is especially precarious when proceeding from communities where peoples' concepts are embedded in practical, oral and symbolised expression, such as is the case of the Lahu Na and other illiterate highland groups. Illiterate migrants develop a double-hidden identity when working in town: hiding both their ethnic highland identity as well as their inability to read and write.

In the rural context, highlanders' social self-esteem is more intact, even when cultural identity is fading away. Rural highland identity (still) means an acknowledged diversity of knowledge, empirical concepts and specializations, which are expressed in local world views, traditional practices and acknowledged narratives. Rural highlanders' attachment to traditional concepts is however being changed for growing dependencies from outside sources. Their cultural anchorage now extends into harbouring external life-style concepts, which feed the communities with new experiences and conceptual models, thereby giving an increasingly diffuse shape to the communities in place. Highland people's involvement in innovative processes is more heterogeneous than before. This results in sometimes contested and competitive interrelationships.

Concept innovation in the highlands comprises many aspects to divide ethnic communities, among which lowland language skills and literacy are outstanding factors. Both give younger community members a comparative advantage in the use of externally designed materials and

concepts as well as in economic mobility used in inter-ethnic relationships. Concept innovation regarding (more) sustainable ways of managing available natural and monetary resources may be better envisaged and developed by the younger generation of ethnic highlanders, whereas the older age group, that defines the logic of the traditional value system, is less challenged by "modern" concepts, even when realizing the need to respond to upcoming demands from the outside. The younger generation links up with concepts that are promoted by lowland institutions, such as formal education, which strongly influence highland farmers' change of cultural concepts. Some (former) highlanders now carry university degrees, permitting their potential influence in politics or research and development contexts. Most persons with higher educational standards have however tended to leave their original community, which results in a loss of knowledgeable human resource for local initiatives, presentation and concept development.

#### 4. CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

In response to the highlanders' problematic conditions, public discussion concerning their land and resource use situation has increased. Whereas state discourse tends to point out highlanders' harmful and illicit practices, non-governmental discourse stresses communication needs regarding local people's legal requirements (citizenship, land titles), political requirements (community representation, self-governance), social requirements (authentic and mediated concept exchange) and cultural requirements (language, belief systems). Ethnic networking initiatives support highland farmers' self-definition by creating forums for indigenous peoples' exchange of perspectives. Support of ethnic highlanders' possibilities to elaborate their points of reflection and possible responses to changing circumstances starts from highlanders' own base of reference. Local developments are analysed and compared among delegates of highland communities, evaluating important issues *within* their cultures' logical framework. Ecological, economic and sociocultural risks—matters of thought in any community—are traced back to local people's common experience pool. This acknowledgment of mountain peoples' cultural references provides a genuine base for dialogue between highlanders and lowlanders, thereby validating highlanders' ethnicity. Though it does not always meet the expectations of farmers, who either do not participate in written communication patterns or do prefer to engage in cultural transformation thereby consciously devaluating their own reference system.

In Thailand, innovative concepts have mostly been induced by externally designed highland development projects. At least two tendencies can be observed. Firstly, in these settings, highland people's strategies, attitudes and motivations have often been referred to in speculative

terms only, since they are usually not invited to assess the suitability of changes in their communities' natural and sociocultural habitat. Highland farmers are approached in order to gain particular knowledge (i.e., on local resources use, farming systems and other economically relevant livelihood affairs), as well as in order to promote particular knowledge (e.g., related to crop substitution). Highlanders' inclusion has mostly not been considered on projects' higher decision-making levels, since sociocultural contingencies, ambiguities and contradictions have been regarded as unproductive or problematic features. Though research and development workers request farmers' possible engagement in innovative activities, such as income generation, reforestation, education and other matters of assumed societal value, the search for highlanders' possible participation in designing concept development mostly stops short at the border between convenience and inconvenience, which their participation means for external implementers of project activities. The complexity of effects that change processes entail for the people in place is being ignored along with local actors' potentials to co-decide the definition of projects' goals, objectives and purposes.

On the other side, in the decade of indigenous people and the year of the mountains, more than ever before has inquiry been made into highland farmers' perspectives regarding the changes to their mountainous habitat and livelihood concepts. Highlanders are invited to give talks at multi-stakeholder meetings and conferences. More than ever before do funding agents approve of participatory and culturally sensitive approaches toward highland peoples' needs, options and specifically valued knowledge systems. Some highland projects in Thailand have integrated indigenous farmers into particular aspects of their ongoing research or development project in view of ensuring its local acceptance as well as the farmers' contribution to what could result in more sustainable livelihood situations. Dedicated efforts towards strengthening and developing local concept bases require, however, qualitative in-depth research on the micro-level, which because of its little comparative value has not been greatly accepted among conventional circles of academia, technical cooperation and politics. A promotion of local concept development that involves intercultural dialogue on highlanders' own concepts needs to envisage the support of farmers' evaluative skills in their own language in order to extend their genuine arguments. This approach requires more funding than is usually allotted, and considerations of this kind have frequently been pushed aside, especially where the general lowland opinion conceives highland peoples' distinct languages and reference systems as disturbing cultural homogeneity or as threatening concepts of national security. A lack of resource allocation for integrating indigenous concepts and values into the national development agenda prevails throughout the region, though in some countries highlanders' self-determination is theoretically foreseen in the political structure of ethnic people's

local autonomy or is potentially embodied in government officials who pertain to the ethnic highland population.

Highland people's self-determination is limited by several factors, such as the necessary use of the official lowland language. There is no place where politically autonomous highland Lahu Na communities receive vernacular language education. It is understood that in multi-ethnic habitats, where language, concepts and values differ from one settlement to another, a vernacular language curriculum design is a difficult task. Notwithstanding, since highland languages are crucial for ethnic continuity and highlanders' social cohesion, it may be a most important input for their concept development. The diversity of highlanders' perspectives cannot be isolated from local people's specific experiences, such as being socially, economically or politically patronized by means of an official language use. The language-based distortion of both meaning and value of ethnic highlanders' concepts may be a minor problem. A major problem is that of local people's resulting passivity, not engaging in responsible action expected from their side. The neglect and consecutive devaluation of local languages and their respective value systems not only induce processes of indigenous concept disintegration, but also the devaluation of highland communities' local organizations, by means of which natural and social resource use is managed.

## 5. OUTSIDERS' POSITION

Frequently, outsiders to highland communities are unaware of these results, since they don't relate to indigenous concepts as being part of an integrated wisdom or knowledge system. Instead, they conceive local views in terms of isolated references, which are noted down separated from a local people's cultural frame of meaning. Whereas practical and empirical knowledge items enter pools of technical or intellectual property, indigenous knowledge is usually regarded as detached from a local people's cultural logic and assessments, including their spiritual wisdom. Little is known about the impacts that encounters with outsiders could possibly have in their eyes. Most highland farmers prefer to address lowland agents with whom they have a rather stable relationship, though this does not mean that these interrelations are perceived as trustful. Official outsiders who settle in a highland communities need to consider the possible impacts of their structural and personal engagement. Hidden expectations prevail in cases of half-hearted and deceiving interrelationships in which perspectives are not met, as the following statements show:

School teachers came up to teach the Lahu children. But they did not know how to motivate the Lahu students who were slow in acquiring the needed language skills. Some teachers would only vent their frustration on them but never put a foot into our village to talk to

the parents, who were just not knowledgeable in matters of school education.

Agricultural project workers came to work here. They were young people who seemed to be friendly to talk to. However, while we sometimes waited for many weeks in order to get paid for our delivered products, these extension officers could afford buying motorbikes for their exclusive use only a few months after their arrival. Yet they would not give us a ride down to the tarmac road (13 kilometres distance), even if we needed to go there urgently.

In both research and development contexts, outsiders' encounters with highland farmers mean the application of scientific or technical knowledge in a defined space, namely an arbitrarily chosen highland community. The intended transfer of concepts usually follows a pre-conceived problem-solving agenda with limited consideration for an ethnic people's social values and critical concepts. Highland farmers' perceived reaction to exclusion may range from indifference to opportunism and from passivity to sub-alternation. Where outsiders of highland communities are paid to either find or provide solutions to externally defined problems, non-genuine response to the initiative may have to be expected. In some research and development initiatives involving ethnic highland communities, the unfavourable condition of status imbalance between farmers and official agents has been as much ignored as the result of this situation's prevalence: that in which a power-holding outsider of the local system receives just that information which is designed for that agent's position. Sometimes, outsiders make use of this imbalance for their own purposes. In the case of Lahu Na communities, the economic advantage of outsiders has mostly induced the perpetuation of stereotypical images which reflect both the farmers' perception of difference in socioeconomic status and their expectation concerning support relationships. One reason among others for the failure of projects is an insufficient relationship concept, in which external agents enter the limited stage of interrelation with local institutions or key persons in terms of a negotiation act, in order to obtain farmers' immediate co-operation in activities to follow. Yet, highlanders' problem-solving communication means usually slow and sometimes reluctant consensus-building processes. These processes could not be short-cut by pushing through decision-making processes on the base of contractual encounters.

In these cases, outsiders' involvement appears as a commodity offered in exchange for securing some amount of collaborative service from the community members. This kind of pre-emptive offer pretends to hide the outsiders' existing dependency from insiders. It distorts meanings regarding the intended scope of cooperation and hinders the evolution of a sustainable concept ownership, for it does not evoke a genuine interest or responsibility among

the local people. Highlanders' negotiation skills constitute an historical and existential social tool for interethnic trade relationships that are shaped by mutual acknowledgment in social and even spiritual fields. Interethnic contact loses value when it fails to produce the results that trade relationships do, namely a tangible benefit. Among Lahu Na in Thailand, farmers' engagement interest usually decreases if this interrelation is perceived as uncommitted or invasive, such as when it turns out to imply painstaking rounds of village meetings done for and by outsiders to the community. Whereas an undesired trade relationship can be cancelled, research and development relationships create processes not chosen by the local people and sometimes requiring more patience than anticipated. Especially law-binding concept promotion tends to create problematic relationships, if these are felt as an unsuitable imposition on farmers' livelihood organization or resource use.

Lahu people have avoided contacts with outsiders in which they felt rejected. Unfortunately, this experience is still a most common feature in local farmers' narrations. And it continues shaping local people's concepts of state support. Most officials, teachers, doctors, development and forestry agents are said to be uninterested in dealing with highland farmers' burning issues. They are perceived as ignoring constructive ways of encounter and as turning their backs on farmers' divergent views. In the past it has happened that—because of limited Thai language skills—Lahu farmers did not know how to forward their views concerning problems and critical developments in terms of effective suggestions.

Be they hospital doctors or district officers, they just do not talk to us. We know them and they know us. Quite often they make mistakes for which they do not feel responsible. They just refuse to listen to our claims and simply send us back home again.

## 6. SOCIOCULTURAL AMBIGUITY

When reviewing the appropriateness of external concepts promoted in given highland localities, the range of intercultural power relations, social contradictions and diverse political interests which come into play in these interethnic relationships ought to be regarded as a matter of fact. Whilst mountain-valley interrelationships increase, the communication between highland Lahu and lowland Thai continues being one of mutual reluctance. The validity of traditional avoidance strategies among the Lahu Na farmers is challenged by "modern" patterns of economic dependency, which has made highland citizens' legal, formal and social integration into the Thai nationhood be an imperative though most intriguing enterprise. In addition to the implications of technical concept adoption, Lahu farmers have started feeling the impacts of non-material innovation, which includes among other aspects the aug-

mentation of individualistic concepts. Many concepts show unsuitability in the sociocultural environment of the Lahu Na people, in that they have undermining effects on the social cohesion of the communities in place, though they might be acceptable on the individual level. Not only among the Lahu farmers, recent developments have meant an increase of diverse problems that stem from ambiguous concept innovation. Both, material and non-material innovations can lead to highland people's loss of agreement base with regard to their livelihood management. These processes, however, cannot be anticipated.

The Thai state's more recent involvement in the highlands means that farmers' have increasing access to mobility, electricity, and formal education. Materials and concepts are transported into the hills, some of which are important for local communities while others are valued only individually. Common problems that Lahu Na and other highland people have with changing concepts reside in a lack of agreement on where to accommodate these concepts within their own value system. Lahu Na farmers have expressed confusion about external engagement situations interfering in their living spaces. Natural resource policies in particular have not been made clear to the highland Lahu Na and other forest settlers, who now illegally rely on wood and non-timber forest species for their immediate survival. With regard to natural resource use, they specifically relate to an experienced ambiguity in external interests, sometimes exploiting and sometimes protecting highland forests, fields and even cultural features. Problematic concept changes have been attributed to the fact that these concepts belong to a different sociocultural system (namely the lowland Thai society), allowing for little understanding among the respective communication partners. The dilemma that indigenous peoples have with lowlanders' consists basically in the exclusion of highland society from civil rights as long as its members are economically unable to participate in lowland life-style models while practicing and claiming cultural distinctiveness, which in political terms requests an acknowledgment of customary law, traditional property, etcetera. Both public and official opinions regarding the legal integration of ethnic highlanders into the mainstream society ambiguously stop short at the point of conceiving highlanders (*chao khao*)<sup>5</sup> as members of their society. Confusion also prevails among concept promoters and appears in the ambiguity that is inherent in official and public attitudes towards the ethnic highland society of the Thai Kingdom. Even supportive agencies are not always fully aware of the diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives that are brought into their encounter with the local population, its rules, taboos and institutions.

Traditionally, the community-based highland culture has provided its people with the skill of social wisdom transfer that has enabled their spiritual self-sufficiency, in that it relates to ethnic and also multi-ethnic value systems, which are shared among members of the highland

society. Spiritual aspects of ethnicity have constituted the domain of indigenous institutions, that guard the particular group's concept base and define ancestral models of social interrelation, partnership and marriage. Now, however, traditional highland identity concepts are now re-validated and expanded among highland Lahu Na, who increasingly accommodate lowland concepts within the indigenous setting. At present, relationship concepts that these highland farmers share with other ethnic highlanders with similar settings or traditions, also allow for shared references to lowland concepts and perspectives, including inter-marriage with Thai people, whose culture is not seen as quite similar and whose perspectives are allegedly very different from the Lahu farmers'. In these cases, traditional institutions have no longer guided young couples' behaviour. Nor could traditional institutions spell out rulings in case of their matrimonial conflicts. Interethnic marriage has given reason to social disruption more than once. It has even resulted in the splitting up of a local Lahu Na community.

In Thailand's now decentralising political structures, there are more possibilities for Lahu Na representatives to suggest a structural revision of detrimental developments, some of which lead to environmental degradation, to the deterioration of relationships between highland and lowland stakeholders, or to sociocultural alienation. Yet, though upcoming generations are more self-conscious than their elders in bringing their causes and cases to discussion, most highland Lahu Na don't dispose of conceptual means to publicly discuss local processes that threaten their natural and social livelihood. Most young Lahu Na people approve of changes that imply expansion of their individual mobility and fostering of intercultural communication skills. Particularly, self-centred interrelationship concepts are now intentionally devalued in order to embrace relationship concepts that are designed for a more pervasive communication between highland Lahu and lowland Thai. This inclusion permits lowland culture to occupy a valued space in the cultural identification base of highland Lahu. At the same time, the cultural identity as Thai is also seen as contradicting or excluding the perspective of being a highland society member. Natural, cultural and social resource management concepts that are essential for Lahu and other highland people's ethnic survival cannot be understood as separate from traditional *and* modern perspectives. These perspectives are now constructed together, against each other and simultaneously. In this dynamically changing context, I suggest referring to Lahu ethnicity as a matter of social ambiguity and confusion rather than of cultural synthesis.

## 7. UNSUSTAINABLE INTERFERENCE

Both the kind and degree of outsiders' involvement in highland areas shape the interethnic relationship between high-

landers and lowlanders as well as the conclusions to be taken about the mutual engagement condition. They also influence highlanders' decision-making process regarding the acceptance of innovative concepts being promoted. In Thailand, some state offices still approve of enforcing the national law in mountain areas by punishment rather than through a dialogue with the highland people about objectives and their purposes. Concept innovation in important matters of people's survival requires accordance in arguments, as blurred objectives result in unsustainable processes. The previous decades' experiences show that some lowland concepts, namely those of material development, were not always suitable in the vulnerable mountain environment. The promotion of market economy in the highlands of Northern Thailand has for instance created the need for highlanders' income possibilities as well as unsustainable and hazardous conditions that also affect valley people living downstream. Its promotion is thus a double-sided sword. Centralized institutions have promoted diverse innovations in the mountainous habitats, many of which are forwarded by low-skilled extension workers who do not take into account whether their often substantial concept changes are appropriate for local implementation or not. Some developments have practically derailed important aspects of the highlanders' subsistence base and resource security. Several development concepts are now found to require more adaptation to the sociocultural conditions in the highlands.

Especially the limited availability of options has raised Lahu Na farmers' environmental awareness regarding their use of natural resources as well as chemicals for "modern" cash crop production.<sup>6</sup> Most farmers have accepted not only the extension of nationally designed infrastructure but also the promotion of lowland materials and concepts of agricultural intensification without anticipating possible impacts in ecological, health and social fields. Now that these implications have become obvious, some farmers still approve of these innovations. Others resist unsuitable concept promotion by means of diffuse and also explicit opposition. Detailed consideration of mountain and forest settlers' cultures is needed, where these are expected to adopt the suggested concept innovations. Some institutions, which promote highlanders' concept innovation in terms of a long-term engagement, now put more emphasis on trust-building relationships. However, language skills of the respective "target" community are scarce among officials and development agents. Although highlanders' social and cultural resource use patterns now receive increasing interest by diverse institutions, many officials do not envisage a broad definition of the mountainous habitat—one in which ethnic collectivities form a constituent part of highland nature and are therefore to be strengthened along with the protection of the non-human environment. Intercultural communication between highland farmers and lowland development agents are mostly weak. This however does not mean that promoted con-

cepts are not effective in terms of their long-term impacts. State involvement in Thailand's Northern mountains gives evidence of how external involvement in the highlands has been effective in that it substantially changed both the interrelation patterns between highlanders and lowlanders as well as traditional concept bases regarding organizational structures. Crop substitution concepts have been effective in that poppy cultivation in Thailand's mountainous areas is now almost eliminated. Yet, most of the alternatively promoted cool-weather fruits, flowers and export market crops include risks and hazards for Lahu and other highland people which are incompatible with global calls for sustainable development. Also the logging ban in 1989 has been effective in that highlanders do not clear forest areas for agriculture any longer, and also shifting cultivation has been reduced. The permanent use of soils over many years causes, however, leads to degradation and results in insufficient production of staple crops, namely rice, which many highland farmers now have to buy. Thailand's exemplary extension of national parks and its expansion of forest areas has been effective in that these areas are now protected from native people's co-existence. Forest and mountain dwellers have been pushed out of their habitats, away from their traditional life resources, knowledge systems and skills to find themselves in precarious situations. Formal educational facilities have been extended into many remote highland areas. Yet, teachers (who are lowland Thai) report that ethnic highland students are comparatively slow, disinterested, or show a weak overall performance, not keeping up with the expected requirements.<sup>7</sup>

Compressed within these critical conditions, Lahu Na highlanders search for efficient concepts for how to secure their livelihood while encountering diverse and sometimes unknown problems. With traditional staple crops being insufficient, the traditional cash crop (poppy) outlawed and modern crop production expensive; with land use being restricted and forest use banned; with shifting cultivation being criticized, religious practice unaffordable and legal documentation incomplete, that search is harder than ever before. More sustainable development concepts would require more inclusion of highland farmers' own perspectives. There should be ways to support highlanders' own evaluations of local dynamics, such as crop substitution projects, decentralized school curricula and other innovations. Unilateral definition of effectiveness could be avoided if counter effects were analysed with and by the local people. Looking critically at some of the promoted change processes, farmers have identified some problems that relate to the changes that are occurring. Concept changes in sociocultural fields, which occur through interethnic relationships with the lowland Thai society and also as a consequence of media consumption, suggest their rather problematic development assumption: The traditional order, which is built on a strongly cohesive platform, is losing substance. Social value systems are weak-

ened and devalued and the validity of pluralistic and egalitarian world views is ceding space for culturally homogeneous and socially hierarchical concepts. Traditional problem-solving skills do not match the array of problems encountered nowadays and have been outdated by upcoming fashions. Concepts promoted through formal education undermine traditional leadership concepts. People's cultural skills disappear while external knowledge receives a privileged position among many community members. Community elders are challenged to keep pace with the younger generation or else stay clear of secular decision-making, though their experience and knowledge are still needed. As a result of all these and more dynamics, social tensions, economic dependencies and communities' problems increase.

## 8. PARTICIPATORY SUGGESTION

More research on indigenous peoples' own development concepts is needed in order to avoid further crisis in the mountainous habitat of Southeast Asia. More participatory, empathetic and caring approaches are needed in order to avoid repeating the errors of donor-driven activities, pretending to change mountain peoples' livelihood resource use by means of a paid concept innovation plan. Regarding the multilateral context of externally designed projects for the purpose of solving environmental, economic or political problems in the highlands: there is an urgent need to engage in more creative and pioneering ways of embracing collective meanings within highlanders' own valued contexts and languages, in order to obtain an appropriate understanding of their livelihood situations, and also in order to spurn their responsible part-taking in both concept development and development concepts. Culturally suitable approaches are especially urgent where highlanders' livelihood situations mean their increasingly difficult struggle with regard to ecological and economic innovation pressures. Wanting to raise awareness, I may take this opportunity to invoke a spirit of dedication to the people in the highlands.

Not all valued concepts of academic, public and political circles are equally meaningful or valid among members of the rural highland society community and vice versa. Namely, culturally sensitive and politically conscious outside agents need to engage more practically in understanding and transferring local people's concept systems. Outsiders should contribute to the extension of ethnic communities' voice and vote by actively acknowledging the validity of highlanders' experiences, even when appearing ambiguous. A culturally supportive understanding of actor-oriented initiatives, which is indispensable for those agents engaged in participatory (action) research and development, is definitely required for identifying more sustainable solutions for natural and human resources in the highlands. The support of ethnic mountain

farmers' own development concepts should imply locally rooted action plans, in which farmers co-define, monitor and evaluate concept development initiatives throughout their planning and implementation process. An envisaged collaborative problem-solving agenda should also comprise a thorough reflection on interethnic communication processes, in order to block further deterioration of human and natural resources in the mountainous areas of the region.

Expected outcomes would be that by supporting ethnic mountain communities' genuine participation, so-called "voiceless" people could be enabled to discuss and exchange important issues in more extensive and also more effective ways. By providing appropriate possibilities to participate in negotiations with outside agents, a revision of sociocultural perspectives could take place and bridges between different actors' or stakeholders' interests, which are based in different reference systems, could be built. The support of highland farmers' articulation base would mean that indigenous concepts and perspectives could be shared instead of being further marginalized. Constructive attitudes could be obtained from both sides of communication if a continuous articulation process is realized by means of a collectively acknowledged dialogue. A public representation of local perspectives and sociocultural imperatives could provide the base for establishing a more sustainable negotiation climate for reviewing terms of interrelation and development concepts to be discussed among highland citizens and their government. By promoting highlanders' sociocultural self-determination, more locally suitable development concepts could be expected, so that a more constructive use of natural and sociocultural resources could be envisaged.

## 9. INDIGENOUS CONCEPTS

Among Lahu Na farmers in Northern Thailand, there is a growing wish to broaden and sharpen the base of knowledge and understanding by means of exchanging concepts within their own language group, assuming that ethnic "*solidarity will help us to learn from each others' experiences.*" A particular group of farmers in Chiang Rai Province are presently discussing their own and other community members' perspectives concerning their cultural base of identification and attitude in matters of sociocultural importance. These indigenous researchers (aging 20 to 28 years) have been doing a community-based investigation regarding the validity of cultural institutions in which they are asking knowledgeable elders to provide their active support. Since older farmers have repeatedly voted for the promotion of their own culture system as having proven sustainable in the past, and as being the only system, which is theirs by definition as well as experience, approval for the research group's pursuit has been expressed even by reluctant community members, thus

giving it an authentic mandate for conducting its activities.<sup>8</sup> The young Lahu farmers decided to do research on the most important aspects of their own culture with the aim of keeping it alive, both in theory and practice, for generations to come. This self-designed research is done by literate members of a traditionally illiterate community. For the initial phase of the project, they have enjoyed additional support from two Lahu bachelor students (Lahu Nyi and Lahu Mönö volunteers), who stayed in the village for a period of two months, in order to document ongoing activities and process first data. When the process of a more systematic reflection became institutionalised through financial support from the government, the vulnerability of the research group's initial intension was challenged. For the now formalised context inspired farmers' concerns about unforeseeable implications for their community. The possibility of receiving support for self-defined issues was as unknown to the Lahu farmers as the effort to document their statements for others to read. The research team then invited some Lahu Na members of a multi-ethnic network,<sup>9</sup> thereby expanding their base of potential kinship interrelations and reducing the dependency from external knowledge providers. The visit of these formerly unknown Lahu persons' dispelled farmers' fears to engage in research activities concerning their own culture. The research farmers then thought of a research design, in which questions were answered by activities (e.g. collecting medical plants in the forest, or constructing ritual instruments).

Pointing at some of the indigenous group's findings concerning generational differences, I may resume that social disruption appears as a result of decreasing interest in community bonds. Diminished appreciation of the traditional social system is considered to be a problem for the community as a whole. This detachment is especially evidenced among young community members, but it is also shared among some older persons. At this time, important technical knowledge has changed its content, with agricultural activities requiring increasingly specific skills and procedures that are unknown to elders. Traditional knowledge such as practiced and guarded by the community elders (whose opinions used to enjoy the whole community's acceptance) no longer attracts the interest of young people. Fashionable lowland elements (news, events, music, sports) play an essential role in the performance of youth, whereas most elders are unable to relate to them. Nor does the "written knowledge" of the youths mean much to elders. However, young persons, though still lacking solid life experience, receive elders' support in that they have a knowledge base perceived to be more ample and appropriate for dealing with current demands. Outside relationships, political conditions and socioeconomic developments require more formalised communication skills (e.g., with the lowland state officials) and also more individual initiatives with which to secure the family livelihood. The now requisite attributes oppose some

ancestral teachings of the Lahu with which former livelihood conditions were secured, although "modern" perspectives are said to be more relevant for economic survival than those. However, many cultural concepts belonging to the lowland system are regarded among old and young as culturally unsuitable and partly disrupting Lahu people's solidarity. Spiritual detachment from traditional concepts is said to happen in those fields where young persons' expectations concerning entertainment are not met. It does not happen in the ritual practice (including natural resource worshipping), which among all community members is seen as the rightful and correct expression of Lahu identity. The now so fashionable display of aggression and selfishness is said to do harm to the spiritual well-being of the Lahu community as a whole. Next to the religious offence and the feared consequences these attitudes may entail, social disruption gives bad examples for the children and causes serious problems in communal decision-making processes.

There are diverse responses to this village research, a unique and self-designed effort. Firstly, the ongoing project is an important possibility for bringing together older and younger folks and men and women who otherwise ignored systematic strategies for solving sociocultural problems by means of research. Some community members expressed that they felt challenged by bringing not only their individual but also their community's name into a formalised interrelation scheme, even while approving the young researchers' efforts. This research means, secondly, the possibility of farmers' empirical concept development, in that they test the suitability of ways and forms to obtain knowledge, agreement and support. Some research farmers have seen their own determination as a legitimate driving force to draw on others for the purpose of consolidating cultural identity. These farmers easily approach other community members in order to find out about their particular attitudes and preferences. Other research team members have felt shy to inquire on personal matters of interest, thinking this approach might be perceived as inappropriate or even upsetting to social conduct norms.

Thirdly, the project allows the possibility for young people to revise their perspectives with regard to what can be achieved. Some research farmers have expressed high expectations with regard to the outcome and have been easily disappointed when observing existing limitations of the research. Others accommodate their expectations to just what can be shared and discussed under given conditions. The latter attitude is probably the most accepted one in the eyes of most community members. All farmers have shared their knowledge, views and timely disposition only so far as they are ready to see their own social reputation exposed. Only a few are prepared to put their social identity at stake for the cause of community research. Certainly, at this stage it is not known how much use the indigenous research efforts will be for the Lahu community involved. According to the native researchers' findings, mutual care and respect as well as

peaceful ways of conflict resolution are to be regained; for they are believed to be essential for Lahu people's social survival in the mountains. More attention is allegedly needed in educational matters in order to provide children with better chances than their parents have had.

## NOTES

1. Lahu Sheleh, as they are known by others, call themselves Lahu Na, which is, in fact the name of a culturally different Lahu subgroup. Hereafter the Lahu Na (Sheleh) will be referred to as Lahu Na.

2. The ongoing forced resettlement dynamics in military-ruled Burma, produces hundreds of thousands of displaced highlanders, disrupting the structure of ethnic communities and families.

3. Highland peoples have been long-term settlers of more or less lasting power domains, such as the diverse Tai-speaking chiefdoms and kingdoms in Southeast Asian lowlands, located in valleys and plains of Yunnan province (Chieng Rung), in Shan states (Ava), or Lan Na (Chiang Mai).

4. This highland proletariat provides the cheapest, landless, and most stripped of rights, labour force for urban lowland enterprises.

5. In Thailand, ethnic highland collectivities or are generalized in the social category "*chao khao*" (hill people). Cultural affiliation or sub groups are differentiated as "*pao*" (tribe).

6. Certainly, Lahu farmers' return to organic subsistence farming is as little probable as the return to poppy cultivation, which was the least hazardous practice at the time.

7. See also "Lahu Na (Sheleh) Livelihood" by Jakhadtè Somchai Jayò in this volume

8. This approval was further consolidated after the research team leader was invited to give a talk on Lahu Na farmers' livelihood at the III MMSEA "Lijiang Conference" and also visited some Lahu communities in Xixuan Banna.

9. The multi-ethnic network of Bang Mapha District, Mae Hong Sorn Province was founded by Lahu Na farmers.

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