

## A SKETCH OF MNONG FOREST MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION TRADITIONS

(A Case Study in Lak District, Dak Lak Province) <sup>(\*)</sup>

LUU HUNG

Although life has changed, the people in Đung, Tlông, Năm, Liêng Ké, Đu Má, Zi Zúc, and Ba Zang villages (belonging to Lak District, Dak Lak Province) still maintain their traditional customs that are harmoniously integrated with the tropical forest environment of their homeland.

Similar to other areas in the Highland region, this area has two distinct seasons: the first is the dry season from November to April and the other is the rainy season from May to October. During the rainy season the rainfall makes up about 85% of the total rainfall for the year. The heavy rain and high-density rain especially gathers during the period from July to September.

Due to those conditions, the vegetation in this area, such as forest and grass, develops and grows very quickly, while the soil is eroded more easily, specifically with regard to the sloping soil and the barren soil. Annually, each hectare could lose around 100 tons of fertile soil from erosion (Cao Liem and Nguyen Ba Nhuan, 1985, p. 209).

The inhabitants of all nine villages engage in cultivation activities and gain their main source of sustenance from rice. Like many other local people who are involved in cultivation, the inhabitants here create their

cultivation land by reclaiming the forest through cutting and burning trees.

The Mnong people reside together in the village (*Bon*). The necessary and sufficient conditions for the formation of a village include three main factors:

- Presence of the forest (in order to cultivate and sustain the people's livelihood)
- Land tenure (in order to establish and maintain a village)
- Presence of a water source:
  - Fresh water source (for drinking and cooking)
  - River or spring (for fishing and domestic activities)

Each village has its own territory and meets the needs of its particular community. In the past, the territory of a village needed to be large enough to use rotating cultivation techniques in the forests located around the living area. The delimited territory was recognized and respected by all neighboring villages and local people. Normally, a spring or a mountain peak was used as a landmark.

With regard to *control* of the village territory, in the past there were very strict rules (called *tin kkep kin* in Vietnamese) reminding local people living inside and outside of the village that any encroachment

<sup>(\*)</sup> This article was issued in the *Anthropology Review*, No. 3 in 2001 in Vietnamese.

village's authority would be punished. These days, most Mnong people we interviewed knew that the rule only comes into effect in the case of encroachment on other village's territory without permission.

Before 1960, before the villages had had to face great changes in society and environment, the people in each Mnong village always recognized the need to maintain and preserve their own territory, including forest, land and water. In other words, the people always recognized the importance of protecting natural resources. Because of that knowledge, the people applied the approach of self management and protection of the natural resources. More specifically, the importance of protecting natural resources formed the people's customs regarding preservation of the forest and its land, which were agreed upon by villages.

## 1. Forest and Land Use Management

### 1.1. The role of the "landowner"

In the Mnong language, the term "*Tom teh tom bri*" is used to indicate a person who has the power to manage the land and forests of the village. The translation of this term into Vietnamese does not fully fit with the terms "Chu dat", "Chu rung", or "Dia chu" (*Landowner - in English*). The full meaning of the Mnong term is elaborated below.

In the living area of the Mnong, most forest and land has been owned by someone for a long time. Territory belonged not only to a village, but also an individual who was the member of a family. In some cases, in

order to memorize the land-allocation map and the landowners in the village area, the local people constructed a satirical verse with information about the landowners. By doing so, the people transmitted information about the allocation of land and its owners through generations. For instance, there is a verse in the Krong No village expressing the following meaning:

... *Glây Bri kon ong poh đih Rtâng*

*Lach Đâng Tông Tang kon Nar poh đâng đak Nông*

*Nông Pul kon Zông poh đâng đih đak Blu tu đak Buôch...*

(Translation:

... In Glay village, Mr. Bri, the son of Mrs. Ong, manages the land of the Rtang stream junction

In Lach Dang village, Mr. Tong and Mr. Tang, the sons of Mrs. Nar, manage the land of the Nong stream.

In Nong village, Mr. Pul, the son of Mrs. Zong, manages the land of the Blu stream junction and the land of the Buech stream...)

Among families in the village, a family which founded the village in the past would be proclaimed "a family owner of the land or forest." In such families, a woman or man would be assigned to manage the land area belonging to the family's authority. In many cases, because the Mnong people still followed the tradition of matriarchy, this position would only be handed over to female members of the family, such as daughters, granddaughters, sisters or sometimes brothers in the same line. In some

villages, there is only one land owning family, while in others, there are three or more families existing together.

"The owner of land and forest" is a person who has a very thorough understanding of history as well as of every activity and event related to the forest and land under his or her supervision. Thanks to the credit of local people, along with having those understandings of local situations, the landowners are respected by all villagers and seen as key persons or "root" persons in their communities and surroundings (in the literal sense, *tom* = "root", *teh* = "land", *bri* = "forest"). They have some of the following tasks:

- Land management and village territory protection
- Planning annual cultivation areas for the villagers
- Providing guidance regarding the locality and borderlines, as well as the history of land cultivation of families in the community when necessary.
- Holding fire-making tools in order to serve the tree-burning activities of villagers<sup>1</sup>.
- Carrying out religious ceremonies and abstention (according to old customs, those ceremonies and abstention are

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<sup>1</sup> To create fire in a primitive way, the Mnong people need three things: a fiber from a bamboo splint, bamboo tinder and a piece of wood. The process of creating fire is described as follows: Use the fiber of a bamboo splint to rub strongly, continually and quickly against a piece of wood, this kind of rub will generate heat and then burn up the bamboo tinder.

mysteriously related to the cultivation activities and crops of a village).

- Resolving the cases of encroachment or land conflict, and punishing individuals who cause forest fires or express impure and offensive behaviors to the "Earth Genie" and "Water Genie" (i.e. extramarital relations).

In summary, in line with old customs, the "owners of land and forest" play an important role in every Mnong village. They are representatives for the villagers, and they manage the land and forest of the community, as well as play the role of distributing natural resources to the villagers.

### ***1.2 The role of the village patriarch***

In every Mnong village, there is at least one, and usually two or three, "village patriarchs". In the Mnong language, the term "village patriarch" is "*Uranh bon*" (*Uranh* = old person). In the case that there is more than one village patriarch, one of them is the most important person.

"The village patriarch" is selected from among individuals who are at least 50 years old. Moreover, the candidate needs to have a lot of experience, understanding of local situations, good communication skills, high respect from the villagers, and better economic conditions than other villagers. An individual who meets these requirements would be assigned as a village patriarch by the community.

Unlike the owner of the land, the village patriarch may not be a member of the village-founding family. The most important

requirement for the patriarch is that his competencies are more outstanding than others, and that he is recognized by the community. However, in many cases, the village patriarch is also the owner of the land or is the husband of the land owner.

From the aspect of natural resources management, the village patriarch cooperates closely with the owner of the land to protect village territory, to plan production, to announce the danger of fires during the dry season, to speed up the prevention of forest fires during tree burning, and to punish those who either directly or indirectly violate the community rules of the forest, the land or the fish-catching sources that the village intends to develop for future use<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, the village patriarch is assigned as a leader of the community. While *Tom teh tom bri* - the owner of the land - pays attention to the management and use of the forest and the forest land, the scope of *Uranh bon's* activity (the village patriarch) is broader and covers all aspects of village life. The village patriarch still plays the remarkable role of managing natural resources within the village. Close cooperation is established between the owner of the land and the village patriarch

so that their activities are synchronized and serve the benefit of the overall community.

### 1.3. Changing land needs

In the past, in Mnong villages, the land available for use was only limited in terms of arable land. Even in the case of a household coming from another place, providing them with land for living would not necessarily be an issue, but finding arable land would not be simple.

The system of land possession formed in each household. Therefore, the need for arable land increased because some families increased in number, leading to a lack of land for cultivation. Another reason for the increase in the need for arable land was the movement of some households to other villages. On the other hand, some family's land needs are redundant due to inheritance or due to lack of enough members in the family for cultivating. For those families, in some cases, the need to exchange their land for money or essential facilities also increased. There are three popular types of exchange: hiring, sharing and selling.

The most popular form of exchange is a land renting over a period of several years. After one crop, the temporary workers need only to express their gratitude to the landowner by having a wine party or giving the landowner a cleaver, a bush-whacker or some *sacks* (gui) of rice.

Among members of the family, land exchange usually takes place on the basis of mutually protecting and helping the family.

This kind of exchange is unlike the mode of buying and selling that is based on

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<sup>2</sup> Before traditional holidays or festivals, villagers will select a section of a spring where numerous fish are concentrated and cut a tree to block a downstream part of the spring. At the same time, they will throw more branches into the section in order to confine and lure more fish. After some days, all villagers will catch fish together in this section of the spring. This is called "fish feeding". During the time of feeding, no one is allowed to go fishing.

the measurement of a product's value, as is common in the developed society today. Although local people also take into account the quality of land (good or bad) and the area of land (large or small), those types of measurements are relative. For instance, a plot of land that is large enough for planting a sack of rice seeds (equivalent to 600 square meters), could be exchanged for keeping a pig for a short period of time<sup>3</sup>, if the land has highly fertile soil. Sometimes the exchange is temporary. When, for example, family A needs a pig for worship, or a copper-made cauldron for paying a fine, family B would meet those needs. In return, family A would transfer to family B a plot of land that has the same value as the value of a pig or cauldron. After a short time, if family A is able to return the pig or cauldron to family B, they would retrieve the land from family B.

In reality, in the past, the village's lands were very large, and the population was not yet high. Therefore, these types of land-use exchange were not an issue that needed to be considered. The old people in Lach Dang village recalled that the Lach Dang villagers had temporarily farmed the land of three surrounding villages (i.e. Dlay Krang, Di Lung, Buyech) in order to finish their cultivating cycle. According to collected documents, before local people were making use of all arable land, the late-comers to the village were also given lands for cultivation.

<sup>3</sup> Use a string to twine around the body of the pig, at the place behind the foreleg. Then stretch the string and use the span to calculate the length. The price of the pig will be calculated depending on the number of spans.

In this region, the mode of land trading appeared quite late. Although the mode of trading was known and existed in many villages, it happened very rarely.

A remarkable point about the Mnong community is that the land-use exchange first concentrated on members of the family, and after that, outsiders and, fellow villagers could be involved. When a household left for another village, the land would be transferred to a member of their family living in the old village. The price for the land was reflected to have symbolic value, such as that of a pig, a wine jar or a chicken.

All changes in land and property rights in the village are under the management of both "the owner of the land" and "the village patriarch". Normally, when a deal between two partners reaches consensus, both representative leaders of the village would be invited for a wine party together with some other people from the family and the village. These guests would be witnesses of the exchange. It could be said that although a certain amount of arable land is the property of each household or family, it still belongs to the supervision of the community in which "the owner of the land" and "the village patriarch" are representatives.

## 2. Planning of land and forest use

The Mnong people divide the forest into two types with distinct names: *Bri* is forest that could be used for cultivation, and *Bri kong* (*Krong nam*, *Bri nam*, in other words) is a primary forest and can not be cultivated.

The Mnong people apply a mode of rotating cultivation, but do not wander aimlessly. Instead, the villagers construct houses in a collective place. Each village forms four to five of these places. Migration to another place would only happen in the case of a serious disease epidemic that kills many people. Migration due to changing the place of cultivation is not common.

Most of the forest around the village is used for cultivation or for the villagers' other needs such as picking vegetables, gathering bamboo shoots, exploiting bamboo trees, collecting wood, and other activities. Following tradition, local people cultivate only one crop per year and then leave the land fallow to recover. Although each household occupies one field, all of the fields of the villagers are gathered in a common area (*Rnoh bri*). Thus, each year,

villagers would cultivate in a certain place. When moving to the next place, every person would be informed and clearly guided to the new location.

Rotating cultivation in this community does not follow the mode of "one way" (only one-time cultivation and no return), but instead, it is planned very carefully. Cultivation takes place from one area to another following a cycle. When it comes to the end of the cycle, the cycle would begin again at the first place that was cultivated. In other words, the process of land and forest use in agricultural production conforms to a timed cycle. A timed cycle could be longer or shorter depending on the capacity of the land. In the past, according to one survey, the shortest cycle was 10 years and the longest was 19 years, while most of them were more than 12 years (see more in the table below).

#### Time cycle of land cultivation in different villages

Village	Zizuc	Dung	Du Ma	Du Zuc	Tlong	Lieng Ke	Lach Dang	Nam
Length of cycle	10 years	12 years	12 years	13 years	14 years	15 years	19 years	19 years

We can use Lieng Ke village as an example. Fifteen forests have been scheduled for cultivation respectively, as follows: *Bri Lieng Ke - Ngol Dac - Ngol Tieng Iar - Nong Tla - Boc Dieng Dung - Pang Tang - Dac Bon Crong - Lieng Gung Zut - Dac Lau - Dac Plang - Chor Cang Bay - Dieng Cong - Dang Nach - Dang Rghi - Lieng Bit*.

The Mnong people clearly understand the custom of cultivating in a cycle. They use a group of three words to express the approach to that type of cultivation: *Vach Sa Bri* (*Vach* = Cycling; *Sa* = "Exploiting"; *Bri* = "Forest").

The approach to land and forest use planning of the Mnong people can be seen as an optimal solution under the conditions

of sloping forest land cultivation. More specifically, this approach allowed the land to have time for recovery after each crop. The time of ten to twelve years was enough for the growth of trees and vegetation, and prevented soil erosion to some extent. Twenty years later, this forest will become a mature forest. It is most likely that 100 years ago or more, the rotational cycle of the milpa was much longer than that of the above-mentioned figures. This means that the Mnong people at that time preferred to practice their cultivation in mature forests. Furthermore, in the first year after plucking rice off the stalks<sup>4</sup>, the milpa's surface is partly covered by straw; after that this surface is rapidly and densely covered by grass and trees leading to the limitation of soil erosion to some extent. If farmers continuously cultivate many crops in the same plot of land, the soil and forest will surely be rapidly and strongly eroded.

This experience points out to the Mnong people that the best thing to do is to farm in mature forests and only cultivate one crop there. In this way, they can save their labour to weed the land. Moreover, it ensured that the land was fertile enough for the next cultivation. Certainly, this approach to cultivation could only exist in the past when population density was low.

From another aspect, the custom of cultivation in a central place has a certain significance for managing and monitoring the use of land and forest as well as preventing the forest from burning.

<sup>4</sup> For harvesting, the farmer uses both hands to pick rice.

### 3. Cultivation

The Mnong people have a deep understanding of the different types of soil in their native area. The structure of land in the village is not always the same, and the relevant soils for cultivation are divided with some detail based on traditional experience. Some examples follow:

- The Tlong villagers distinguish five types of soil in their old village.
  1. *Teh brung* (red soil - *dat do* - laterite)
  2. *Teh zuh* (black soil - chernozemic soil, moist, fertile)
  3. *Teh chaih* (mixed-sand soil)
  4. *Tieh ndreh* (mixed-gravel, arid)
  5. *Teh tlir* (proto-soil)

Only the first three types of soil can be used for cultivation. The third type - *Teh chaih* - occupies the highest proportion of the area, and is the main type of soil in the fields. At present, in their new settlement, the first and second types make up the majority of the area.

In Lach Dang village, the five types of soil that can be used for cultivation include:

1. *Teh put zil* (red soil, bad quality)
2. *Teh gal* (black soil, good quality)
3. *Teh mah teh dang* (alluvium)
4. *Teh sre* (sunken soil, mixed gravel, stagnant water after rain )
5. *Teh boc* (Fertile soil, swampy in the rains)

- In Lieng Ke village, there is only one type of soil, *teh zuh luc kec* (sand-mixed black soil) that is useful for planting rice and fruits. According to the experience of the villagers, among eight types of rice that can be planted in this

area, the *Lua Bar* (sticky rice) and *Lua Cay* (like sticky rice) require this type of soil, while the other rice varieties can be planted in other soils.

For any type of soil, the Mnong people cultivate by first pricking holes in the ground and then sowing the seeds. The work of pricking holes is the responsibility of the men, while the women carry out the sowing work. They go across the field (a sloping field) with a group of three to four people, starting from the top of the field and finishing at the base of the field, and when one member pricks the holes, the others sow the seeds into those holes. The

tool for pricking the holes is a 2.5 meter long wooden stick with a sharpened point. When this stick works, it will make a hole that is 3-4 centimeters deep<sup>5</sup>.

When forest land is cultivated for the first time it is quite soft and sloping. Therefore, the method of pricking holes in the ground is the most suitable method. Especially under the conditions of continual heavy rains, this method helps to minimize the problem of soil erosion in sloping areas.

Villagers do their cultivation following a consistent and sustainable schedule. The allocation of annual work following the traditional approach is expressed as follows:

#### Annual agricultural Schedule

Month	Work	Note
January	Forging and repairing farming tools (cleavers, axes, etc.) and clearing the trees on the field for cultivation	
February	Continuing to clear the trees	The land of the young forest needs to be cleared in February
March	Burning the trees on the field	End of the month
April	Final clearing in preparation for cultivation; cultivating maize and rice	If the rain comes late, the cultivation also has to be late, delayed until early May.
May	Planting rice, cucumber, pumpkin, calabash	Should be finished before the first days of June
June	Weeding the rice fields; Planting tomatoes, eggplants, peppers.	
July	Harvesting maize, Weeding the rice fields for the second time	For the old forest land weeding a second time may not be necessary.
August	Weeding the rice fields (if not done last month)	
September	Caring for the fields, preparing for the harvest.	
October	Starting to pick rice	Starting at the end of the month
November	Picking rice	
December	Continuing to pick rice (if yet finishing)	In some cases, it could continue until January)

<sup>5</sup> Recently, they have filled the point of the stick with iron, so that it looks like a bamboo shoot.

Thanks to this kind of approach to cultivation, the problems of soil erosion have been greatly minimized, despite the very heavy and continual rain during the period from July to September.

#### 4. Prevention of forest fires

A long time ago, the Mnong people feared forest fires and paid much attention to preventing forest fires.

Before the cultivating season, they have to burn all of the trees and plants in the fields. In order to control of the fires, about five to ten days before burning, all villagers, under the instruction of "the village patriarch", build a dike for the whole area of cultivation. They also cut and sweep all flammable grasses, leaves, and materials surrounding the area of intended burning, to prevent the fire from spreading to the forest. Normally, a dike is about three meters wide or more, and is at the site that had a high potential for the fire to spread.

Following traditional custom, the people need to use a tool, called a *rnut*, to directly start the fire in a primitive way in the fields. Then some people take the fire used for burning, while some others go around to check whether the fire is under control or not, so that they can react immediately in a bad situation. Normally, they would burn starting from the base of the field and following the wind. When the fire is over, the villagers do a final checking of the burned area to eliminate every possible factor that might cause a forest fire.

All activities regarding the prevention of forest fires are deployed under the instructions of the village patriarch, the owner of the land, and other old people, although the villagers have been equipped with skills and experience for preventing forest fires since they were children.

Every villager realizes the danger of forest fire. For that reason, in accordance with the village's rule, a person who causes a forest fire will be punished heavily by the village patriarch and the owner of the land. The prevention of forest fire, particularly when the dry season is coming, is not only announced as a warning to the whole community, but also reiterated within a family and household.

The fear of forest fires is expressed in the words of prayer to the "Genie of fire". In the religious ceremony that is performed before using the *rnut* tool for starting the fire, the owner of the land has to pray to the "Genie of fire" to approve the two wishes of the villagers. The wishes are that the fire will completely burn everything on the field, and that the fire will not spread to the forest. They even promise to do a thanksgiving ceremony to the "Genie of fire". Soon after finishing the burning, every villager organizes a thanksgiving ceremony so that they fulfill their promise to the Genie on the one hand, and have a toast for a favorable start in a new cultivating season on the other hand.

Due to the great attention given to the prevention of forest fires, and even making it a custom of the Mnong community, in the

past, nobody dared burn arbitrarily and thus no forest fires occurred. Many 60 to 70 year old people have confirmed that a phenomenon of forest fires only appeared about 35-40 years ago.

### **5. Custom of "feeding" wood**

In spite of the availability of wood in the forest, the Mnong people still maintain a custom of saving wood for long-term use.

When cutting down trees of the forest for cultivation, the Mnong people always leave some specific young trees that they recognize as very scarce and valuable species. According to the classification of the Forestry department, those types of wood are in the first and second groups of the wood-group-ranking table. Because of very strict compliance with this rule, many scarce and valuable trees have been saved and grown over almost a generation.

In the Zi Zuc village, many families used to preserve the pine forests. Pine trees had grown naturally in the area. The local people only cultivated in areas where more common trees or bamboo forests existed. The exploited pinewood is used to replace light wood and can be exchanged with other villages for other goods.

Those kinds of forests or trees always belong to someone by property rights. Normally, the rights are attached to the cultivating land of a household or family.

### **6. Religious beliefs**

The management and protection of natural resources in traditional Mnong

society have been ruled by a religious belief which recognizes the existence of a spirit in all things.

The Mnong people believe that in every land, body of water, forest and tree there always exist a "spirit", and in the forest also there are holy areas (Rbac area). From their viewpoint, people should not offend a holy forest. Before burning trees for cultivation, if the "holy" forest is near, villagers have to build a dike to protect the holy forest from the fire, and also must organize a ceremony to announce to the forest that they will burn it, and that the forest should take care to avoid the fire.

Villagers are also very cautious about the "Genie of Land" and the "Genie of Water", and in particular about avoiding impureness toward these Genies. Those who have extramarital relations will be strictly punished by the community and also must confess their faults to these Genies.

The owner of the land and the village patriarch not only play the roles of managers and moral leaders in the Mnong society, but are also seen as people who can establish mystic contact with the "Genie of Land", with respect to the cultivation of the village. Therefore, the owner of the land and the village patriarch can hold the fire-creating tools and perform religious ceremonies. In return, they have to follow very strict rules in their daily life such as not eating broken rice-mixed vegetable soup. From another view, these actions make them hold a very special position in

the community and their voice is respected and more effective in the village.

Being affected by factors of belief and spirituality, the Mnong people have not acted arbitrarily or violated village rules. The interrelations among the owner of the land, the village patriarch, the community and the village rules have supported the effective management and protection of the forest and land in every Mnong village.

### **7. Conclusion**

For a long time, the Mnong people have lived on mountainous agricultural cultivation as well as on the exploitation of the forest for cultivating land. It seems that, on the one hand, they exploit and somehow destroy the forest and on the other hand, they also know how to protect and restore the capacity of the forest. It can be said that the Mnong people have introduced a very effective system for the management and protection of the forest which is very suitable for their living conditions.

The contents mentioned above have very obviously shown this traditional custom of the Mnong people. In every village, this custom has formed in combination with many other essential factors, including community-based customs, self management, village institutions, the effect of village rules, and other factors. Therefore, the management and protection of natural resources have been committed and maintained.

From another aspect, this kind of reaction to the land and forest under the conditions of low population density and the low economic-social-cultural level of the Mnong people can be seen as the most effective approach to ensuring and maintaining the livelihood of the people, as well as the sustainability of natural resources. Although the method of exploitation is fully natural, the mode of a cycle based-rotating cultivation, and the custom of a relevant land and forest use have minimized the speed of natural resource devastation. Interestingly, all of these effective approaches rely on real-life experience that seems to be quite primary.

Thanks to these types of customs and cultivation approaches, many old forests from the past were preserved. It seems that the cycle of cultivation was still a long one, despite the fact that we do not yet know the history of the Mnong approach to cultivation before it was changed by war. Until the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, the Mnong people were satisfied with their living conditions, such as forests, lands, forest products, fish, and river resources. Everything seemed to be very rich and had no problems.

### **Preference:**

Cao Liem and Nguyen Ba Nhuan (1985), *Land of the Highland - Condition of physicality and natural resources*, Science and Technology Publishing House, Hanoi.