

The 'Karen Consensus', Ethnic Politics and Resource-Use Legitimacy in Northern Thailand

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Recent Thai research on Karen ethnicity and resource management places significant emphasis on rotational shifting cultivation (rai mun wian). A broad consensus has emerged that this is a relatively sustainable, ecologically friendly and subsistence-oriented form of agriculture that is threatened by the recent intrusion of the state and the market. This paper argues that the portrayals encompassed by this 'Karen consensus' rely on overly selective accounts of Karen economy and, in particular, play down the historical importance of long-term agricultural intensification and commercial exchange. While recognising the importance of establishing the legitimacy of upland communities in a context of tenure insecurity and resource conflict, the paper argues that the 'limited legitimacy' of the 'Karen consensus' runs the risk of undermining Karen claims for a greater share of natural resources and development assistance.

Introduction

In recent years, a growing body of literature on environmental management has been produced by non-government organisations (NGOs) and academics in northern Thailand. In this material the Karen—Thailand's largest 'upland' ethnic group—consistently feature as conservationist, cooperative, and other-worldly. Indeed there is considerable justification for arguing that there is a broadly held 'consensus' in NGO and academic circles that the Karen represent a fragile ideal of mutually beneficial interaction between culture and nature: 'virtually as one in the same ecosystem'.¹ Genuine Karen livelihood, this consensus suggests, is based on a subsistence-oriented production system that is underpinned by a rich body of local environmental wisdom, a vigorous communal orientation and consistently non-commercial values:

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1 Kunlawadi Bunphinon, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon suan ruam: konkai nai kanraksa pa khong chao kariang ban Sanephong' ('Collective Resource Management: Mechanisms for Forest Protection in the Karen Village of Sanephong'), *Niwet*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1997), p. 19.

Shifting cultivation is really a way of maintaining the lifestyle of the Pakakoeyor [Skaw Karen],² and it cannot be separated from the beliefs, traditions, rituals and lifestyle of the people. Every time they come to plant seed or to look over the fields they think of the human spirit that is closely bound to the lives of animals and to nature itself. Every time they strike the soil with a spade they think about the maintenance of biodiversity and of nature ... The system of shifting cultivation arises out of longstanding systems of local wisdom and awareness of nature. This knowledge has persisted for generations. If we ask a Pakakoeyor why they practise shifting cultivation, they will respond that shifting cultivation is a production system that takes into consideration the protection of soil, water, forest and animals. The land belongs to nature, not to people or any individual. The resources of the world belong to nature. We only seek permission to use the resources in the maintenance of our livelihoods. We have to protect the resources so that there will be enough left for our children to live here.³

In this paper I critically examine this portrayal of Karen ethnicity and resource management on two levels. First, I argue that, taken as a whole, the recent body of work on the Karen raises ethnographic and historical questions that warrant further debate and investigation. My view is that much of the material relies on stereotypically bucolic images of Karen livelihood that do not stand up to critical scrutiny, especially when placed in the context of long-term agricultural intensification and commercial exchange. Of course, in making the claims they do about Karen agriculture, these authors are making fundamentally political claims and, from this perspective, ethnographic veracity may be an issue of secondary importance. The second strand to my argument is, then, to suggest that the political wisdom of the 'Karen consensus' cannot be taken for granted, especially in an environment of intensified resource competition. My concern is that the politically motivated construction of a Karen identity based on subsistence-oriented livelihoods threatens to undermine the resource claims of the large numbers of Karen who are seeking modest (re-)engagement with national and international commercial networks. In the 'Karen consensus', livelihood claims to resource rights have been closely linked to the establishment of a particular, and distinctive, form of ethnic identity. The effect of the latter has, I believe, been to weaken the force of the former.

In this discussion I am drawing mainly, but not exclusively, on Thai-language material produced by academics and NGOs in the northern city of Chiang Mai. Much of this material originates from Chiang Mai University and from the Northern Development Foundation, an activist NGO with strong academic links. Influential precursors to this work include the study by Uraivan *et al.*⁴ on the Karen's 'intermediate zone crisis' and Pinkaew's⁵ path-breaking work on the Karen's 'local ecological wisdom.' Recent work includes important studies of rotational shifting cultivation;⁶ accounts of local communities

2 The two largest Karen groups in Thailand are the Skaw and the Pwo. In much recent Thai literature the Skaw Karen are referred to as Pakakoeyor (though P'gaganyaw may be closer to what Skaw Karen actually call themselves). The choice of ethonyms is an interesting issue in itself but one which lies outside my scope in this paper.

3 Waralak Ithiphonolan, *Rai mun wian: mandaa haeng phuut (Rotational Shifting Cultivation: Mother of Plant Varieties)* (Project for the Development of Northern Watersheds by Community Organisations, Chiang Mai, 1998), pp. 34–5.

4 Uraivan Tan-Kim-Yong, Anan Ganjanapan, Shalardchai Ramitanondh and Sanay Yanasarn, *Natural Resource Utilization and Management in Mae Khan Basin: Intermediate Zone Crisis* (Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, 1988).

5 Pinkaew Leungamsri, *Phumpanya niwetwithaya chon phunmuang: suksa karani chumchon Kariang nai pa Thung Yai Naresuan (Local Ecological Wisdom: Case Study of the Karen in Thung Yai Naresuan Forest)* (Project for Ecological Recovery, Bangkok, 1996). See also Pinkaew Leungamsri and Noel Rajesh (eds), *The Future of People and Forests in Thailand after the Logging Ban* (Project for Ecological Recovery, Bangkok, 1992).

6 Jesada Chitikitpiwat, *Kanchatkan thi din yaag yangyun: karani suksa kanchatkan rai mun wian khong chaw Pakakoeyor nay jangwat Chiang Mai (Sustainable Land Management: A Case Study of Rotational Shifting Cultivation of the Pakakoeyor in Chiang Mai Province)* (Thesis for Master of Arts in Social Development Submitted at Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, 1999); Waralak, *Rai mun wian*.

and biodiversity;⁷ further studies of ecological wisdom, local rice varieties and resource management capabilities;⁸ and an account of the emergence of 'watershed networks' in Chiang Mai province.⁹ More popular publications include the Karen leader Joni's 'reflections on philosophy of life',¹⁰ and autobiographical accounts by Bupho¹¹ and Lisa.¹² Similar portrayals of Karen agricultural practices also appear regularly in NGO newsletters; play a role in Thai public debate;¹³ and circulate freely in international NGO and environmental circles.¹⁴

In Thailand there are two main 'groups' of Karen, the Skaw and the Pwo. In the sections that follow, I place most emphasis on material concerned with Skaw Karen communities, these being the communities that predominate in the areas of Chiang Mai province where I have worked. However, recent accounts of Pwo Karen resource management are broadly similar¹⁵ and it is clear that research on the Pwo, particularly that by Pinkaew,¹⁶ has had a significant influence on the development of the 'Karen consensus'. While I do not have the space to explore some of the subtleties of regional variation, it is my contention that the issues I raise have relevance for recent discussions of both Skaw and Pwo communities.

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- 7 Northern Development Foundation *et al.*, 'Kansuksa khwamlaklai thang chiwaphab lae rabob niwet nai khet pa chumchon phak nua ton bon' ('Study of Biodiversity and Ecology in Community Forests in the Upper-Northern Region'), in Krom Songsoem Khunnaphab Singwaetlom (ed.), *Phumpanya thongthin kap kanchatkan sapphayakon chiwaphap (Local Wisdom and the Management of Natural Resources)* (Krom Songsoem Khunnaphab Singwaetlom, Bangkok, 1999); Pritsana Phomma and Montree Chantawong, *Chumchon thongthin kap kanchatkan khwamlaklai thang chiwaphap (Local Communities and the Management of Biodiversity)* (Project for the Development of Northern Watersheds by Community Organisations, Chiang Mai, 1998).
- 8 Chatchawan Thongdiloet (ed.), *Supsan Lanna: sup to lomhaichai khong phaendin (Maintaining Lanna: Maintaining the Breath of the Region)* (Khanakammakana Chat Ngan Supsan Lanna, Chiang Mai, 1999), pp. 63–77; Kannika Phromsao and Bencha Silarak, *Pa chet chan panya prat: chak khamboklao khong pholuang Joni Odochao (The Seven Level Forest, the Wiseman's Wisdom: The Words of Headman Joni Odochao)* (Local Knowledge Foundation, Bangkok, 1999); Kunlawadi Bunphinon, 'Withi chiwit Kariang: withi haeng khwam phukphan kap thammachat' ('Karen Lifestyle: A Lifestyle in Harmony with Nature'), *Niwet*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1993); Kunlawadi 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon'; Prasert Trakansuphakon, 'Karen Crisis: The Case of Local Wisdom in Transition', Paper read at 6th International Conference on Thai Studies (Chiang Mai, 14–17 October, 1996); Thirayut Senakhom and Phonphana Kuacharoen, *Phanthukam khao: botbat kan anurak lae phatthana doi chumchon (Rice Varieties: The Role of Communities in Protection and Development)* (Alternative Agriculture Network, Bangkok, 1996).
- 9 Pratuang Narintarangkul Na Ayuthaya, 'Community Forestry and Watershed Networks in Northern Thailand', in Phillip Hirsch (ed.), *Seeing Forests for Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand* (Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 1997).
- 10 Joni Odochao, *Banthuk kham 'tha'* (Records of the 'Tha') (Northern Development Foundation, Chiang Mai, 1998).
- 11 Bupho, *Chiwit kha Pakakoeyor (My Pakakoeyor Life)* (Samnakphim Sarakadee, Bangkok, 1997).
- 12 Lisa Chuchunchitsakun, 'The Forest World of the Pgae K'nyau (Karen) Children', *Thai Development Newsletter*, no. 26, (1994); Lisa Chuchunchitsakun, *Withi lok pa: khon Pakakoeyor (Forest Life: The Pakakoeyor)* (Northern Development Foundation, Chiang Mai, 1998).
- 13 Anonymous, 'Endangered Eco-Warriors', *Bangkok Post* (9 February 1999); Sukhadaa Chakonphisut, 'Joni Odochao', *Nitayasarn Sarakadee*, vol. 15, no. 173 (1999).
- 14 See, for example, Center for Multichannel Learning, 'Thailand', www.edc.org/mcl/thailand, (1999); Mikael Gravers, 'Ritual as a Medium of Power: Karen Religious Movements in Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand', Paper Read at Workshop on Cargo, Cult and Culture Critique, (Aarhus, 25–8 November 1999), pp. 9–10; Human Rights Council of Australia, 'The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand: Development in Conflict with Human Rights', tc.unl.edu/enemeth/tribes, (1996); International Alliance of the Indigenous—Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, 'Letter to the Prime Minister of Thailand', www.gn.apc.org/iaip/third/letter, (1999); David Taylor, 'Sacred Forestry', *In Context*, vol. 40 (Spring 1995); Tokyo Eco-Partnership, 'Profile of Mr Jomi Odochao', www.tokyo-teleport.co.jp/world-ccc/eng/s_c_sp03, (1999); World Wildlife Fund, 'Karen Ecology Project', www.wwfthai.ait.ac.th/wwfthai, (1998).
- 15 Kunlawadi, 'Withi chiwit Kariang'; Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon'; Pinkaew, *Phumpanya niwetwiththaya*; Thirayut, *Phanthukam khao*, Chapter 3.
- 16 Pinkaew, *Phumpanya niwetwiththaya*.

The 'Karen Consensus': Sustainability, Self-Sufficiency and Externally Imposed Crisis

The various components of the ecological knowledge that governs the rotational system of rice cultivation form the heart of the Karen way of life.¹⁷

The Pakakoeyor are people who farm rice, together with various vegetables and other crops in upland fields ... The life of the Pakakoeyor is one that requires them to eat rice from upland fields ... The soul of the Pakakoeyor lives in upland fields.¹⁸

For the Pakakoeyor who live closely with upland rice fields almost all their lives, the upland fields are a small paradise.¹⁹

It has long been recognised that in the development and maintenance of ethnic identity, particular cultural traits are chosen as markers of group cohesion.²⁰ In recent writing on the Karen, a form of rotational shifting cultivation known as *rai mun wian* has taken on this role.²¹ This agricultural technique involves the clearing, burning and cultivation of land parcels, followed by a long period of fallow before the land is re-cultivated. Karen *rai mun wian* focuses on the production of upland rice, though this rice is often intercropped with numerous vegetables creating a remarkable level of biological diversity within the agricultural and fallow fields. In the past, fields were left fallow for up to 10 or 20 years, providing ample opportunity for forest re-growth and soil replenishment. These long fallow periods required an 'agricultural domain' much larger than the area cultivated in any one year, and village settlements developed a range of cultural and institutional mechanisms for the sustainable management of fallow, regenerating lands and secondary forest.

While shifting cultivation has often been condemned by state agencies, writers on Karen agricultural systems have drawn attention to their distinctive ecologically friendly and

17 Montree Chantawong *et al.*, 'People and Forests of Thailand', in Pinkaew and Rajesh, *The Future of People*, p. 167.

18 Waralak, *Rai mun wian*, pp. 7, 11.

19 Chatchawan, *Supsan Lanna*, p. 64.

20 Fredrik Barth, 'Introduction', in Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Universitets Forlaget, Bergen, 1970); Eugeen E. Roosens, *Creating Ethnicity: The Process of Ethnogenesis* (Sage Publications, Newbury Park, 1989).

21 For recent accounts of *rai mun wian* in the Thai literature see Bupho, 'Chiwitkha', pp. 95–121; Jesada, *Kanchatkan thi din*, Chapter 3; Joni, *Banthuk*; Kannika and Bencha, *Pa chet chan*, Chapter 6; Kunlawadi, 'Withi chiwit Kariang', pp. 46–52; Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon', pp. 26–8; Lisa, 'Withi lok pa', pp. 34–44; Montree, 'People and Forests', pp. 165–7, 169–75, 177; Northern Development Foundation *et al.*, 'Kansuksa khwamlaklai', pp. 74–5, 77, 104–5, 144–6; Prasert, 'Karen Crisis'; Pratuang, 'Community Forestry', p. 124; Pritsana and Montree, *Chumchon thongtin*, pp. 61–5; Thai German Highland Development Project, *From Ideas ... to Action: Experiences in Participatory Highland Development* (TGHDP, Chiang Mai, 1998), pp. 53, 92–4; Thirayut and Phonphana, 'Phanthukam khao', pp. 5–47; Waralak, *Rai mun wian*. For some comparable accounts in the Western ethnographic literature see Philip Dearden, 'Development, The Environment and Social Differentiation in Northern Thailand', in Jonathan Rigg (ed.), *Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental Change in Thailand* (Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore, 1995), pp. 119–20; Christina Lammert Fink, *Imposing Communities: Pwo Karen Experiences in Northwestern Thailand* (UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, 1994), pp. 45–6, 56; Peter Hinton, 'Declining Production among Sedentary Swidden Cultivators: The Case of the Pwo Karen', in Peter Kunstadter, E.C. Chapman and Sabhasri Sanga (eds), *Farmers in the Forest: Economic Development and Marginal Agriculture in Northern Thailand* (The University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1978), pp. 192–3; Peter Kunstadter, 'Subsistence Agricultural Economies of Lua and Karen Hill Farmers, Mae Sariang District, Northwestern Thailand', in Kunstadter *et al.*, *Farmers in the Forest*, pp. 83–4, 87–9; Paul Lewis and Elaine Lewis, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1984), p. 84; Manfred van Eckert, William Bourne and Kwanchewan Buadaeng, *The Karen Farming Systems in Huay Poo Ling: A Study of the Present Farming Systems, An Assessment of Constraints and Recommendations for Implementation* (Thai German Highland Development Project, Chiang Mai, 1992), pp. 5, 12–13, 18–19; Anthony R. Walker, 'North Thailand as Geo-ethnic Mosaic: An Introductory Essay', in Anthony R. Walker (ed.), *The Highland Heritage: Collected Essays on Upland North Thailand* (Suvarnabhumi Books, Singapore, 1992), p. 11; and Paul J. Zinke *et al.*, 'Soil Fertility Aspects of the Lua Forest Fallow System of Shifting Cultivation', in Kunstadter *et al.*, *Farmers in the Forest*, p. 135.

sustainable characteristics. Conservationist practices are said to include careful site selection; short cultivation periods combined with long fallow periods; careful management and control of burning; maintenance of large tree stumps; minimal soil disturbance; and preservation of ridge-top and watershed forest cover. The environmental benefits reported in the recent literature are numerous: protection of biodiversity; vigorous forest re-growth (said by some to create vegetative diversity superior to undisturbed forest); very limited soil erosion; good water quality and quantity in down-slope streams; limited weed infestation; and maintained, or even enhanced, wildlife diversity. In these accounts the sustainability of *rai mun wian* is borne out by the relative immobility of Karen settlements, with village sites often remaining fixed for generations, or relocating on a rotational basis within a narrowly defined area.

The stability and sustainability of Karen agricultural practices are said to be supported by a complex local system of integrated resource management. Three elements of this system are regularly highlighted. First, a self-sufficient, subsistence orientation is said to lie at the heart of Karen identity. It is regularly reported that Karen economy is based on production of rice and vegetables for household consumption, and that cultural precepts and cautionary tales reflect the 'highly-regarded value of self subsistence':²²

Karen society, both in the past and at present, is a society that concentrates on production for consumption in the household ... Farmers thus plant rice or protect rice varieties according to their own likes and dislikes ... rather than cultivation being determined by market fluctuations.²³

Secondly, Karen 'local wisdom' (*phum panyaa*) is said to be reflected in the practical technology of forest product use, complex systems of forest and fallow classification and, most importantly, an array of customs, prohibitions and rituals—deriving from spirit beliefs, Buddhism and loyalty to the ways of the ancestors—that *regulate* the selection of land for *rai mun wian* cultivation. The result of indigenous regulation is that 'land is used in a way that is consistent with the forest ecosystem and which also protects *long lasting* systems of production'.²⁴

The third key element is the social relations of Karen land management. Agricultural rotation and communal agricultural activities are said to have limited the development of private property arrangements in relation to land.²⁵ Agricultural fields, animal grazing areas, watershed forests, and hunting-gathering forests are said to form part of the communal resource of the Karen village. Households are allocated use rights to upland fields, but these rights are allocated by village leaders and are temporary. There are also said to be well-developed systems of intra-village redistribution and emergency allocation. 'If the situation arises where one person in the community is not able to produce enough to eat from his land in a particular year' Waraalak writes, 'he is able to produce food on the land of his relatives in the village.'²⁶

External Penetration of the 'Traditional' Economy

Of course, it is now well recognised in the literature on the Karen that there have been significant changes in these 'traditional' forms of production. Part two of the 'Karen

22 Montree *et al.*, 'People and Forests', p. 167.

23 Thirayut, *Phanthukam khao*, pp. 36–7. See also Kannika and Bencha, *Pa chet chan*, pp. 111, 117.

24 Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon', p. 29, my emphasis.

25 See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 19, 26; 'Montree *et al.*', 'People and Forests', p. 171; Uraivan *et al.*, *Natural Resource Utilization*, pp. 91–2.

26 Waraalak, *Rai mun wian*, p. 11.

consensus' is a tale of 'externally imposed socio-economic transformation'²⁷ with both the market and the state subverting indigenous resource management. The process of market penetration into the Karen villages of the Mae Khan catchment is described in the seminal study by Uraivan *et al.*²⁸ Early on in the process, they suggest, cash-starved Karen were drawn into the market economy by the lure of consumer goods offered on credit by 'shop keepers and merchant traders aspir[ing] to optimise market potential'.²⁹ Cash crops were grown to repay the debts incurred and provide the wherewithal for future purchases. Subsistence rice production was undermined as rice fields were converted to cash crops such as taro and soybeans. Traders became a source of rice in addition to consumer durables and debts mounted as fertiliser and pesticide were poured into the production of cash crops in the hope of realising higher levels of market income. Ultimately, many Karen lost their land to moneylenders, local investors or commercially successful and expansive cultivators in neighbouring communities. Those who retained their land faced declining productivity under new regimes of intensive cropping. '[D]espite despair and indebtedness', they conclude, 'commodity production is increasing among Karen villagers who are seeking new cash crops with higher market prices.'³⁰

The second culprit—the state—is said to have played a key role in this process of commercialisation and impoverishment. While Karen communities have received less state attention than their up-slope opium-growing neighbours, they have nevertheless received considerable quantities of development aid, especially in districts identified as national security risks. State extension efforts have included a range of subsidies and incentives such as the creation of cash crop demonstration plots; provision of seed, seedlings and other agricultural inputs; provision of marketing services; construction of paddy fields and irrigation infrastructure; and road improvements.³¹ Other state action has been more coercive. Successive developments in national forest policy since the 1960s have placed numerous regulatory and legislative restrictions on cultivation in forest areas. Long resident Karen communities have found themselves located in areas now formally classified (or being prepared to be classified) as forest reserve, conservation forest or even national park.³² Areas of permanent cultivation have been relatively unaffected by this reclassification, but it is widely claimed that clearing and cultivation of fallow land has been restricted in many areas. Uncertainties created by national policy and informal land tenure are also said to be undermining local confidence in long rotational systems. In brief, state development and resource management policies have hastened the decline of what are assumed to have been distinct and sustainable Karen agricultural and social systems.

History and Self-Sufficiency

The Karen consensus—and the central claim that *rai mun wian* is a 'viable and beneficial method'³³—needs to be assessed in terms of the long-term development of Karen farming systems. Specifically, historical and ethnographic evidence suggests that Karen rotational

27 Uraivan *et al.*, *Natural Resource Utilization*, p. 86, my emphasis.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

31 See, for example, Pratuang, 'Community Forestry', p. 129 and Pritsana and Montree, *Chumchon thongtin*, pp. 55–6.

32 See, for example, Kannika and Bencha, *Pa chet chan*, p. 117; Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon', p. 19; Northern Development Foundation; *et al.*, 'Kansuksa khwamlaklai', p. 149; Prasert, 'Karen Crisis', Pritsana and Montree, *Chumchon thongtin*, pp. 51, 54; Thai German Highland Development Project, *From Ideas*, p. 53; Uraivan, *et al.*, *Natural Resource Utilization*, p. 98; Waralak, *Rai mun wian*, pp. 8–9.

33 Thai German Highland Development Project, *From Ideas*, p. 59. See also pp. 93–4.

shifting cultivation was only sustainable on a long-term basis when it was associated with limited population, abundant land and considerable opportunity for village fission and out-migration.³⁴ The Karen settled in north-western Thailand over the last two centuries in an area that had been extensively de-populated in conflicts between the Burmese, the Siamese and the northern Thai.³⁵ The relative recency of their settlement history suggests that, in this area, the widely used distinction between rotational and pioneer shifting cultivation may be somewhat overdrawn. Karen rotational cultivation may, in fact, be a short-term to medium-term *pioneering* technology that was adopted in relatively recently settled areas prior to the establishment of larger communities and more settled forms of agriculture.

The 'pioneer' situation of land abundance appears to have come under increasing and, in some cases, critical pressure by the early decades of the twentieth century. Almost all of the ethnographic accounts of Karen communities conducted between the 1950s and the 1970s refer to upland cultivation systems 'under severe stress' with population pressure on land resulting in shorter fallow periods, lower yields and subsistence shortfall.³⁶ In 1961, Young wrote that Karen are 'not by any means self sufficient' and that rice was obtained from surrounding Thai communities or from hill tribes when lowland prices were too high.³⁷ Similarly Iijima observes:

According to villager's own statements swidden farming in the hill village of Mae Ha Ki has been in decay for several decades. The main reason seems to be the overexploitation of their fields because of increasing population in the whole hill area.³⁸

The sub-district described by Uraivan *et al.* in the mid-1980s had experienced a tripling of the Karen population in the previous decade, an expansion matched by a tripling in the area of upland fields and a reduction in the fallow period to less than five years.³⁹ By 1994, Kanok and Benjavan reported that long fallow rotational cultivation only persisted in small pockets in the west of Chiang Mai province and in Mae Hong Son province.⁴⁰ In brief, the claim that *rai mun wian* systems 'have been capable of producing agricultural crops to support generations of Karen for centuries' warrants considerable scepticism.⁴¹

Of course, it is very likely that state restrictions on cultivation in forest reserve areas have compounded demographic pressures on agricultural systems. As Vandergeest has

34 See, for example, Hinton, 'Declining Production', Shigeru, Iijima, 'Ethnic Identity and Sociocultural Change among Sgaw Karen in Northern Thailand', in Charles F Keyes (ed.), *Ethnic Adaption and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma* (Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 100–2; Kunstadter, 'Subsistence Agricultural Economies'; Lewis and Lewis, 'Peoples', p. 84; van Eckert *et al.*, *The Karen Farming Systems*, p. 6.

35 Anders Baltzer Jorgensen, 'Karen Natural Resources Management and Relations to State Polity', in Ing-Britt Trankell and Laura Summers (eds), *Facets of Power and its Limitations: Political Culture in Southeast Asia* (Uppsala University, Uppsala, 1998), p. 232; Charles F. Keyes, 'The Karen in Thai History and the History of the Karen in Thailand', in Keyes, *Ethnic Adaption*, pp. 38, 43; Kunstadter, 'Subsistence Agricultural Economies', p. 126; Ronald Duane Renard, *Kariang: History of Karen—Tai Relations from the Beginning to 1923* (University Microfilms International, London, 1979), Chapter 4.

36 Hinton, 'Declining Production', p. 194. See also Robert Cooper, *Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response: Patterns of Settlement and Economy in Transition* (Singapore University Press, Singapore, 1984), p. 15; James W. Hamilton, *Pwo Karen: At the Edge of Mountain and Plain* (West Publishing Company, St Paul, 1976), pp. 54–7; Iijima, 'Ethnic Identity', p. 103; Kunstadter, 'Subsistence Agricultural Economies', pp. 77–9, 90–1.

37 Gordon Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand* (The Siam Society, Bangkok, 1974), p. 77.

38 Iijima, 'Ethnic identity', p. 103.

39 Uraivan, *et al.*, *Natural Resource Utilization*, pp. 62–3. The authors imply that this upland expansion is a result of farmers losing their paddy fields, however they also note that the area of Karen paddy fields in the district doubled between 1975 and 1985.

40 Kanok Rerkasem and Benjavan Rerkasem, *Shifting Cultivation in Thailand: Its Current Situation and Dynamics in the Context of Highland Development* (International Institute for Environment and Development, London, 1994).

41 Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon', p. 26.

argued in a paper that has had a strong influence on the 'Karen consensus', state regulatory action has 'effectively criminalised' upland shifting cultivation in many districts.⁴² For example, in the Karen sub-district of Wat Jan, land-cover data I have analysed suggests a 95 per cent decline in upland cultivation in the most protected Class 1 watershed areas, much of it since the local establishment of a Forest Protection and Policing Office.⁴³ Nevertheless, some caution should be exercised in attributing too much influence to state regulation. Government statements on the incompatibility between forest conservation and livelihood activities are well documented but there has been relatively little research on the local implementation of national policy. Indeed, documentation of administrative impotence and inconsistency suggests that processes of regulatory implementation have left considerable room for local manoeuvre and negotiation.⁴⁴ For example, in contrast to Wat Jan, there are areas in the far west of Chiang Mai province where most Karen cultivation still takes place in Class 1 watershed areas. It is also significant that some of the most detailed recent discussions of the contemporary sustainability of *rai mun wian* describe Karen villages located within Tung Yai Naresuan wildlife sanctuary.⁴⁵ The possibility that some state-declared conservation areas have *protected* Karen villages from *external* demographic forces warrants further investigation.

Agricultural Intensification

Throughout the period of population growth and increasing state regulation many Karen communities have followed a path of adaptive agricultural intensification. Typically, this has taken the form of development of irrigated paddy, a technology which appears to have been adopted with alacrity from their northern Thai neighbours.⁴⁶ Survey and ethnographic data suggest that a wide spectrum of Karen households have participated in this agricultural transformation and that recent paddy creation is not merely a path of upward mobility for Karen traders, headmen and ritual specialists, as it may have been in the past. *The claim that Karen identity revolves around the cultivation of upland rice is unsupported by the important role of paddy cultivation in household economies.* Data from a range of studies are instructive and help contextualise the decline in upland cultivation and a trend to more permanent forms of settlement.

During recent household surveying undertaken in Wat Jan, numerous paddy-cultivating Karen described how they, or their parents, had created their own paddy out of the forest.⁴⁷ Often, forested areas were first cleared for upland cultivation with suitable pieces of land

42 Peter Vandergeest, 'Mapping Nature: Territorialization of Forest Rights in Thailand', *Society and Natural Resources*, vol. 9 (1996), pp. 260–1.

43 The land cover analysis in this paper draws on three 'slices' of land-cover data prepared as part of a National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) study and provided to the author by collaborating researchers in Thailand. Details of the study are provided in NRCT, *Thailand Landuse and Land Cover Change Case Study* (NRCT, Bangkok, 1997).

44 Philip Dearden *et al.*, 'National Parks and Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand: A Case Study of Doi Inthanon', *Society and Natural Resources*, vol. 9 (1996), pp. 135–6; Philip Hirsch, *Political Economy of Environment in Thailand* (Journal of Contemporary Asia Publishers, Manila, 1993), Chapter 5; Vandergeest, 'Mapping Nature', pp. 262–4; Fink, 'Imposing Communities', pp. 197–201.

45 Kunlawadi, 'Withi chiwit Kariang'; Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon', Pinkaew, *Phumpanya niwetwithaya*; Thirayut and Phonphana, *Phanthukam khao*, pp. 41–60.

46 See, for example, Hinton, 'Declining Production', p. 186; Iijima, 'Ethnic Identity', pp. 104–5; Kunstadter, 'Subsistence Agricultural Economies', p. 92; Montree *et al.*, 'People and Forests', p. 165; Northern Development Foundation *et al.*, 'Kansuksa khwamlaklai', p. 141; Pratuang, 'Community Forestry', pp. 126, 130–6; van Eckert *et al.*, *The Karen Farming Systems*, p. 5.

47 Surveys referred to in this paper were undertaken as part of the Integrated Water Resource Assessment and Management (IWRAM) project of which the author is a member. The IWRAM project is being undertaken by The Australian National University and the Royal Project Foundation in Thailand.

gradually converted into levelled and banded paddy over periods as long as 10 or 20 years. It is likely that soil deposition from eroded up-slope fields assisted in this gradual process of paddy formation.⁴⁸ The results of this ongoing investment have been dramatic: in 1954 aerial photographs indicate that there were only 460 *rai*⁴⁹ of paddy in a group of four Wat Jan villages; by 1973 this had doubled to 925 and by 1994 almost tripled to 1290.⁵⁰ In nearby villages surveyed by my Thai colleagues, 55 per cent of households currently farm paddy fields exclusively, while 42 per cent combine paddy and upland cultivation. Only 3 per cent of households surveyed relied solely on upland cultivation. Amongst paddy cultivators, land ownership is relatively even—the average is about 6 *rai* and only 3 per cent of households surveyed indicated that they owned more than 10 *rai*.

A similar pattern of paddy expansion is evident in the village of Mae Lan Kham, the focus of Waraalak's study of *rai mun wian*. Waraalak reports that the 98 households cultivate between 3 and 6 *rai* of upland fields each and that consumption of rice from these fields is central to their Karen lifestyle.⁵¹ The study makes no significant mention of paddy cultivation, despite the strong emphasis on considering all aspects of environment and society 'holistically' (*yang pen ong ruam*).⁵² However, a table of land use provides, without comment, a total of 771 *rai* of paddy fields (almost 8 *rai* per household!) and my analysis of land-cover data suggests that the area of paddy in the small Mae Lan Kham sub-catchment has more than doubled since 1985. Waraalak, and others, attribute sedentarisation, and associated changes in housing style and community dynamics, to state regulation; however, it is likely that investment in paddy fields is a powerful incentive for the adoption of a more settled lifestyle.⁵³

This pattern of widespread paddy ownership among Karen communities is also evident in the otherwise bleak report by Uraivan *et al.* on the 'intermediate zone crisis' in the Mae Khan catchment.⁵⁴ Their study indicates that in the mid-1980s only 30 per cent of Karen households did not own paddy and that 50 per cent did not own upland fields (the latter figure probably reflecting paddy-based security rather than destitution). Indeed, despite their ideologically appealing prognosis of a 'yawning economic gap between a minority of land-holders and majority landless people', they go on to suggest that 'most Karen value their inherited fertile ricefields as family land and make a significant effort not to lose this possession.'⁵⁵ Once again, my analysis of land-cover data from the upper Mae Khan catchment suggests that the area of paddy has almost doubled since their study was undertaken.

Commercial Disengagement

The third key element in the historical development of Karen economy—along with declining upland cultivation and increasing paddy cultivation—is, I would suggest, a long-term *disengagement* from many aspects of commercial exchange. Historically, Karen

48 Zinke *et al.*, 'Soil Fertility', p. 153.

49 One *rai* equals 0.16 hectares. Panomsak Promburom, *An Integrated Approach for Assessing Rice Sufficiency Level in Highland Communities of Northern Thailand* (Master of Science Thesis submitted at Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai), p. 43. See also Yoko Hayami, 'Internal and External Discourse of Communalism, Tradition and Environment: Minority Claims on Forest in the Northern Hills of Thailand', *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1997), p. 558.

51 Waraalak, *Rai mun wian*, pp. 4, 11.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9. Data provided by Jesada (*Kanchatkan thi din*, p. 55) also indicates relatively high levels of paddy ownership in the same area.

54 Uraivan *et al.*, *Resource Use Utilization*, p. 110.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 109.

agricultural systems were supported by trading networks, albeit to varying degrees,⁵⁶ through which upland forest products were exchanged for rice. Marshall's classic account of the Karen in nineteenth century Burma documents trade in sesame, betel-nuts, oranges, stick-lac and honey.⁵⁷ Rajah's account of Karen involvement in the production and trade of fermented tea (*miang*) refers to a more recent period but provides a good indication of the intensity of these commercial relations.⁵⁸ During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Karen also became heavily involved in the timber industry, a position that they consolidated over the years to the point where, by the middle of the twentieth century, they were reported to have 'something of a monopoly on the jobs associated with extracting teak from the forests of north-western Thailand'.⁵⁹ Elephants were an important source of income in upland Karen communities, and Young noted in the early 1960s that 'more prosperous Karen have longstanding business with teak companies, contracting work with them for the use of their elephants'.⁶⁰ Evidence also points to Karen involvement in a wide range of other commercial activities including cattle trading, slave trading, fighting as mercenaries, and in some cases opium production and trade.⁶¹ Indeed, it has been suggested that at the end of the nineteenth century Karen households had an average income 'probably higher than that of the northern Thai', largely a result of their involvement in extra-community commercial interactions.⁶²

This material casts important light on the historical narrative of the 'Karen consensus'. The ethnohistorical accounts referred to above raise the possibility that the relatively poor socio-economic conditions of Karen communities are the result of the decline in international and domestic demand for forest products (some niche marketing of *miang* notwithstanding) and, more recently, the demise of the northern Thai logging and saw-milling industry.⁶³ Jonsson, in raising this possibility, suggests that the widely reported 'subsistence orientation' of Karen communities is probably a relatively recent phenomenon that has developed since the collapse of Karen trading networks.⁶⁴ Similarly, Cohen's important account of Karen economy in the 1970s clearly indicates that relative *isolation* from commercial networks is a significant contributor to household indebtedness, with money-lending traders depending 'to a great extent on the isolation of the stores and their ... Karen customers'.⁶⁵ Recent Karen involvement in soybean, ginger and pumpkin cultivation and in livestock rearing can be re-framed as a partial and relatively modest re-engagement with the market economy. Rather than being swamped by commercialism,

56 See, for example, Jorgensen, 'Karen Natural Resources'; Keyes, 'The Karen in Thai History', p. 32; Renard, *Kariang*, Chapters 3 and 4.

57 Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1997), pp. 84–87.

58 Ananda Rajah, *Remaining Karen: A Study of Cultural Reproduction and the Maintenance of Identity* (Doctoral Thesis submitted at The Australian National University, Canberra, 1986).

59 Charles F. Keyes, 'Introduction', in Keyes, *Ethnic Adaption*, p. 15. See also Keyes, 'The Karen in Thai History', pp. 36, 46.

60 Young, *The Hill Tribes*, pp. 77–8. See also Kunstadter, 'Subsistence Agricultural Economies', pp. 103–5.

61 See, for example, R.E. Elson, *The End of the Peasantry in Southeast Asia: A Social and Economic History of Peasant Livelihood, 1800–1990s* (Macmillan, Houndmills, 1997), pp. 209ff; Fink, *Imposing Communities*, pp. 45–6; Holt S. Hallet, *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1988), pp. 30–1; Hamilton, *Pwo Karen*, pp. 77–8, 136, 185; Peter Hinton, 'Why the Karen Do Not Grow Opium: Competition and Contradiction in the Highlands of North Thailand', *Ethnology*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1983); Keyes, 'Introduction', p. 14; Keyes, 'The Karen in Thai History', pp. 36, 47; Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand* (Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1989), pp. 13–14; Uraivan *et al.*, *Natural Resource Utilization*, pp. 181–2.

62 Renard *et al.*, quoted in Dearden, 'Development, the Environment and Social Differentiation', p. 122. See also Renard, *Kariang*.

63 Renard, *Kariang*, p. 230.

64 Hjørleifur Jonsson, 'Forest Products and Peoples: Upland Groups, Thai Politics, and Regional Space', *Sojourn*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1998). See also Elson, *The End of the Peasantry*, pp. 41, 209ff; Jorgensen, 'Karen Natural Resources', pp. 225–6, 228, 234.

65 Paul T. Cohen, 'Opium and the Karen: A Study of Indebtedness in Northern Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1984), p. 165.

Karen communities appear to be exploring paths of market oriented diversification that support regularly under-producing paddy *and* upland rice systems.

Ethnicity and the Politics of Resource Management

In presenting this ethnohistorical material, it is not my intention to initiate an unproductive debate about the authenticity of contemporary representations of Karen economy. Nor am I seeking to challenge the 'freedom of imagination' of Karen leaders and those acting on their behalf.⁶⁶ However, recognising the *legitimacy* of processes of 'ethnogenesis'⁶⁷ need not amount to a reluctance to engage in debate about the inclusiveness and appropriateness of the particular directions these processes have taken. The defining features of ethnic identity deserve ongoing discussion and debate precisely because these features not only generate the cultural content of identity, but lay down frameworks of inclusion and exclusion that shape access to the rights and resources being sought. My purpose in introducing alternative ethnographic and historical accounts is, then, to highlight the *selective* rather than inauthentic character of the 'Karen consensus'. This selectivity, while politically successful in some respects, also runs the risk of undermining Karen claims in an environment of increasing resource competition.

The key achievement of the 'Karen consensus' is that it mobilises a selective nostalgia for 'traditional' values and agricultural practices to define and defend a *legitimate* position within contested northern Thai landscapes. As Hayami has suggested, the promotion of *rai mun wian* as a central element of Karen cultural identity is a politically strategic inversion of 'the difference imposed on [the Karen] in the designation of "hill tribes" who practice harmful swidden cultivation'.⁶⁸ The achievements of this 'defensive sense of identity' should not be understated.⁶⁹ There is now considerably less emphasis in national policy discourse on the expulsion of upland communities from forest reserves and much more on *managing* the presence of agricultural activity in all but the most vulnerable areas. Very few Karen communities have been relocated in the past decade and resource claims on forests surrounding Karen communities have been successfully resisted. More generally, recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge and local resource management capabilities is increasingly evident in Thai public discourse and policy development. Importantly government policy, partly in response to the arguments put by academics and NGOs, places an increasingly strong emphasis on the subsistence production of communities in forest reserve areas. Some areas of state policy are now combining this subsistence orientation with a commitment to the strengthening of communal resource management institutions. The authors of the 'Karen consensus' have made an important contribution to these achievements.

The legitimacy established by the 'Karen consensus' is, however, very limited. While it makes a strong case for the legitimate presence of Karen communities in upland catchments, the 'Karen consensus' does this on the basis of an idealised rural lifestyle based on subsistence-oriented, self sufficient and *non-commercial* agricultural production. This is a potentially hazardous and divisive strategy and one that is not necessarily justified—nor necessitated—by the political imperatives of identity formation. Four specific issues—

66 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993), p. 13.

67 Roosens, *Creating Ethnicity*.

68 Hayami, 'Internal and External Discourse', p. 575.

69 Daniel Chirot, 'Conflicting Identities and the Dangers of Communalism', in Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid (eds), *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1997).

paddy cultivation, cash-cropping, agricultural development assistance and commercial harvesting of forest products—highlight the strategic limitations set by the ‘Karen consensus’.

Paddy Cultivation

With few exceptions the ‘Karen consensus’ gives very little attention to paddy cultivation, despite its being a significant, if not predominant, form of agricultural activity in many Karen villages.⁷⁰ There appear to be a number of reasons for this. First, and most importantly, paddy is regarded as an ethnically undistinctive form of agricultural practice which has been imported into Karen communities. Secondly, paddy property relations appear relatively ‘modern’ and individualised in contrast to the communal character which is attributed to ‘traditional’ Karen villages. Thirdly, paddy cultivation usually lacks the crop diversity that is seen as one of the ethnically defining features of Karen agricultural practice. And fourthly, paddy fields are usually held under more secure forms of tenure than upland fields and, as such, are perceived as a less threatened site of agricultural activity.

From the point of view of mobilising people around a distinct and threatened sense of identity, these are valid reasons for playing down the role of paddy cultivation. However, from the point of view of defending a legitimate position for Karen communities in upland landscapes, the limited emphasis on paddy seems self-defeating. The environmentally benign impact of paddy cultivation is well recognised. Paddy fields slow the passage of water through upland catchments, contribute to groundwater recharge and help to filter the passage of sediment in the landscape—precisely the catchment benefits that are usually attributed to forest in state environmental discourse.⁷¹ By placing such a high priority on the *distinctiveness* of Karen identity, the ‘Karen consensus’ misses the opportunity to demonstrate the environmentally benign character of this large and increasingly important aspect of their agricultural production. In addition, incorporating paddy cultivation more fully into Karen identity would help to establish a legitimate Karen claim to irrigation water—a point of endemic tension in northern Thai agricultural systems—rather than suggesting that the Karen are merely guardians of water sources for more active farmers downstream. Finally, at the most general level, a stronger emphasis on permanent paddy production would also strengthen residency claims of Karen communities by clearly subverting inaccurate stereotypes of ‘hill-tribes’ as ‘drifting’ or transient populations. *Down-playing, rather than emphasising, the cultural distinctiveness of agricultural practices may have strategic value, especially given the normative importance of paddy cultivation in Thai national culture.*

Cash Cropping

These issues are thrown into even starker relief when considering the commercially-oriented agricultural activities of Karen farmers. There is considerable evidence that the past two decades have witnessed increasing, though still relatively modest, Karen involvement in the production of cash crops. During the wet season, most productive resources are allocated to rice production for local consumption, but small areas of paddy and significantly larger areas of upland fields are devoted to soybeans, ginger, pumpkins and other vegetable crops.

70 For some limited exceptions, albeit framed by a discussion of *rai mun wian*, see Kannika, *Pa chet chan*, pp. 117, 124; Jesada, *Kanchatkan thi din*.

71 L.S. Hamilton, ‘What are the Impacts of Deforestation in the Himalaya on the Ganges—Brahmaputra Lowlands and Delta? Relations between Assumptions and Facts’, *Mountain Research and Development*, vol. 7 (1987); Ray-Shyan Wu *et al.*, ‘A Simulation Model for Investigating the Effects of Rice Paddy Fields on Runoff Systems’, (Manuscript, 1999).

Indeed, in a number of Karen villages surveyed in Mae Chaem district, rice is a relatively minor crop on upland fields and significant areas have been withdrawn from annual cropping altogether and converted to orchards. In the dry season the level of cultivation is somewhat lower—a result of both water supply limitations and the restricted quotas of extension agencies—but almost 100 per cent of this agricultural production is devoted to cash crops. For many Karen households, dry-season cash cropping is an attractive alternative to off-farm wage labour, even where returns are relatively low as with soybeans. Also, in some Karen villages, the need to manage carefully both the allocation of dry-season water and extension agency quotas has strengthened the 'communal' aspects of production which are stereotypically associated most strongly with subsistence-oriented production.

How does the 'Karen consensus' deal with the aspirations of these households? In some accounts, cash crop production is declared irrelevant, given the natural abundance of Karen subsistence systems:

Almost every family has no annual income. But they have a happy life. There is enough food to eat. They grow their own rice in upland fields and there are vegetables in the upland fields, in the forest and on the banks of the streams. There are fish in the rivers.⁷²

More commonly, however, the 'Karen consensus' acknowledges the presence of cash crop production but frames it as an external imposition on Karen producers. Market-oriented production by Karen farmers—especially intensive permanent cultivation—is consistently portrayed as culturally and ecologically undesirable, and as an option that should be pursued 'at a minimum possible degree.'⁷³ Pratuang, for example, acknowledges widespread adoption of soybeans in the Mae Wang catchment but portrays this as an externally driven development fundamentally antithetical to the Karen's 'subsistence livelihoods', 'subsistence economy' and 'traditional self-sufficiency'.⁷⁴ In other accounts, moral precepts and cautionary tales are cited as evidence of Karen farmers' cultural resistance to commercialism and their satisfaction with subsistence production of (upland) rice: 'you can eat rice but you can't eat money'.⁷⁵

There are significant hazards in this approach in an environment of intensifying resource competition. The language of subsistence-oriented and ecologically friendly agricultural production all too readily slips into advocacy of agricultural and commercial restraint in the uplands. Indeed, the claim is made, with varying degrees of explicitness, that Karen presence in upper-watershed areas is legitimate *precisely because Karen communities do not make demands on natural resources*. The 'Karen consensus' comes close to portraying commercial agriculture by Karen farmers, not as a productive contribution to upland economies, but as an inappropriate, and even unnecessary, consumptive assault on ecological assets that compromises the productive efforts of those further downstream:

For shifting cultivation (*rai mun wian*) there is no need to use chemicals. No need to use fertiliser. It is not dangerous for the soil and doesn't flow off into the water. *Because we live at the top of the watershed, we don't want to spoil the water, to spoil the water for the people downstream...* If it was necessary to take up permanent cultivation we would not be able to overcome the grass ... we would need to use chemicals to kill the grass ... and we would also need to use chemical fertiliser. When the soil was exhausted we would be forced to move further into the forest.⁷⁶

72 Wirawat Thiraprasat, 'Khamniyom' ('Foreword'), in Pinkaew, *Phumpanya niwetwitthaya*, p. 7.

73 Uraivan *et al.*, *Natural Resource Utilization*, pp. 69, 188. See also Thirayut and Phonphana, *Phanthukam khao*, pp. 36–7.

74 Pratuang, 'Community Forestry', pp. 136, 137, 141.

75 Lisa, *Withi lok pa*, p. 34. See also Chatchawan, *Supsan Lanna*, p. 66; Joni, *Banthuk*; Kannika and Bencha, *Pa chet chan*, p. 108; Pinkaew, *Phumpanya niwetwitthaya*, p. 68–9.

76 Waraalak, *Rai mun wian*, p. 38.

The critique of commercial agriculture becomes even more explicit in reference to the productive activities of neighbouring Hmong communities. Within the 'Karen consensus', the rotational cultivation of the Karen is favourably contrasted with the pioneer swiddening of the Hmong in which cleared forest areas are farmed until soil-depletion or weed infestation necessitates abandonment and out-migration.⁷⁷ The main intention appears to be to draw a clear distinction between resource-friendly Karen practices and the expansive and mobile agricultural practices of their up-slope neighbours. Recognising that most Hmong communities have now adopted more permanent forms of cultivation, the critique of the 'Karen consensus' comes to rest on the off-site effects of intensive upland cultivation. Seemingly corrupted by their long-term association with opium and the market, Hmong farmers are denied a legitimate presence in upland catchments:

The cultivation of opium in watershed forests by Hmong ... is an important cause of the destruction of large quantities of virgin forest. ... Mono-cropping of cabbages and temperate flowers ... by the Hmong has caused the destruction of the watershed forest of the [Karen] village of Mae Khapuu. The cultivation of crops by Hmong in the watershed area creates great conflict with the internal ecological system due to their high chemical use.⁷⁸

Development Assistance

The limited legitimacy of the 'Karen consensus' is further highlighted by its treatment of rural development initiatives. Karen communities have received much lower levels of development assistance than other upland communities, in large part due to their relatively limited involvement in opium production. Indeed, one review of development assistance cited by McKinnon found that Karen communities 'score lowest of all' despite relatively greater levels of disadvantage.⁷⁹ While the major development campaign against opium production is now tailing off, state and NGO agencies maintain the view that low-key assistance packages are more appropriate given the cultural and economic orientation of Karen communities. In a recent project report, one of Thailand's most prominent development agencies, while applauding its success in promoting multi-million *baht* cash cropping in two 'core' Hmong villages, sets out a strategy for further extension into 'outlying' Karen villages that will focus on consolidating subsistence production.⁸⁰

This disparity in development assistance receives no critical commentary at all in recent literature on the Karen. Indeed, quite the opposite seems to be the case, with a clear relationship posited between limited intervention by government agencies and a *desirable* state of relative under-development. Local resource management capabilities are seen as deriving from an 'era of freedom' (*yuk issara*) when the village had not yet fallen under the influence of the state.⁸¹ These capabilities persist in areas where 'the state development system has barely reached the village in the past 30 years of national development' but, conversely, are on the decline where state agencies have facilitated market incorporation, primary school education and public health. The lamentable state of affairs in one such 'developed' village is described in some detail:

77 Anan Ganjanapan, 'The Politics of Conservation and Complexity of Local Control of Forest Land in the Northern Thai Highlands', *Mountain Research and Development*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1998); Jesada, *Kanchatkan thi din*, p. 5; Kannika, *Pa chet chan*, p. 127; Kunlawadi, 'Withi chiwit Kariang', p. 44; Waralak, *Rai mun wian*, p. 3.

78 Northern Development Foundation *et al.*, 'Kansuksa khwamlaklai', pp. 108, 127.

79 John McKinnon, 'Structural Assimilation and the Consensus: Clearing Grounds on which to Rearrange Our Thoughts', in John McKinnon and Bernard Vienne (eds), *Hill Tribes Today* (White Lotus—Orstom, Bangkok, 1989), p. 341. See also Philip Dearden, 'Development, The Environment and Social Differentiation', pp. 121–2; Dearden, *et al.*, 'National Parks', p. 133.

80 Unfortunately I am not in a position to cite this source.

81 Pritsana and Montree, *Chumchon thongthin*, p. 81.

The road and the income that came along with commercial crops increasingly drew the villagers into greater external dependency, and dependency on the external market, and caused the relationship between people and the forest to decline, especially in the area of food and medicinal herbs. Day by day the new generation will be separated from the original local wisdom and knowledge of the community. [The village] has received considerable mainstream development. Several households have pick-up trucks and almost every household has a motor-bike. Most of the village has electricity and electrical appliances. ... The continuation of the original point of view is a heavy burden on the community. ... Knowledge in relation to management of biodiversity can clearly be seen to be at the lowest level [of the three villages studied]. Mainly this is a result of the primary education system which separates children from the lifestyle of the village and orients them towards making a livelihood in the capitalist system.⁸²

In brief, the 'Karen consensus' provides a ready rationale for cash strapped agencies seeking to justify their limited allocations to certain communities and, at the same time, provides no support at all for sympathetic local officials seeking to improve budgetary allocations in Karen areas. Internationally, the notion that subsistence-based communities should be maintained as repositories of indigenous knowledge has some currency,⁸³ but it is, as yet, unclear how strongly Karen farmers themselves subscribe to this view. Indeed, the willingness of many Karen farmers to experiment with alternative crops, building on a history of agricultural adaption and incorporation, suggests that they do not perceive such a strong conflict between 'external' support and 'local' capabilities. While there is, no doubt, enormous room for improvement in the design and delivery of rural development initiatives, framing the legitimacy of agricultural knowledge in overly local terms threatens to undermine Karen claims for a greater share of the development budget.

Forest Products

Encyclopaedic knowledge of forest products features prominently in the 'Karen consensus'. However, once again, the emphasis is on subsistence rather than commercial use. Accounts of Karen economy stress that villagers 'harvest forest plants to use in the household and only sell a very little' (*khay baang lek lek nooy nooy*).⁸⁴ Strong cultural aversions to commercial timber cutting are alleged, and even the acquisition of timber for house-building is reported to be constrained by an array of regulations and moral precepts: 'if there is a nest, the tree cannot be used because this would be like destroying someone else's house to build your own'.⁸⁵ Previous commercial dealings in forest products are acknowledged (though the record is silent on widespread Karen involvement in the timber industry) but, most importantly, the abandonment of these allegedly unsustainable practices is applauded. In the famous dispute over forest management in Wat Jan, a nationally prominent NGO announced that the Karen villagers had agreed to give up tapping pine oil in the interests of forest conservation, with religious ceremonies held to mark this act of ecological repentance.⁸⁶ Ongoing exploitation of forest products is typically attributed to 'outsiders' (*khon phay nook*) secretly entering the forest and stealing the local ecological heritage.⁸⁷

82 Ibid., pp. 56, 99–100. See also Chatchawan, *Supsan Lanna*, pp. 69–70; Jesada, *Kanchatkan thi din*, p. 38; Lisa, *Withi lok pa*, p. 6; Northern Development Foundation *et al.*, 'Kansuksa khwamlaklai', pp. 78, 142, 148–9; Pinkaew, *Phumpanya niwetwitthaya*, p. 20; Thai German Highland Development Project, *From Ideas*, p. 59.

83 Eugene S. Hunn, 'The Value of Subsistence for the Future of the World', in Virginia D. Nazarea (ed.), *Ethnoecology: Situated Knowledge/Located Lives* (The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1998).

84 Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon', p. 27.

85 Pritsana and Montree, *Chumchon thongthin*, p. 79.

86 Anonymous, 'Villagers in Call for an End to Large-Scale Logging', *Bangkok Post*, 13 February 1993; Vorapien Ploenpoch, 'Villagers Say Fires Set Deliberately', *Bangkok Post*, 13 March 1994.

87 Kunlawadi, 'Kanchatkan sapphayakon', p. 27; Northern Development Foundation *et al.*, 'Kansuksa khwamlaklai', p. 79; Pritsana and Montree, *Chumchon thongthin*, p. 78.

While the critique of these ‘outsiders’ is potent, the discourse clearly denies Karen communities themselves a legitimate role in the commercial use of forest resources. The overall effect is a fundamentally conservative one: state agencies and well-placed business interests retain control of forest-based *revenue* while Karen communities are allocated a ‘subsistence-only’ *presence*.⁸⁸ The ‘Karen consensus’ convincingly presents wide-ranging evidence of Karen desire to be more closely involved in forest management, but framing the legitimacy of their case in terms of an ‘alternative development trajectory based on local subsistence’ presents only a minimalist claim for a ‘more equal share of the benefit streams flowing out of the forests’.⁸⁹ Of course it would be naïve to assume that there are not strategic limits on the pursuit of rights to commercial exploitation of forest resources. However, the option should not be too readily dismissed, especially in communities with chronic subsistence deficits and few income-generating alternatives. Recognising the legitimacy of the collection and sale of forest products may also provide a more resilient foundation for sustainable local management than maintaining the stereotype of resource plundering by shadowy outsiders.

Conclusion: Towards a Less Limited Legitimacy

What motivates the production of the ‘Karen consensus’? For some of its originators the consensus may, perhaps, arise from a firm commitment to Karen culture as an intrinsic property of a defined, and definable, group of people. Under threat from the external forces of the market and the state, this unique ethnic heritage is seen as deserving of documentation, preservation and promotion. However, the authorship of a primordial ethnic identity does not necessarily amount to a commitment to primordialist views of culture. The recognition that traditionalism can be a strategically useful manoeuvre in the pursuit of rights and resources is now commonplace. Framing claims in terms of ethnic rights—combining ‘an interest with an affect’⁹⁰—enhances their moral leverage by transforming quotidian resource conflicts into ‘more dramatic human rights issues’.⁹¹ And the selection of *rai mun wian* as a central defining feature of Karen identity is readily understandable, given its resonance with national and international interest in the linked preservation of biological and cultural diversity and the promotion of self-sufficiency as an antidote to the excesses of globalisation.

These are powerful motivations. However, in this paper my primary aim has been to suggest that the strategic value of the ‘Karen consensus’ should not be taken for granted. My argument in relation to paddy cultivation, cash cropping, agricultural development and forest product harvesting is that the ‘Karen consensus’, by relying on an overly narrow and distinct sense of Karen identity, potentially contributes to the ongoing marginalisation of Karen farmers in contexts of resource competition. In the following paragraphs, I will conclude with a more general discussion of the limitations of the ‘Karen consensus’ and some possible alternatives.

The key objective of the ‘Karen consensus’ is not to challenge élite and state discourses about the agricultural practices of upland peoples, but *to exclude the Karen from them*. In

88 Pari Baumann, ‘The Persistence of Populism in Indian Forest Policy’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1998).

89 *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5, 106.

90 Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers, ‘From Political Mobilization to the Politics of Consciousness’, in Cora Govers and Hans Vermeulen (eds), *The Politics of Ethnic Consciousness* (Macmillan Press, Houndmills, 1997), p. 12.

91 Brian D. Haley and Larry R. Wilcoxon, ‘Anthropology and the Making of Chumash Tradition’, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 38, no. 5 (1997).

response to charges of deforestation and watershed degradation, the 'Karen consensus' is to submit a vigorous 'not guilty' plea, rather than question the basis of the charges themselves. Despite the constant emphasis on alternative forms of indigenous knowledge, this construction of the Karen as model ecological citizens leaves the predominant environmental management orthodoxies completely unchallenged. Rather than drawing on the growing body of evidence, both in Thailand and internationally, that questions these environmental orthodoxies—that forest clearing reduces water supply, that intensive upland cultivation creates downstream sedimentation and that chemical use 'poisons' soil and water—the 'Karen consensus' assembles a body of ecological knowledge about the relationships between forest, soil and water that echoes the 'official' knowledge of the state and conservationist groups.⁹² The possibility that there may be alternative forms of ecological knowledge (for example, that forest clearing can increase wet-season *and* dry-season water supply) is simply not entertained.⁹³

Of course, the concerns of the 'Karen consensus' go well beyond environmental issues, and it forms part of a broader critique of Thailand's recent experience of capitalism and globalisation. Ideals of Karen restraint, non-acquisitiveness and self-sufficiency are contrasted with the intrusive and disruptive force of external economic and political systems. As Waraalak suggests, the ecological knowledge systems of the Karen form a refreshing counterpoint to the materialistic values and technology of the 'ready-made' era.⁹⁴ Given recent experience of economic turmoil, this critique appears powerful, and it is readily mobilised in broader NGO and 'civil society' opposition to the economic development strategies of the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank and the Thai government itself.

However, while the language and rhetoric appear radical, there is a powerful sense in which the 'Karen consensus' gives practical and discursive *support* to the uneven development of northern Thai modernity. What more could commercially-oriented farmers (or industrialists or urban water consumers) want than conservationist and other-worldly farmers safeguarding ecologically strategic upland resources? The ecological balance advocated by the 'Karen consensus', and other rural self-sufficiency discourses, is precisely the sort of resource balance that relatively affluent downstream farmers want to maintain. For example, throughout the north of Thailand, lowland communities have been active in expanding their paddy land for both wet-season rice production and dry-season cash cropping. The thought that their investments may go to waste through dry-season water shortage bought on by an intensification of upstream cultivation is an alarming one. As resource economists have been at pains to point out, the benefits of upper-watershed maintenance tend to be externalities that accrue to downstream farmers and urban water consumers. The denial of the legitimacy of commercial production in upland areas not only helps to maintain the flow of these externalities but also limits the scope of any future Karen claims for compensation in return for resource-use restraint. Celebration of indigenous cultures of self-sustenance and altruistic resource management runs the risk of reinforcing existing patterns of uneven development.

What, then, are the strategic implications of the critique I have presented in this paper? My view is that the limited legitimacy of the 'Karen consensus' should prompt some consideration of alternative constructions of Karen identity. This need not involve the

92 Pratuang, 'Community Forestry', pp. 121–2.

93 L.A. Bruijnzell, *Hydrology of Moist Tropical Forests and Effects of Conversion: A State of Knowledge Review* (Free University, Amsterdam, 1990); Tim Forsyth, 'Historical Evidence for Watershed Degradation: How Important Is Agriculture?', Paper Read at Environmental Services and Land Use Change: Bridging the Gap between Policy and Research in Southeast Asia (Chiang Mai, 1999); Jack D. Ives and Bruno Messerli, *The Himalayan Dilemma: Reconciling Development and Conservation* (Routledge, London, 1989); McKinnon, 'Structural Assimilation', pp. 319–28.

94 Waraalak, *Rai mun wian*, pp. 1–2.

wholesale abandonment of ethnicity as an element of political strategy; however, in pursuing a political agenda of inclusion and tolerance, there may be some value in avoiding unnecessary projects of demarcation. Is there room for a politically aware sense of Karen identity that places more emphasis on dynamic adaptation and less on primordial attributes? Is a form of identity that celebrates, and vigorously asserts, the diversity of Karen experience viable in the contemporary landscapes of resource competition? May there be value in promoting mobile and multiple Karen identities: rice growers, soybean cultivators, market gardeners, orchardists, pine-oil tappers, *chao rai*, *chao na*, (hill farmers, paddy farmers) upland villagers, lowland town-dwellers, television watchers, forest protectors, Honda Dream riders, makers of merit, New Testament scholars and construction-site labourers? All this may be a little messy and a little harder to package and, for some, may represent an unacceptably intimate relationship with modernity. But, ultimately, the political mobilisation of Karen self-sufficiency and ecological friendliness may represent a much less potent critique of modernity than a campaign which vigorously asserts their legitimate role within it.