

Rucianawati

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**INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, ETHNICITY, AND TRANS-NATIONAL
COMMERCE in MEKONG RIVER BASIN - THAILAND**

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Preface

This research on *The Indigenous, Ethnicity and Trans-national Commerce in Thailand Mekong Basin Area, 1970s – 2005* is one of the seven researches which conducted by Research Centre for Regional Resources, Indonesia Institute of Sciences (PSDR – LIPI) during 2005. This year is the first year of the four years research plan for the research on the Mekong River in 4 countries in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Lao PDR).

This year, the research was done by four researchers; all of them focusing on the topic of *indigenous, ethnicity and trans-national commerce in the area of the Mekong River Basin*, with surely emphasize particular aspects, such as inter-ethnic relationship, migration and government policy during various periods.

There were many people for the team whom they have to convey the appreciation during this research. First the heartfelt thanks to Associate. Prof. Dr Thanet Aphorsuvan, who had been so patient and kind preparing the invitation letters for all the research team to arrive in Thailand safely, and also acting as our host during two weeks field research in Thailand. Our thankfulness also addressed to Sittha Lertphaiboonsiri who had brought the team to The Rockefeller Foundation Bangkok Regional Office and also provided them with some annotated bibliography on Mekong studies. So we would also like to express our gratitude to The Rockefeller Foundation – Southeast Asia Regional Office, which gave us values sources on Mekong studies, especially to Dr. Rosalia Sciortino, Regional Representative for Southeast Asia, and Dr Allan Feinstein, Associate Director – Cultural and Humanity, who had invited the team to come and have discussion and give some valuable information and suggestion.

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This research was presented at the final seminar at PSDR, before it was produce as a complete report. Nevertheless, we realize that there are still limitations and weaknesses in our report. Thus, we would very much appreciate any critics and suggestions for better quality research in the near future.

Jakarta, December 30, 2005
Director
Research Centre for Regional Resources
Indonesian Institute of Sciences

Yekti Maunati

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ABBREVIATION

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMC	Asian Migrant Centre
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nation
BDP	Basin Development Plan
BBC	Burmese Border Consortium
ECAFE	Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
EC	European Community
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPP	Gross Provincial Product
GRP	Gross Regional Product
IMC	Interim Mekong Committee
IOM	International Organization for Migration
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
MC	Mekong Committee
MOSTE	Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment
MRDC	Mountainous Region Development Corporation's
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NESDP	National Economic and Social Development Plan
NEB	National Environment Board
NGO	Non Government Organization
NEQ	National Environmental Quality
PRC	People republic of China
RFD	Royal Forestry Department
SEATO	South East Asian Trade Organization
TDRI	Thailand Development Research Institute
TMBA	Thai Mekong Basin Area
US	United States
DWT	Dead Weight Tons
PRC	People Republic of China

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION:
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, ETHNICITY AND TRANSNATIONAL
COMMERCE IN THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN

Rucianawati

I. Background

Human life cannot be separated from the need for water. Indeed it can be said that human civilization started in river valleys or the places where people can easily find water. For agriculture, water is the main factor for maximal production. Besides that, water is useful for transportation.

Mekong, the fifth longest river in Asia and the biggest in Southeast Asia, is significant for the people who live along its banks. It flows from the Tibet Plateau, through China, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. It has several names, on the Tibetan Plateau, it is named Dza Chu, in China it is called Lantsan Kiang, and Mekong is the Thai version (Butwell 1988).

If we look at the significant role of the Mekong River, we can understand that it has become the centre of civilization. It has specific functions in transnational commerce for many ethnic groups, and it can be said that anyone who dominates the river traffic will be acknowledged as politically dominant. For a long time the Mekong River has been the main traffic lane for commerce, and geographically has become the political boundary for several countries (Hill 1996:12).

Economically, the Mekong River has served as the source of natural resources for the people who live around it. It has more than 1300 species of fish including the biggest river fish in the world the giant catfish and stands second to the Amazon in living resources or biodiversity. The area around the river has economic superiority with its forest that furnishes building materials

and medicinal plants, tin mining, copper, gold, and natural gas.

In the 18th century, the time of modern imperialism when the West looked for colonies outside Europe guided by three words: gold, glory and gospel. The wealth of Southeast Asia, mainly in spices, caused competition among the Europeans to dominate this area. It meant that the West not only wanted to hold economic sway but also have political control. The economic role of the Mekong River became the pull factor for the Europeans to come and dominate the Mekong and its surroundings. Controlling the Mekong meant dominating the centers of economics, politics and culture in this area.

If we look at the significant role of the Mekong River in politics, social life, culture and economics we will understand why there was a big migration flow into this area. It has a close relation with the history of human migration that has gone on until the present. The process of migration in the Mekong River Basin influenced the dynamics of the people in this area.

The majority of the people who live around the Mekong River Basin rely on agriculture, fishing, and forestry with 85% of the people depending economically on those sectors (Steinberg 1989: 7). Historically, since the 1st century, the farmers in the Mekong River Basin have taken advantage of the Mekong River to irrigate their fields (www.mrcmekong.org). Because of its fertility, the basin has become the biggest producer of rice. This is why the Mekong River Basin like the Red River Basin has been called the old centre of rice plantation (Hall 1988: 726).

Usually, a river basin becomes the centre of economic development that attracts migrants to come and stay in its area. It is therefore very interesting to study the process of migration, the composition and the mixture of ethnic groups, the dynamics of the social structure and the activity of transnational commerce in the Mekong River Basin. The people who live here are made up of more than 100 ethnic groups. They have established colonies along the river that flows through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The ethnic diversity is one of the special characteristics of the Mekong

River Basin, besides other unique characteristics, the size and the length of the river, also the wealth of the natural resources (Kasetsiri 2003).

In Thailand, some towns in the Mekong River Basin, such as Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Savanakhet, Mukdahan, and Chong Mek have grown. Almost all of those towns have become the centres of commerce, involving various ethnic groups. Since tourism has become the favourite sector in the Thai economy, the Mekong River has been promoted to support the development of the tourist industry, especially of eco tourism.

II. The Issues

A river basin, especially of a big river like the Mekong, usually becomes the centre of economic growth. Its land fertility attracts migrants to come and carry out activities and establish colonies. Based on this fact, it is very interesting to study migration, ethnicity, social structure, and ethnic activities in transnational commerce in the Mekong River Basin. What is the process of migration in the Mekong River Basin? What are the ethnic interrelations and what is their role in the context of economics and culture in the Mekong River Basin?

This research also wants to look at the existence of indigenous people in the area of the Mekong River. Have the indigenous people become a marginal group? Where are they positioned in economic activity? What is the government policy in managing the Mekong River Basin, especially its policy in relation to the indigenous people?

III. Aims of the Study

The aim of this study is to look at the dynamics of a multi ethnic society in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand from the 1970s to the present. Besides that, the purpose of this research is to study the existence of local people who have been part of the flow of migration from other areas with different ethnic

groups, as well as the impact of migration on the social systems of local people. This research also wants to understand the dynamics of ethnic interaction from many aspects, such as agriculture, forestry and commerce that have become the main factors in the economic development in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (de Silva 1988).

In addition, the study of trade and ethnicity relate to forestry and agriculture in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand is expected to become an example and inspiration for the Indonesian government to overcome similar issues. It is also important for the decision makers to learn and make wise policies in developing the river basin.

IV. The Theoretical Framework

In a multi ethnic country, ethnic competition may show up because of many factors, for instance, the different treatment by the government of various ethnic groups in the country. For example, in Sarawak, East Malaysia, the government has been very helpful to the Malays as the perceived natives of the country rather than to the Chinese or other migrants. The government deems that Chinese have played a major role and have enough skills in economic activity (Ardhana and Rucianawati 2002: 65-66). Even though the competition did not get worse, the jealousy cannot be eradicated.

The sense of possession and domination of any area usually comes from an ethnic group which claims to be native to the region. Its members think that they are the first who came and stayed and therefore have the authority to control this area. The ethnic competition then tends to show up when other ethnic groups arrive in the same area. Because the human migration, which involved many ethnic groups still flows, it is very interesting to look at the dynamics of people in the Mekong River Basin, as well as their interaction and competition.

This research tries to study the process of human migration in the Mekong River Basin. In the process of migration, pull factors and push factors cause

the people to move to other places. Migration is a process of spatial mobility accompanied by a change of permanent residence, in the political unit, statistics or administration to bring out a new order, system and social structure in the new place. Mochtar Naim, cited by Singarimbun (1977), analyzes nine factors that influence the process of migration: ecology, geography, demography, economics, education, political turmoil, the pull of the city, and the policy of migration or transmigration.

Migration in the Mekong River Basin was mainly influenced by geographic factors (the fertility of the land) and economic factors, in relation with the commerce through the river lane. The big flow of migration happened in the colonial era, when the people from the mother countries came and stayed in their colonized countries. As well, the people in the colonized countries also migrated to look for new places where they could feel safe from the interference of the colonizers (Abdillah 2002: 99).

The process of migration has both positive and negative impact on a new place. The process of assimilation, acculturation or the mixture of tradition and culture between the migrant and the local people are examples of positive impact of migration. The negative impact shows in the political and cultural conflict and the damage of the environment. Sometimes nativism appears towards the migrant. The native in this term refers to the people who claim to be the indigenous people of a certain area (Abdillah 2002: 99 and 109).

The process of migration that causes the ethnic conflict to emerge might bring up 'ethnic egoism'. Local people, as the natives, think that they have the right to a certain area. Because of the coming of migrants, the local ethnic group must associate with them and admit that there are other people or other ethnic groups in their area. Sometimes, there is a power struggle in the political and economic aspects. In social anthropology ethnic or ethnicity refers to the relations between groups of people that cause consciousness of the difference of culture and appreciation of the different (Abdillah 2002: 79).

The term 'ethnic' becomes the predicate of identity of anyone or any group of people. Ethnic refers to groups of people who have commitment to a group, which is based on physical characteristics, and stay in a certain area. Ethnic solidarity is materialized in the people's association, primordial completeness, such as the levels, the status, the language, the customs, and the beliefs, which are the responsibility of any member, and makes her/him the same as other members. The 'sense of community' among the members of the group is the characteristic which is part of any ethnic group (Abdillah 2002: 75-76).

Turning to commercial activity, one among many factors which cause human migration, is the fulfillment of economic needs, this term means selling and buying goods. Reid says that from the 15th to the 17th centuries, Southeast Asia was the bustling place in East – West commerce. Reid called this period the commerce era (Reid 1992). The main lane for commerce was through the ocean and the big rivers, such as the Mekong.

V. Hypothesis

The research about indigenous people, ethnicity, and transnational commerce in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand hopes to prove the hypothesis that the flow of migration until today has removed the local people (indigenous people) of the Mekong River Basin to the remote areas. Thus they lose a part of their authority. The government policy, in the interests of economic and development also motivated the process of the marginalization of local people.

VI. Research Method

This study applied the multidiscipline approach, borrowing the concepts and theories of anthropology, sociology and economics. This multidiscipline approach aimed to make easier the analyzing of issues related to migration, trade, ethnicity, and indigenous people.

Planned as continuing research, this research will be conducted for 4 years (2005-2008). In the first year (2005), the empirical research was carried out in Thailand and focused on the issues of migration, ethnic dynamics and transnational trade from the 1970s to the present. In the second year (2006), Cambodia will be the field for the research. The focus in the second year research will be on migration, interaction among ethnic groups, commerce, and government policies in developing the Mekong River Basin. The research will be carried out in the Lao PDR in the third year (2007), with inter ethnic relations, migration, ecology, and trade domination as the main themes. In the last year (2008), Vietnam, as the estuary of the Mekong River will be the field of research when the research will focus on commerce, agriculture, and ethnicity. Through the four year research, this study is expected to result in a model of migration patterns and ethnicity, as well as the dynamics of transnational commerce in the Mekong River Basin. Besides this, a model of government policy in relation with the issues of migration, ethnicity and commerce will be formulated.

The gathering of data was/will be conducted by looking at the primary sources as well as secondary sources through both library and field research. In the first year of the research (2005), the team of researchers interviewed and had discussions with academics and people in institutions involved with Mekong research. The team went to the area of the Mekong River Basin in Thailand (Chong Mek, Mukdahan, and Ubon Ratchatani) and visited some Mekong research centres.

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CHAPTER 2
THE MEKONG:
Geography, History and Their Role
In Social - Economic Activity

Rucianawati

I. Introduction

The Mekong River as the biggest river in Southeast Asia plays a big part in the lives of millions people who depend on its waters, especially for agriculture, fishing, transportation and industry. Not just today, but for thousands of years this river has been the source of livelihood for the people who live in its basin that covers about 183,000 square kilometres. Comparatively recently, the Mekong River has become one among many factors that caused westerners to come to dominate the area surrounding it.

In agriculture, there is no doubt that the Mekong River gives fertility to the land surrounding it. Its water enables the farmers to irrigate their fields. The mud that settles along its banks when the Mekong floods retreats, increase the fertility of the soil, especially in the area around the estuary. The river is rich in various species of fish that are a very important source of livelihood for thousands of fishers of the Mekong.

As a long and big river, the Mekong has two other main functions, besides those in agriculture and fishery; those are in transportation and industry. People in five countries, (Thailand, the Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar) and the Yunnan Province of China, who live in its basin, use the Mekong River as the lane of transportation, mainly in commercial activity. Recently, some dams were built, especially on the Mekong of Yunnan Province in the interests of irrigation and electricity for industry

To understand the significant role of the Mekong River, it is very important to study its geographical area, its history and its role in social and economic activity. For this reason, this chapter will look at the geography and characteristics of the Mekong River, its role in agriculture, fishery and forestry, as well as its function in navigation/transportation. The commercial activity will be explained in a separate chapter.

II. The Geography and Characteristics of the Mekong River

Mekong, the biggest river in Southeast Asia has its source in the tranquil southern reaches of the (Qinghai) Tibetan Plateau. From its rise, the Mekong River swiftly flows through the mountains and ravines of Yunnan into the narrow neck between China and Thailand. Enters the Indochinese peninsula and slowly flows to cleave the dense forests and hills. 4,880 kilometers in length, the river is the tenth longest in the world (Chen Liang 2004: 4; Asiaweek 13 May 1977).

Geographically, the Mekong River flows through six distinct geographical regions: the Yunnan Province of China, Myanmar, the Lao PDR, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam (Figure 2.1). The Mekong is the natural border between the Lao PDR in the east and Myanmar and Thailand in the west. The river constitutes the border between the Lao PDR and Myanmar for more than 200 kilometres before reaching the Golden Triangle, the place where the 'Lower Mekong' begins. The Mekong passes into Cambodia and Vietnam and then out into the South China Sea.

Figure 2.1
Map of the Mekong River



Source: <http://www.chinapage.com/river/mekong/mekong-map.jpg>

The Mekong River has three unique characteristics: the ethnic diversity, the size and the length of the river and the wealth of the natural resources. Kasetsiri notes that the people who have lived and established colonies along the Mekong River are made up of more than 100 ethnic groups. The length of the river that almost reaches 5000 kilometres, is the distinctive feature of the Mekong, moreover the river flows through five countries and one province. Biodiversity, the dense forest surrounding its banks and the mineral resources are the great wealth of the Mekong River.

Kasetsiri divides the river geographically into three parts: the upper stretch (from the Tibetan Plateau to the Golden Triangle), the middle stretch (from Ubon province of Thailand to Champasak of Laos) and the lower reaches (from Khone Falls in Cambodia to the Vietnamese delta). Of all the parts of the Mekong River, it can be said that the most interesting part is from the 'Golden Triangle' down to the Cambodian border. For, along this part of the Mekong, Laos and Thailand see the greatest range of Mekong altitudes, narrow defiles, gentle plains, churning rapids and not navigable falls (Sarasin 2001: 16).

The Mekong River has several names. In the Tibetan Plateau, it is named Dza Chu, which means 'River of Rocks'. In China, it is called Lantsan Kiang (Lancangjiang) and in Thailand is known as the Mekong. In old Lao-Tai languages, the river is called Mae Nam Khong. Tonle Thom, which mean large river, is its name in Cambodia, while in Vietnam, Gao Long or nine dragons is another name for the Mekong River (Kasetsiri 2003; Butwell; 1988).

In the countries where the Mekong River flows, the cities and trading centres have grown. Ban Say, Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Tha Khaek, Savannakhet, Pakse and Champasak are towns in the Lao PDR that lie along the Mekong River. In Cambodia, Strung Treng, Kratie, Kampong Cham and Pnompenh has grown on the banks of the river as well as Cao Lanh, Vinh Long and My Tho in Vietnam. In Thailand, there are many cities along the banks of Mekong, such as, Mae Sai, Sop Ruak, Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong, Chiang Khan, Nongkhai, Nakhon Phanom, That Phanom, Mukdahan and Khong Chiam.

III. The Role of the Mekong in Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry

As the fifth longest river in Asia, the Mekong plays a significant role in the lives of the people who live alongside it. Economically, the river has natural resources such as dense forests that furnish building materials and medicinal plants, also mineral resources including tin, copper, gold, iron ore, gem stones and natural gas. Fish are another of the natural benefits of the Mekong that are very important in the survival of the communities which depend on it.

Water and biodiversity are the most abundant resources of the Mekong River. On average, 15,000 cubic metres of water passes through the main-stream of the Mekong every second. This water nourishes large tracts of forest and wetland in the Mekong River basin (www.mrcmekong.org). The wetlands, which are mostly concentrated along the lowlands of the Mekong River basin, the deltas of the major rivers and the coastal plains of Thailand, provide fish, waterfowl and other products (ADB and UNEP 2004: 2).

Agriculture

Most inhabitants in the Mekong River basin are farmers and fishers who rely on the waters of the Mekong. More than three quarters of the people are farmers, with rice as their main product. The production of rice by farmers in the Mekong River basin is estimated to be enough to feed 300 million people a year (www.mrcmekong.org). The Table below shows the rice production and other primary crops of Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam:

Table 2.1
Primary Crop Production 2002

Crops Production	Cambodia	The Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Vietnam
	Production (tons)				
Rice, paddy	3,740,002	2,410,000	21,900,000	25,945,000	34,063,500
Vegetables	473,000	673,000	3,525,010	2,960,723	7,614,125
Fruit	322,200	181,500	1,365,000	7,670,622	4,274,800
Cassava	186,800	70,000	96,818	16,870,000	4,157,700
Sugarcane	168,850	210,000	6,333,000	62,350,000	16,823,500
Maize	168,060	113,000	660,000	4,170,000	2,314,700
Coconut	70,000	-	275,000	1,396,000	838,000
Natural rubber	32,365	-	35,662	2,460,000	331,400
Sweet potatoes	25,538	102,000	57,382	97,370	1,725,100
Soybeans	21,250	3,002	114,700	300,000	201,400
Potatoes	-	35,000	318,585	84,070	377,472
Tobacco Leaves	4,692	33,400	48,161	73,000	34,400

Coffee Green	300	18,000	2,016	59,537	688,700
Beans Dry	19,600	3,000	1,467,330	260,000	141,900
Groundnuts in Shell	8,720	175,000	700,000	128,816	397,000
Onions	-	-	592,823	265,573	222,811
Plantains	-	-	400,000	-	-
Oil Palm Fruit	-	-	-	3,900,000	-
Sorghum	-	-	-	300,000	-

Source: ADB and UNEP, 2004: 92

Table 2.1 shows that paddy rice is the most important crop product, especially in Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The three countries earn foreign exchange by exporting their surplus production.

Agricultural land in the Mekong River Basin generally is concentrated along the lowlands of the Mekong basin. Like the deltas of the Ayeyarwady River in Myanmar, the Chao Phraya River in Thailand and the Red River in Vietnam, the delta of the Mekong River is an important rice growing area in Southeast Asia. Those places are known as the 'rice bowls' (ADB and UNEP 2004: 89).

For the people of the northern and northeastern provinces of Thailand where the Mekong flows, the river brings great blessings. The Thais have revered the river for its fertile plains which are created when its waters overflow. The Nam Mun watershed in Thailand, for instance, is a fertile wetland that is being converted into agricultural land. The main agricultural products

from this area are rice, sugarcane, cassava, corn, soybeans, peanuts and tomatoes. Nam Mun, in the northeastern region of Thailand is the largest right bank tributary of the Mekong River. This place is densely populated with farmers and fishers who depend on the ecological resources of the Nam Mun basin (ADB and UNEP, 2004: 46).

Most rice farmers in Thailand are subsistence farmers, who sell only their excess production. In 1999, Thailand exported 6.5 million tons of rice. Famous for its high quality rice production, Thailand's rice exports have been growing steadily. Indonesia also imports rice from Thailand, not only legally but also illegally.

Fishery

Besides its very productive agriculture, the Mekong River basin is one of the most productive inland fisheries in the world. Over 1300 species of fish are found in the Mekong River, and only the Amazon River of South America has greater fish diversity. The Giant Mekong Catfish (*Pangasianodon Gigas*) is one of the largest freshwater fish in the world which may grow up to 3 metres long and more than 300 kg in weight, and the Giant Barb (*Catlocarpus Siamensis*) are two among several fish species in the Mekong River that are already endangered.

The Mekong River also has dolphins (*Orcaella Brevirostris*) which may reach up to 2.8 metres in length, 150 – 200 kg weight and can live longer than 50 years. Although those fish are listed as endangered species, especially the dolphins that reproduce only once every two years, fishers still catch and sell them for consumption, especially in Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Thailand. Some hotels and restaurants in Thailand, offer the Giant Catfish on various menus as special Thai cuisine for tourists.

To preserve the existence of the Giant Catfish, since 1983, the Thai Fisheries Department has tried to breed the Giant Catfish. The program was successful and hundreds of Giant Catfish fry have been released into the Mekong.

River. The artificial breeding program was carried out at the Phayao Fisheries Station in 1984. Although the Giant Catfish are listed as an endangered species, some fishermen believe that the fish will never become extinct, because they lay hundreds of thousands of eggs (Wongruang 2004: 18).

Thousands of people obtain their livelihood from fishing. Indeed, it can be said that the people of the Greater Mekong sub region rely on the Mekong's abundance of freshwater and saltwater fish both for local consumption and for export. The major exports of fish products for instance, are frozen shrimp and canned tuna. Fisheries are important in several economies of the sub region both as a source of protein and of foreign exchange (ADB and UNEP 2004: 2)

The Mekong River Commission estimates that for the entire Mekong River basin and other large and smaller river basins, the total annual freshwater catch including aquaculture production approaches 3.1 million tons (ADB and UNEP 2004: 4)

Table 2.2
Annual Consumption of Freshwater Fisheries Products
in the Lower Mekong River Basin (LMB), 2000

LMB Countries	Population in LMB (millions)	Per Capita Consumption (kg)	Total Fish Consumption (tons)
Cambodia	11	65.5	719,000
The Lao PDR	5	42.2	204,800
Thailand	23	52.7	1,187,900
Vietnam	17	60.2	1,021,700
Total LMB	55	56.6	3,133,400

Source: ADB and UNEP 2004: 95.

Table 2.2 shows that among the Lower Mekong Basin countries, Thailand with the largest population consumes the largest number of fish. The large volume of fish production in Thailand has included the country among the 10 largest fish processors in the world. The fish consumed in the LMB includes freshwater fish caught in the rivers and fish produced by aquaculture or fish farming. On average, about 10% of fish consumed in the LMB is produced by aquaculture. In Thailand, inland aquaculture is concentrated in the northeast region, especially on the Khorat Plateau.

In the future, aquaculture will become more important because the environmental problems in the Mekong River will have a negative impact on the fish catch. Pollution and dam construction are the main factors in destroying the fish habitat. Dams built for hydropower generation or irrigation alter the natural dynamics of the river. This alteration disrupts fish migration and spawning and reduces the yield of fisheries (ADB and UNEP 2004: 96). The fishers have noticed the river's unnatural flow since the Manwan dam, the first dam on the Mekong River in China started operations in 1995¹. The fishers feel the negative impact of the operations of this dam, since their fish catch has gone down and forced some of them to start to think of how to find new livelihoods (Wongruang 2004: 13).

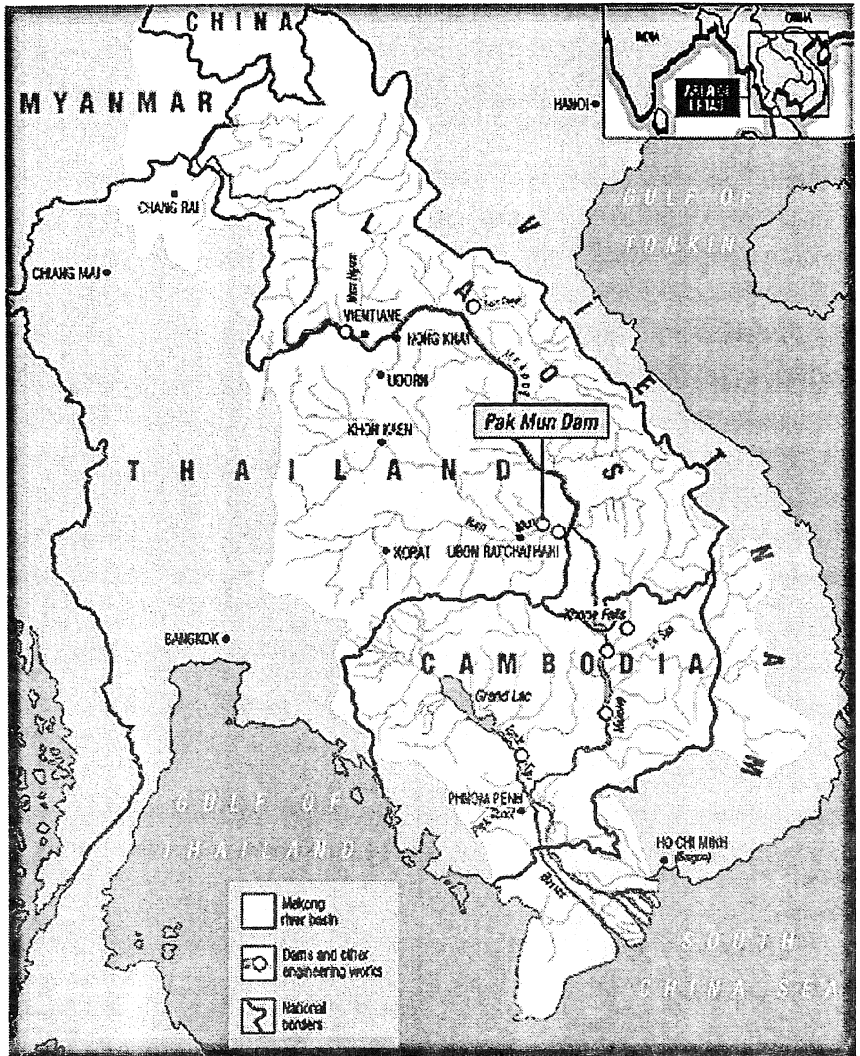
Before the Chinese dams were built, the fishers in Chiang Khong of northern Thailand caught an average of 41 giant catfish annually but in 1994, some close to the operation of the Manwan dam, only caught 18 giant catfish. The condition became worse when the following year the Mekong River reached its lowest level: of 44 centimeters (Wongruang 2004: 13).

¹ The government of PRC through its 10th national five year plan for 2001 – 2005 decided to develop hydroelectric power in the Yunnan Province. With eight dams on the Mekong River, the Yunnan Province will become China's biggest hydroelectric power base, planned to produce some 15,000 megawatts of electricity.

In Thailand, the Pak Mun dam (Figure 2.2) is an example of a Mekong tributary dam building that has a negative impact in the natural fish proliferation. The dam, which is located 5 km from the confluence of the Mun and Mekong Rivers, has blocked the migration of white fish² between the two rivers and decimated important fisheries upstream from the dam. Since the dam's construction in 1994, social protests, particularly those from the community which relies on fishing have occasionally forced authorities to open its floodgates to allow fish to pass through.

² Generally, fish in the Mekong River system was classified into white fish and black fish. White fish refers to fish which migrate seasonally up and down the river and its tributaries, while black fish refers to fish which live in lakes, ponds and swamps (ADB and UNEP 2004: 96).

Figure 2.2
The Pak Mun Dam of Thailand



Source: http://www.dams.org/images/maps/map_mekong_bw.htm

The majority of fish in the Mekong mainstream migrate into the Mekong tributaries during the rainy season to spawn and seek shelter in the shallows, streams, pools and rice fields. It means that the construction of dams in the Mekong tributaries, for instance, the Pak Mun dam of Thailand and the Xe Kaman dam of the Lao PDR, have had negative impact on the rich natural resources of the area and gradually will kill the fish and the livelihood of fishers around those river.

Other problems of the fisheries on the Mekong River are caused by the development of waterway transportation that has damaged the fish habitat. To make it possible for big vessels to sail along the Mekong River, many rapids, shoals and reefs must be removed. The negative impact of this project is that removing them destroys critical habitats and disrupts fish migration and spawning. It means that crucial sources of food for the fishing community, the whole year round, declines sharply.

As a major source of freshwater fish, the ecology of the Mekong River should be preserved. For this reason, cooperation among the countries in the sub region, as well as consciousness among the local people in managing the environment, are needed. The sustainability of fishing in the Mekong River depends on strong national and local support to:

- (i) Protect the integrity of the fish habitat from deforestation, land reclamation and other destructive activities;
- (ii) Maintain water quality by providing municipal, industrial and domestic sewage facilities and by minimizing the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture;
- (iii) Maintain open migration routes and provide appropriate fish passes at dams, weirs and other obstructions to natural water flow and flood pattern;
- (iv) Regulate fishing pressure so that fish stocks remain healthy and productive and enforce bans on destructive fishing (ADB and UNEP 2004: 79).

Forestry

Forests in the Mekong sub region in 2000, covered about 40% (94 million ha) of the total land area, with a different proportion in each country. More than 50% of Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Myanmar are forested, while the Yunnan Province of the PRC, Thailand and Vietnam only have about 30% of forest land (ADB and UNEP 2004: 63).

Table 2.3
Total Forest area 1990 – 2000

Country	Total forest (1990) '000 ha	Total forest (2000) '000 ha	Annual change rate (%)
Cambodia	9,896	9,335	-0.6
The Yunnan Province, PRC	13,423	12,873	-0.4
The Lao PDR	13,088	12,561	-0.4
Myanmar	39,588	34,419	-1.4
Thailand	15,866	14,762	-0.7
Vietnam	9,303	9,819	0.5
Total	101,164	93,769	-0.7

Source: ADB and UNEP 2004: 65.

Table 2.3 shows that the forested area among the five countries and one province in the Greater Mekong sub region 1990 – 2000 declined except in Vietnam. Myanmar, which has the largest total forest area, experienced the largest deforestation.

Among the countries which are included in the Greater Mekong sub region, Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Myanmar are particularly dependent on forest products. For the people along the Mekong, the forests provide timber for housing and medicinal plants. The most valuable and thoroughly exploited

of the forest products along the Mekong River has been teak (Hoskin 1991: 24-26).

Forests along the Mekong Basin provide vital protection from soil erosion and provide subsistence to rural communities. Forests also have a function as water preservers, as well as the lungs of the world in minimizing air pollution. The cooperation among the Greater Mekong sub region countries is needed to cope with deforestation and in reforestation.

IV. The History of the Mekong in Navigation/Transportation

For thousands of years, the Mekong River has been a transportation lane, especially for the people living in its basin. There are at least 25 major ports on the Mekong River. Almost the entire length of the Mekong River is navigable for nearly 8 months of the year, except around the Khone Falls (www.mrcmekong.org). Basically, the river has two navigable stretches; the first from its mouth in Vietnam to the Khone Falls, near the border between Cambodia and the Lao PDR and the second from southern Lao PDR continuing up to Jinghong in the Yunnan Province (Hoskin 1991: 12).

The Mekong is the main communication route for internal transport in the heart of this area. It can be said that the Mekong River has always acted as one of the main drainage channels on the Asian Mainland. In the colonial era, natural resources from the inland were mostly transported via the river. In Thailand, especially, for the people who live in the northern and northeastern regions, the river has offered a vital communication link within the region through generations (Groslier 1966: 68-69, Hoskin 1991: 24 and Sarasin 2001: 16).

Before the rapids, shoals and reefs in the Mekong River were removed, naturally the river could be navigated year round only by small vessels of less than 60 dead weight tons (DWT), especially in the area between the Yunnan Province on the PRC border and Ban Houayxai in the Lao PDR. Many accidents were reported with the majority caused by vessels striking reefs. Some

sections could be safely navigated by larger vessels in high water, particularly in the downstream of the Mekong River.

The first joint investigation to improve the navigation channel of the Mekong River began in 1993 when four Mekong countries (the governments of the PRC, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand) began looking into how the Mekong River could be made more navigable for regional commerce. This planning became a reality when the four countries agreed to make the river navigable 95% of the year. On 20 April 2000, the four countries signed the Commercial Navigation Agreement, which aimed to allow boats of the contracting countries to sail freely along the waterway (886.1 kilometers) between Simao Port in China and Luang Prabang in the Lao PRD (Chuenodomsavad 2004: 59).

The project was implemented gradually; first, it made the Mekong River navigable for vessels up to 100 DWT, by removing 11 major rapids and shoals and 10 scattered reefs, then for vessels up to 300 DWT, by removing another 51 rapids and shoals and finally for the 500 DWT barge train, by 'canalizing' the waterway (ADB and UNEP 2004: 97). Besides that, governments also installed winching facilities and more than a hundred navigation markers and signboards (Chuenodomsavad 2004: 58).

In June 2001, the Mekong River was opened for commercial navigation simultaneously in China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. Thus far, only small vessels weighing less than 300 tons could reach Laos from China (Chen Liang 2004: 5). The opening of the Mekong River as a commercial route expected an increase in commercial activity and tourism, especially ecotourism through the river.

V. Conclusion

The Mekong River, as the biggest river in Southeast Asia, has a significant role, particularly for the six countries, which are included in the Greater Mekong sub region (the Yunnan Province of the PRC, Myanmar, the Lao

PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam). Because of its important role, this river sometimes is called a river of life.

The Mekong River has become the source of livelihood for the people who live in its basin. They rely on the water of the Mekong River, especially for farming and fishing. For thousands of years, farmers, especially in the Lower Mekong River Basin, have depended on the waters of Mekong. The fertility of the soil in the Mekong River basin has brought great blessing for the farmers, so they are famous in rice production. The Mekong also provides all farm families in the Lower Mekong River Basin fish for subsistence and extra cash income.

The Mekong River has also become the vital artery of Indochina, especially after 2001, when the project to make the river navigable for big vessels was implemented. The bustling navigation on the Mekong River means that the commercial activity (transnational trade) in the greater Mekong sub region countries has increased. It is influential in the development and growth of many ports and trading centres along the Mekong River, such as Mukdahan in Thailand which is known for its 'Indochina Market'.

For Indonesia, it is very important to understand the role of the Mekong River in social and economic activity, in order to learn how to manage a river basin, in view that Indonesia has some big rivers, like, the Mahakam River, the Musi River and the Kapuas River, although those rivers are not as big or long as the Mekong River. The most important points that should be learned are how to manage a river, make use of its natural resources and exploit it for agriculture, fishing and electricity/industry, as well as maximizing the function of the river in waterway transportation. One matter that must be adhered to is the preservation of the habitat biodiversity and the environment surrounding the river.

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CHAPTER 3

MIGRATION AND ITS PROBLEMS IN THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN, IN THAILAND

Lamijo

I. Introduction

Mekong, the longest river in Southeast Asia, stretches more than 4,200 kilometres from the Yunnan province of China through Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Geographically, the total area of the Mekong sub region is more than 2,423,000 square kilometres and the total population is around 256 million; 62 million in Thailand, 5.9 million in Laos, 18 million in Cambodia, 48 million in Myanmar, 78.7 million in Vietnam, and 42.8 million in the Yunnan Province. These six countries have both similarities and differences in the terms of social, cultural, and economic systems. These are mostly agricultural societies and most of the people practice Buddhism.

The greater Mekong sub region is rich in ancient cultures and civilizations, which, with the exception of Thailand, also has a long history of colonization. Up to the latter half of the 1990s, most of the countries, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar were embroiled in internal strife, repressive regimes, cross border conflicts, political instability, and economic stagnation. The Lao Thai border extends along both sides of the Mekong River, traditionally it was considered a single region dominated by one ethnic group, which continues to maintain close ties despite the demarcation of national boundaries (Asian Migrant Centre 2002: 1).

At the beginning of the new millennium, these countries, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar, are the least developed in Southeast Asia. In the past two decades, as the conflicts diminished, these countries increasingly embarked on development efforts to catch up with the rest of Asia. All of these countries have opened their doors to some extent in search of foreign invest-

ment. Thailand and the Yunnan Province of China represent the other end of the wealth disparity spectrum in the greater Mekong sub region. Having developed their economies more successfully over the past two decades while the rest of the region was mired in conflict, Thailand and Yunnan have become logical magnets for people fleeing turmoil or simply seeking jobs and means of survival (Asian Migrant Centre 2002: 2).

The Asian Migrant Centre estimates that there are at least 1.6-2 million migrants (excluding refugees) in the greater Mekong sub region. After the war in Indochina ended in the middle of the 1970s, there were massive migration flows across the Mekong border. In recent years, a rapid increase of cross border migration has been an emerging issue in the Mekong River sub region. Most migrants leave home in search of work and are undocumented. Many hundreds of thousands are self exiled because of the ethnic strife and civil war in their home countries. Since governments in the region are not able to track their mobile populations, there are only rough estimates.

During the last three decades, all Mekong states experienced similar social problems, which have now become common crimes in this region. These prominent crimes are: trade in arms, ammunition, endangered species, drugs, and even human beings; that is, trade in children and women. It seems that each country in the Mekong River Basin is either a producer of drugs or a transit point for drugs and part of the network of trade in drugs and women trafficking. Along with the massive cross border migration, a thriving illegal smuggling industry also exists in the Mekong sub region.

The Southeast and South Asian countries have been incorporated into the global changes in many ways, and Thailand has developed a tradition of both accepting immigrants and sending Thai emigrants abroad. Over the past century, only relatively small groups of people moved out of the country permanently while population groups of different ethnic origins came into what is now Thailand, among them groups of Shan, Karen and Mon origin. At present, Thailand's labour migration situation has become more complex as Thailand shifted from a former labour supplying country into the position of a

both labour receiving and sending country.

This paper addresses some questions: What is the history of migration in the Mekong River Basin? What is the most important reason for migration? How far does the impact of migration in the Mekong River Basin extend? How is the government to cope with the problems of cross border migration?

II. History of Migration in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand

Migration is an on going process of transition. It is a journey of physical displacement, as well as social and psychological dislocation. While circuits of migration may involve a wide range of people from transnational elite entrepreneurs to under class migrant workers, it should be noted that migration itself is a journey which entails costs both emotional and material/physical (Beatriz P. Lorente et.al. (eds.) 2005: 4, 155).

Cross border migration is the mass movement of populations across the border from the country in which they belong to another country for a continuous living period where they are remunerated for work activities. The International Travel Regulation defines a period of one year as the length of stay in the new land, which determines migrant status. Tourists, who travel to a country, are not migrants due to their short stay. Transients or sojourners, who travel regularly from one country to another country, are not migrants either according to such a definition (Supaphan Kanchai and Shakti R. Paul 2002: 11).

Borders are magnets for many people and one of the most important groups, both due to sheer volume and socio political implications, are migrant workers. However, border areas are also magnets for many other mobile population groups, including traders and businesspeople, and general commerce which brings many truck drivers into the areas. In addition, there are increasing numbers of tourists in some border areas, and often a large presence of police and the military. Criminal gangs have been known to operate on many of these borders and the local areas have been sources of, and transit points

for, trafficking in drugs, in women and girls for prostitution, and for smuggling a range of goods and artifacts (Research Centre for Regional Resources 2004: 81).

Migration, especially for work, is not new in the Mekong region, there is a long history of movement by people among the Mekong countries, and between the region and the rest of the world. Thailand has benefited from Lao, Khmer and Myanmar labour for hundreds of years. In history, labour, not land, was the key variable in the calculus of a leader power. It was common practice by all sides in the time of Ayuddhaya, to take captive, after the battle, large portions of the population and relocate them into the victors' territory. These people would then be integrated into the hierarchy of the kingdom and provide labour to the monarchy and nobles, replenish supplies of warriors while denying the opponent the same, and to generally repopulate. With the arrival of Western European powers to the region with their sense of nation state, boundary and borderlines, Thailand moved to clearly define the territory constituting the Thai state and the populace enclosed therein (Sudthichitt Chintayananda et.al.. 1997: 1). Following World War II, especially in the early 1950s, migrants still moved back and forth across the border to seek employment in their comparatively wealthy neighbouring countries in the Mekong sub region. However, it is important to be noted that intra Mekong region migration is growing without an official mechanism in place.

Thailand has a long history of immigration from its neighbouring countries notably Laos, Myanmar, China, and Cambodia. Between the 1960s and 1980s, migrants from the Mekong region were mostly refugees from various conflicts. The Myanmar economy stagnated after the country was closed to the world, following a coup d'etat by General Ne Win in 1962, which coupled with incessant warfare along the border region, acted as push factors for families to take the journey.

As the Thai economy boomed from the 1970s through to the early 1990s, a large number of Laotian refugees and migrants began entering Thailand as early as 1975. The number of Burmese refugees, on the other hand, has in-

creased since 1984. The Burmese Border Consortium (BBC) was one of the first groups to respond to the issues and needs of the first wave of Karen refugees that fled the country that year. The exodus of Burmese refugees and migrants further increased after the September 1988 takeover of the government by the military. Meanwhile, the number of Cambodian migrants has been rising since the early 1990s (AMC 2002: 144).

Over the last two decades, rapid economic growth in Thailand has effectively transformed the country from a labour exporter during the 1970s/80s to a de facto labour importing country by early 1990. Strong economic growth resulted in higher demand for labour attracting large numbers of labourers from rural areas across Thailand, as well as from neighbouring countries. Since then thousands of migrant labourers from neighbouring countries have been entering Thailand in search of better paid jobs. Most of them are from Myanmar with relatively smaller numbers from Cambodia, China, Laos, and the South Asian countries. Migrant workers, legal or illegal, can be found in most provinces of Thailand. The most important entry point into Thailand for migrant workers is the border area, where some border points have no rigid control.

By the early 1990s, undocumented migrant workers had already become a significant feature of the Thai economy and society. However, there was no government policy or system to deal with irregular migrants. Since the economic collapse in July 1997, Thailand has suffered from a high unemployment rate, which peaked in 1998. However, there are still occupations, which continue to have labour shortages, particularly labour intensive, lower paying, and '3D' (dirty, dangerous, disdained) jobs.

Since 1996, migrant workers have been required to apply for registration or extension of work permits. However, many groups believe that the number of migrants who have not registered is in fact much greater than those who have. For instance, a National Security Council official stated on 6 December 2002 that the estimated number of migrants was over one million, most of whom were undocumented (AMC 2002: 146).

III. Migrant Origin Countries

Thailand itself is a labour exporting country to other richer countries, such as Hong Kong and Japan. Since the early 1970s, Thai people have migrated abroad due to the uneven development that has widened the gap between the rich and poor combined with the rising consumer oriented values of Thai people and the current unemployment problem. The most popular destinations for Thai migrants are Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Middle Eastern countries. Between 1988 and 1995, for example, there were around 40,000-60,000 Thais who went to Japan every year. In 1991, which was the peak of the influx, there were as many as 105,666 Thais going to Japan. Most of them went there to live illegally (Supang Chantavanich 2001:13).

Between 1991 and 1994, 20,982 Thai females were deported from Japan as illegal migrant workers. Many had no proper travel documents as they had entered Japan using fake passports of other nationalities. About 80% had worked in the sex industry. Agents who helped them to enter Japan charged them a fee of around eight hundred thousand baht per person and then made them provide sex to clients to pay off this 'debt' (Pasuk Phongpaichit et al. 1998: 155). Hereunder are the figures for occupations of illegal Thai migrant workers in Japan in 1994.

Table 3.1
Occupations of Illegal Thai Migrant Workers in Japan, 1994

Occupations	Male	Female	Total
Construction	15,691	178	15,869
Factory worker	10,654	3,139	13,793
Host/Hostess	7,413	445	7,858
Other manual Employment	3,656	800	4,456
Waitress/bar staff	1,865	2,242	4,107
Dish washer	1,407	1,530	2,937
Cook	1,787	626	2,413
Other services	1,051	687	1,738
Others	3,495	2,686	6,181
Total	40,029	19,323	59,352

Source: Japanese Immigration Office (Pasuk Phongpaichit, et al., 1998: 164)

While its nationals migrate to more developed countries outside the Mekong region, Thailand has become the central receiving country of migrants from the neighbouring countries in the Mekong River Basin. Thailand's general prosperity and political stability in relation to its neighbours have attracted migrants across the borders into Thailand, mostly undocumented. Illegal migrant workers began trickling in to work in the border towns of the Mekong River Basin in Thailand. Thailand is easily accessible from neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, the Lao PDR and Cambodia. There are hundreds of unofficial entry points by land and by sea, in addition to a

smaller number of official entry points from these countries¹.

Chinese migrants mostly from Yunnan, usually cross the Myanmar border and then enter Thailand through the Mae Sai-Thachilek checkpoint where an agent will transfer them by truck. Some travel to the Lao PDR in order to reach Thailand, traveling from the Huoixai area in the Lao PDR to Chiang Kong or Chiang Saen in the Chiang Rai Province in northern Thailand (Reiko Harima et al. 2003:229). Many Laotian migrants enter Thailand through a legal channel with a three day stay permit which they purchase for US\$3, and overstay to find undocumented work through informal connections or by depending on smugglers. Others choose to cross the border by land or by swimming across the river and then using traffickers to proceed further into Thailand.

Cambodian migrants use a similar process to Laotians. Cambodian villagers living along the Thai border make daily crossing to work for employers in Thailand. They can obtain a 24 hour pass at the border, and then overstay. However, it is important to note that for all nationalities there are a number of incidences of trafficking for sex work, begging, or other work. There has been a recent significant increase in the demand for young women in the sex indus-

¹ There are many immigrant checkpoints along the border. Some of these are: 1.) Thai-Myanmar Border: Chiang Rai (Mae Sai and Chiang Kong districts), Chiang Mai (Fang district), Mae Hong Son (Khun Yuam district), Tak (Thasongyang and Mae Sod districts), Karnchanaburi (Sangklaburi and Thongpapoon districts); 2.) Thai-Laos Border: Chiang Rai (Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong, and Wienghang districts), Phayao (Chiangkham district), Nan (Chalermprakiat district), Nakorn Panom (thatpanom and Tauthane districts), Nong Khai (Sri Chiangmai and Tha Bor districts), Ubonrachathani (Khemmarat and Piboonmangsaaham districts), Mukdahan (Don Tan and Som Poi districts), Amnat chareon (Chanumarn district); and 3.) Thai-Cambodia Border: Surin (Karbchherng, Prasart, and Ban Kok districts), Sra Kaew (Tapraya and Aranyaprathet districts), Trad (Klong Yai and Kaoh Kong districts). AMC, *Migration Needs, Issues, and Responses in the Greater Mekong Subregion*, AMC, Kowloon, 2002.

try, because customers are afraid of contracting HIV Aids and many believe that younger girls are safer (AMC 2002: 161).

In 1995, the Immigration Office estimated that just over half a million foreigners were working illegally in Thailand (Pasuk Phongpaichit et al. 1998: 174).

Table 3.2
Official Estimates of Illegal Workers in Thailand, August 1995

Origin	Number
Myanmar	334,123
China	100,000
Laos, Cambodia	10,000
South Asian	81,357
Total	525,480

In early 1996, The Ministry of Labour assessed the number of illegal immigrant workers based on information obtained from local business and labour officers in different provinces. They came up with the high figure of 728,137 people of whom two thirds were Burmese. In September 1996, the Thai government issued a directive for the registration and subsequent issuance of temporary work permits for undocumented migrant workers. This followed two previous failed attempts in 1992 and 1994 to regulate the flow of undocumented migrant labour flow into the country.

During this last round, the migrants from three neighbouring countries namely, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos were allowed to register. Out of the total 76 provinces in the country, 43 were permitted to register. The migrants in eight occupations were authorized to register i.e. construction, fisheries,

fisheries related industry (pier work, cleaning seafood, etc), and industrial production (shrimp paste, fish sauce, squid drying, tapioca, lumber, rice and pebbles). Agriculture, mining, land transportation, and domestic helpers. Many others were not allowed to register e.g. garment and shoe factories, restaurants and other service sectors, gasoline stations, retail shops etc. prostitution is officially, illegal in Thailand and therefore, all direct and indirect commercial sex workers (CSWs) as well as entertainment workers were also not registered.

A result of this is that among the registered migrant workers, in 1997 89.35% were Burmese followed by 8.71% Cambodians and 3.95% Laotians. They were heavily concentrated in the border areas with Myanmar, as well as in Bangkok and nearby vicinities. Since the economic crisis occurred, hundreds of thousands of migrants have been sent back across the border along side the Mekong River Basin in Thailand (Research Centre for Regional Resources 2004: 82). As of March 2002, 428,431 migrants had registered, following the Thai government decision to allow undocumented migrants to register with the government. Among those registered, 348,747 were Burmese, 42,085 Laotian, and 37,595 Cambodian (AMC 2002: 4). Many groups estimate that the number of migrants who did not register was higher, perhaps at least double the number who registered. Therefore, it was not surprising that this fact has contributed to the increasing number of illegal migrants in the border areas in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand.

Table 3.3
Number of Migrant Workers who were granted Work Permits
(As of 25 March 2002)

Occupation /industry	Burmese		Laotians		Cambodians		Total					
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female				
Agriculture	46576	23140	69716	2612	1349	3961	3113	1394	4507	52301	25883	78164
Mining	837	297	1134	7	9	16	9	1	10	853	307	1160
Porlery	2007	770	2777	122	38	160	19	15	34	2148	823	2971
Construction	21862	8983	30845	943	439	1382	2445	803	3248	25250	10225	35475
Rice mill	3531	1034	4565	69	33	102	85	19	104	3658	1086	4771
Livestock	11839	3993	15832	1688	598	2286	1671	435	2106	15198	5026	20224
Fishery and related jobs	35671	23123	58794	966	324	1290	12278	778	14056	49915	24225	74140
Transportation of goods from wear house	5417	1640	7057	492	323	815	1950	557	2507	7859	2520	10379
Domestic help	5389	41970	47359	1047	11470	12497	408	2686	3094	6824	56126	62950
Special jobs (miscellaneous)	62775	47893	110668	9249	10327	19576	4420	3513	7933	76444	61773	138177
1. with employer (special 1)	56685	43750	100395	8326	9153	17479	3629	2815	6444	68620	55698	124318
2. without employer (special 2)	6110	4163	10273	923	1174	2097	791	698	1489	7824	6055	13859
Total	195904	152843	348747	17175	24910	42085	27398	10201	37599	240477	187954	428431
Percentage	56.2	43.8	100.0	40.8	59.2	100.0	72.1	27.1	100.0	56.1	43.9	100.0

Source: Office of the Commission on Administration of Illegal Alien Immigrants (AMC 2002: 146)

Table 3.4

Summary of the Predominant Characteristics of Registered Migrants

No.	Key characteristics	Burmese	Laotians	Cambodians
1.	Number of migrants applying for extension in 2002	348,747 (81.4%)	42,085 (9.8%)	37,598 (8.8%)
2.	Sex	M. 56.2%	M. 40.8%	M. 72.9%
		F. 43.8%	F. 59.2%	F. 27.1%
3.	Occupation			
	Agriculture	69,716	3,961	4,507
	Construction	30,845	1,382	3,248
	Fishery and related jobs	58,794	1,290	14,056
	Domestic helper	47,359	12,497	3,094
	Special jobs	110,668	19,576	7,933
4.	Gender dimension and types of work			
	Domestic helper	M:F 1:8	M:F 1:11	M:F 1:7
	Construction	M:F 5:2	M:F 2:1	M:F 3:1

Source: Office of the Commission on Administration of Illegal Alien Immigrants (AMC 2002: 146).

IV. Causal Factors of Migration

Migration can be classified by its causes: natural or man made disasters. Another classification is by the decision of the migrants, that is. voluntary migration and forced migration. There are many issues surrounding workers' rights and the plight of migrants in their home areas, which motivate them to seek greater opportunities in the border towns in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand.

The troubled economies of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar have a 'stand by army' of millions of unemployment. Therefore, there is an intense labour push from these countries, resulting in both documented and undocumented migration without government intervention. Economic motivation was the most important reason to migrate during the economic crisis period. Higher wages and better employment opportunities are pull factors for migration. People will move from an economically less advanced country to a more advanced one.

In the past decade, Thai or Burmese crossed the border freely. After Thailand experienced a well progressing economic growth while Myanmar's economic growth was still stagnant, even tended to decrease, the people who then wanted to cross the border, both Thai and Burmese, were limited or were controlled tightly to reduce the number of Burmese migrants crossing into Thailand to seek jobs². Additional, push factors for Burmese include relocation/internal displacement, forced labour, violence against women and lack of social services, especially health care and education (AMC 2002).

Economically, the Burmese are worse off than the Thai because of the instability in the political situation, low wages, low agricultural productivity and high unemployment in the country. A dramatic increase in the cost of living contributed to the worsening social situation in the country. Therefore,

² Interview with Tanomsak Serivichyaswat, President of Thai-Myanmar Cultural and Economic Cooperation Association, 21 May 2004.

it was no wonder that during the economic crisis the massive waves of Burmese migrants across the border, especially in Mae Sai, Mae Sot, Ranong, and Sangkhlaburi borders, into Thailand in search of jobs and better pay. This phenomenon was not so evident before the 1990s in the socialist countries like Vietnam, and some argue that the shift to the market economy may have contributed to the increase.

Political instability in the countries of origin also created the migration wave across the border. Myanmar is a country governed by military power. There are also some minority groups in Myanmar, which are opposed to the Myanmar government and have waged political and armed struggle for wider autonomy or outright independence. The condition of instability made some Burmese decide to leave the country by crossing the border into Thailand for a better life. Therefore, combinations of many of these conditions have caused the massive migration to Thailand.

Thailand has also become the primary destination within the Mekong region for Lao migrants seeking work. While many cite economic necessity, poverty and unemployment as the main reasons, others appeared to have more choices in their decisions to migrate. Similarities based on language, culture and direct personal relationships between the Lao PDR and Thailand also play a crucial role in migrant decisions to go to Thailand. Thai culture is quite similar to that of the Laotians, as the region on both sides of the Mekong River has historically belonged to the same ethnic groups (Reiko Harima et al. 2003:236). Similar to other sending countries, economic factors play a key role in decisions to migrate from Cambodia and Vietnam to Thailand. Moreover, traditional ties between border areas in the Mekong region, including similarities in language and ethnic culture, together with cross border transportation networks, facilitate cross border migration of people in this region.

V. Migrant Living Conditions in the Mekong River Basin

There are many issues affecting migrants in their destinations. They are faced with many difficulties, whether in the border areas or in other places in Thailand, along with the recently increasing unemployment. The living conditions endured by migrants are typically poor, with overcrowded and unhygienic housing. This, combined with poor diets brought about by the migrants' limited incomes, has serious health consequences. In many cases, the migrants' fear of arrest and the feeling of isolation also result in a high level of stress and poor mental health. The government is responding to increasing unemployment among Thais but employers argue that Thais do not want most of the jobs taken by migrants. Therefore, the problem of migrant versus Thai is that migrants generally work for very low wages and have no health or welfare support.

It is not surprising that police and immigration officials control the movement of migrants. Because of the migrants' illegal status, the authorities often have to take unpopular actions against them. Sometimes they arrest the migrants for illegal entry into the country or impose a fine for illegal employment. They also deport the migrants across the border checkpoints.

In addition to their job related encounters with the migrants, the police and immigration officials are often blamed for ill treatment of the detained and arrested migrants. There are numerous reports of physical and sexual abuse of migrants by the police, which results in a strong dislike for them. On the other hand, some employers and health officials are more understanding with migrants and provide support and services as required (Supang Chantavanich 2000: 140).

Migrant living conditions are generally very poor. The cost of basic necessities such as rent and utilities are often a major burden on migrants, several migrants may share one cheap apartment and live in very cramped conditions. Factory workers, for instance, generally stay in cheap worker accommodation provided by employers, or share a cheap apartment with their friends. Construction workers build makeshift sheds using discarded materials, which are

overcrowded, hot, and lack electricity and even windows. Migrants have little privacy and cook, eat and sleep in the same small space. They often have no access to clean water and the toilets are dirty and insufficient. These poor living conditions make migrants more vulnerable to disease (AMC 2003: 159).

Migrants are vulnerable to various diseases and infections, but are often stigmatized for spreading diseases. Migrant sex workers generally lack HIV Aids related and reproductive health knowledge. They often do not know how to protect themselves from risk and may be powerless to do so even when they know, thus making them a high risk group. Some of the male migrants go to bars and brothels, and have unsafe sex with sex workers. This puts both male and female sex workers at risk, as well as the migrants' wives and girlfriends (Reiko Harima et al. 2003:245).

Health problems and access to services can be a problem but it has now been made worse by the increasing prevalence of HIV Aids and the unique characteristics of border areas, which tend to facilitate the spread of HIV Aids especially the fast growth of prostitution in the cross border areas in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand. Although the focus of attention of governments as well as of NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, and academics tends to be on HIV Aids, there are many other diseases and infections, such as malaria and tuberculosis, to which migrants are vulnerable. In Thailand, documented migrants have paid into the state health insurance scheme, but not many avail themselves of such services as they have little understanding of their rights to the services and the system. Therefore, migrants need access to government health insurance schemes regardless of their immigration status. They also need concrete and clear guidance on how to avail such schemes, including information about health and HIV Aids.

Undocumented migrants are reluctant to use health services. They generally treat minor illness themselves, prescribe medications for themselves or resort to folk medicine. They tend to seek treatment only when the illness is more serious. Undocumented migrant workers being deported may be subjected to a mandatory blood test for HIV Aids and other diseases.

VI. The Impact of Migration: New Problems Appearing

Migration certainly belongs to the key phenomena, which characterize the present social and political developments in the world. At the same time, it is one of the core problems in need of better international solutions. International migration movements can be viewed as normal and in no way extraordinary developments. To take a historical example, the North American and Australian continents would obviously look different today if international migration had not taken place. The same can be said about any other region of the world, as none of today's metropolises would have developed without major internal and cross border migration. Accordingly, the present century has been referred to as the age of migration (Supang Chantavanich 2001: 2).

The emergence of major migration movements can create problems, which national governments around the world find difficulty to cope with. Among the problems most often named are the sometimes catastrophic appearance of migration and refugee flows and the difficulty of controlling such movements. An unwillingness to develop a more appropriate migration policy and to address the issue from a broader perspective, aside from acute political crises, has also been diagnosed for international bodies like the European Union and the ASEAN (Supang Chantavanich 2001: 2).

There are many issues surrounding migrants in their destinations. They are faced with many difficulties, whether in the border areas or in other places in Thailand, along with the recently increasing unemployment. In many cases, migrants face obstacles in integrating into the local community due to differences in language, culture, religion and ethnicity or the fear of arrest. Lack of understanding between the migrants and locals may lead to xenophobia and racial discrimination against migrants. Migrants are often stigmatized as a cause of unemployment, crimes, and spreading disease, e.g. HIV Aids.

The government is responding to increasing unemployment among Thais but employers argue that Thais do not want most of the jobs taken by migrants. Migrants are often seen as competitors for local jobs, as well as the cause of a rising unemployment rate. In many cases, migrants have been made the scape-

goats for these problems, often reinforced by discriminatory comments and policies by government and media. Discrimination against migrants has mixed components based on race, class and gender. Certain races are reportedly discriminated against more than others, such as the Burmese in Thailand. Migrant women, especially migrant sex workers, may be more vulnerable to discrimination and stigmatization. In effect, the problem of migrant versus Thai is that migrants generally work for very low wages and have no health or welfare support.

Health problems and access to services can be difficulties now made worse by the increasing prevalence of HIV Aids and the unique characteristics of border areas, which tend to facilitate the spread of HIV Aids, especially the fast growth of prostitution in the cross border areas in the Mekong River Basin in Thailand. Tourism has significant influence in the increase of the sex industry in Thailand. In 1987, tourism became the main income earner for Thailand, better than the annual income from textiles and paddy rice (Walden Bello, Shea Cunningham, and Li Kheng Poh 1988: 228). In the same year, around 3.48 million tourists visited Thailand with payment received of more than 50 million Baht (Chaiwat.Satha-Anand 1991: 89).

The most important to be noted from the growth of tourism is the increase in crime and prostitution. The Visit Thailand Year 1987 led to more children being trafficked into tourist sites for prostitution. The Amazing Thailand Tourism campaign for 1998-1999 was also predicted to bring more children into the sex trade (Bangkok Post 24 November 1999). Furthermore, the growth of prostitution led to the spread of HIV Aids in Thailand. Around 80,000 women and children have been sold into Thailand's sex industry since 1990, with most coming from Myanmar, China's Yunnan province, and Laos. Trafficked children were also found on construction sites and in sweatshops. In 1996, almost 200,000 foreign children, mostly boys from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, were thought to be working in Thailand (Bangkok Post 22 July 1998).

VII. Coping with the Impact of Migration

There have been a number of responses to migration related issues, although the nature and the level of intervention vary depending on the country's situation. Most of the governments in the Mekong region take the 'managed migration' approach promoted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The focus on this is developing legal and regulative mechanisms and channels for migration; preventing undocumented migration; including trafficking; deporting undocumented migrants; legalizing migrant status by registration, and penalizing traffickers. (Reiko Harima et.al. 2003:250).

As the major migrant receiving country in the Mekong region, the Thai government has initiated a number of responses to 'manage' migration, such as the registration of undocumented migrants, deportation of migrants who fail health checks etc., as described earlier. The government has also responded to the issue of trafficking of women and children by cracking down on traffickers and rescuing trafficked victims. In June 1999, government agencies and NGO representatives signed a Memorandum of Understanding, namely, the Practical Guide for Agencies Engaged in Assisting Women and Children Subjected to Trafficking, providing guidelines for the police authorities to ensure victims of trafficking get access to safe shelter and other humanitarian assistance (Reiko Harima et al. 2003:250).

In 1992, the government made its first public attempts to address the issue by announcing that it would allow undocumented migrants to work in specified occupations in certain provinces. In 1996, the first written policy appeared, through a Cabinet Resolution providing work permits to undocumented migrants. This practice of periodically issuing Cabinet Resolutions (six have been issued between 1996 and 2001) has become the government's standard procedure in shaping its policy and practice on migrants in Thailand (AMC 2002: 145).

In January 2002, Thai officials prepared for the Thai Burma Joint Commission and tabled options for sending illegal workers back to Burma, as well

as attempting to create a framework for the legal entry of workers. Just like many other countries in the Mekong region, the Lao PDR attempts to prevent trafficking in collaboration with a number of inter governmental organizations. A national project on trafficking involves a repatriation program, public education and research on trafficking and migration. Cambodia has no official agreement with Thailand to regulate the flow of migrants to that country. In Vietnam, major national responses include research, awareness campaigns, workshops, and other preventative programs against trafficking, as well as counseling of trafficked victims. In Yunnan, current responses to out migration mainly focus on research into the causes, status and special traits, to draft effective measures.

Related to the spreading of HIV Aids because of rapid growth in prostitution among migrants, and along with the growth of tourism in Thailand, the Thai Government has been running a national HIV Aids program to reduce the spread of HIV Aids since the 1990s. In 1996, the Thai government issued Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act, which moved the emphasis of guilt for child prostitution onto parents, customers, agents, and sex establishment owners which has had a role in reducing the numbers of victims of child prostitution.

The legislation has played a role in changing the nature of prostitution in Thailand. It has helped reduce the existence of brothels, once a major feature of the Thai sex industry. The decline of brothels is important in the fight against child prostitution, as the majority of child prostitutes have been located there or in low class bars away from the public view. It seems also that the new legislation and police crackdown on brothels have played an important role in reshaping the sex industry in Thailand.

The government of Thailand is also aware that Aids is a serious problem; therefore, the Thai government has set up a National Aids Committee, which has formulated two policies, namely 1) A policy aimed at prevention and behaviour change; and 2) A policy to provide adequate medical and other services to deal with the problem. This policy includes the provision of suit-

able personnel to both care and counsel and to encourage the acceptance of Aids sufferers by the community (Niels Hoerup et al. (eds.) 1998: 62).

A number of NGOs are also actively advocating migrant rights in Thailand. NGO support includes counseling and legal services, emergency home/shelter services, reproductive health/HIV Aids education, training on migrant social interaction, language lessons and assistance for migrants in detention centres and jails

VIII. Conclusion

Migration is not a new phenomenon to the Mekong region. Thailand has a long history of immigration from its neighbouring countries notably Laos, Myanmar, China, and Cambodia. Over the last two decades, rapid economic growth in Thailand has effectively transformed the country from a labour exporter during the 1970/80s to a de facto labour importing country by early 1990. Strong economic growth resulted in higher demand for labour attracting large numbers of labourers from rural areas across Thailand, as well as from neighbouring countries.

Economic motivation was the most important reason to migrate to Thailand's borders along side the Mekong River Basin. The troubled economies of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar have a 'stand by army' of a million unemployment. Therefore, there is an intense labour push from these countries, resulting in both documented and undocumented migration without government intervention. Political instability in the country of origin, such as Myanmar, also created the migration wave across the border. Traditional ties between border areas in the Mekong region, including similarities in language and ethnic culture, together with cross border transportation networks, facilitate cross border migration of people in this region

The emergence of major migration movements has created problems, which the national government of Thailand finds difficulty to cope with. Migration to the Mekong River Basin and other places in Thailand has caused

health problems, increase of poverty, trafficking in women, and spreading of HIV Aids. The absence of protection mechanisms for migrants in the Mekong region in general and especially in Thailand gave rise to problems with the migrants, such as their understanding of the registration, the standards of wages and social welfare, and their lack of the original work permits

The Thai government tried to cope with these migration impacts by allowing undocumented migrants to work in specific jobs, attempting to create a framework for the legal entry for work, and preparing for cooperation with neighbouring countries in sending illegal migrants back to their countries of origin.

Recommendations

- ⇒ The governments of sending and receiving countries in the Mekong region need to develop clear, rights based, gender sensitive migrant policies and bilateral agreements that ensure a legal, safe, and transparent migration process that primarily protects migrant' rights, welfare and right to migrate legally.
- ⇒ Governments should develop and publicize transparent and just conditions of stay for migrant workers, in line with the labour demands of their national economies.
- ⇒ Governments and NGOs should recognize the manifestation of racial discrimination against migrant workers in government policies/practices and prevalent public/social attitudes and practices.
- ⇒ Governments should support and encourage NGOs to conduct baseline research into the prevalence of inter communal problems, discrimination and psycho social problems experienced by migrants.

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CHAPTER 4

Isan: The Indigenous People? A Response of Migration In Northeast Thailand

Betti Rosita Sari

I. Introduction

In recent decades, Thailand, especially in border towns and cities including those in northeast Thailand, has been the main destination of Lao, Burmese and Cambodian migrants. Disparities in the levels of economic development and wage levels between Thailand and Cambodia, the Lao PDR and Myanmar largely account for the desire of workers from the neighbouring countries to find a better job in Thailand. The Table below on selected economic and social indicators gives us a brief economic comparison between Thailand and its neighbouring countries, with Thailand as the most prosperous country among them.

Table 4.1
**Selected Economic and Social Indicators for Cambodia, Lao PDR,
 Myanmar and Thailand, 2003**

Indicator	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand
Population (1.000). 2004 ^a	14.482	5.787	50.101	63.763
Population growth rate (%). 2004 ^a	2.4	2.2	1.2	0.8
Average annual growth rate (%) of population aged 15-39 ^b				
1990-2000	3.2	2.7	2.0	1.0
2000-2010	3.0	2.9	1.3	0.0
Infant mortality rate (per 1.000 live births) ^a	71	86	81	20
Ratio of girls to boys in secondary education (%) ^a	52	67	98	99
Percentage urban. 2004 ^a	19	21	30	31
Per capita GNP (US dollars), 2003 ^c	177	317	351	2.238

Sources: ^a Economic and Social Commission for the Asia Pacific (2004). *ESCAP Population Data Sheet 2004*, Bangkok

^b United Nations (2003). *World Population Prospects, The 2002 revision, Vol. II. Sex and Age* (United Nations Publication, No. E/03, XIII.7.).

^c Philip Martin 'Policy synthesis paper: Enhancing national capacity on migration management in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Mongolia and Thailand'. Paper prepared for ILO, 6 July 2004.

From the Table above we know that the per capita Gross National Product of Thailand is six times that of Myanmar; seven times that of the Lao PDR, and twelve times that of Cambodia. Certainly the economic factors are not the only ones. The lack of social services, particularly education and health, uncertain economic conditions and political environments also induce people to migrate. Transportation and communication infrastructures also play an important role.

Most of the migrants are subsistence farmers who enter the waged labour market temporarily or permanently. The Asian Migrant Centre (AMC) estimates that there are currently at least 1.6 to 2 million migrants (excluding refugees) in Thailand. For many, migration to Thailand has become institutionalized by government policies, local officials, employers and private sector recruitment agents.

A total of 428,431 migrants had registered in March 2002, following the recent Thai government decision requiring undocumented migrants to register with the government. Among those registered, 348,747 were Burmese, 42,085 were Laotian, and 37,595 Cambodian. Many groups estimate that the number of migrants who did not register was much higher, perhaps double the number who registered or possibly more (Thailand CRT 2002).

The people of migrating ethnic groups were Khmer, Lao, Vietnamese, Cham, Burmese, Mon, Karen and Shan all from neighbouring countries. They migrate to Thailand for trade, to escape fighting and either natural disasters or those caused by humans, as well as to share some religious traditions and culture.

In northeast Thailand in the border areas between Thailand and Laos and traversed by the Mekong River has also become an enclave or transit point for migrants who want to enter Thailand legally or illegally. For example, Laotians generally do not use the entry point from Laos to Thailand, because there are numerous alternative land and river routes which can be easily taken and where there are no border fees.

The migration to Thailand in general, and especially to the northeast region had both economic and social impact. The flow of migration in and out of the northeast region brought about competition between the local people and the newcomers. Did the local people become the majority or the minority? What the response from the local people to the increase of migration in the northeast region was will be described below.

II. Who are the Isan People?

a. The History of the Isan People

The region first came under the influence of the Dvaravati culture and then of the Khmer empire. After the Khmer empire began to decline from the 13th century, Isan was dominated by the Lao Lan Xang kingdom. Thereafter the region was increasingly settled by Lao migrants. Siam held sway from the 17th century, and carried out forced population transfers from Laos to Isan in the 18th and 19th centuries. Franco Siamese treaties of 1893 and 1904 made Isan the frontier between Siam and French Indochina.

In the 20th century a policy of ‘Thaification’ promoted the incorporation of Isan as an integral part of Thailand and de emphasized the Lao origins of the population. This policy extended to the use of the name ‘Isan’ itself. The name is derived from that of ‘Isana’, a manifestation of Shiva as deity of the northeast. The name therefore reinforces the area’s identity as the northeast of Thailand, rather than as a part of the Lao world. Before the 1960s, the people of Thai Isan were simply labeled Lao and wrote their language in the Lao alphabet before the central government forcibly introduced the Thai alphabet and language in school. Most Isan people now, however, speak the Isan language which is closely related to the Lao language. (www.nationmaster.com)

b. The Ethnic Composition in Thailand and the place of Isan

The word Thai means free and this is important in understanding ethnic relations in Thailand. ‘Thai’ refers more to the state rather than a particular ethnic group and the word ‘Tai’ refers to an ethnic group in the Thai community. In fact, over the centuries, several different ethnic groups have lived relatively harmoniously in Thailand. The main ethnic group is the Central Thai

who make up about 50% of the population, or 30 million people.¹ The Central Thai are concentrated in the central region around the capital, Bangkok. The largest minority is the Isan, a Lao speaking group which populates the north-east region bordering the neighbouring country of Laos. The Isan make up about 23% of the population. The Yuan² are the third largest ethnic group located in the North, constituting 9% of the population. They are also a Lao speaking group.

The Lao (both the Isan and Yuan) are ethnically closely related to the Central Thai, both being members of the largest, Thai speaking linguistic group. However, while their languages (arguably dialects) are mutually intelligible, large cultural differences persist. In total, Thai speakers make up over 80% of the population. The Chinese make up fewer than just 8% of the population, although the Sino Thai (Thai speakers of Chinese descent) would make this figure closer to 11%. Thai Malays constitute only 2% of the population according to official figures, the Khmers another 2% and the Hill people 1%. There are also small populations of Vietnamese, Indians, Burmese, and Mons.

c. Isan People: Search for Identity

In their search for identity the village dwelling Isan people of rural north-east Thailand despite long exploitation, cultural barriers and hindrances placed in their way by the more urbane and class conscious Central Thai. The Central Thai with the 'Thaification' policy have over the last several decades taken the initiative and seized the opportunity to advance themselves and their resultant rank in the mainstream Thai society. This is evidenced by their emerging acceptance and significance on a national level in both socio economic

¹ Keyes, Charles F. 1997. 'Cultural Diversity and National Identity in Thailand,' in *Government Policies and ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, (eds.) MIT Press, Cambridge, from Joel S. Selway, 2004).

² Another term for the northern Thai is *Payap*

and political terms as they evolve from their agrarian upbringing to becoming the formally recognized labour class of Thailand.

As validation that the people of northeast Thailand are an oppressed and neglected people, one expatriate visitor to the region, Edward W. Mill, observed disparities between the northeast and other regions of Thailand in 1970

*.....one of the chief subjects of concern for the Thai government in recent years has been the economic and social disparities between the different regions of the country. The Northeastern region, traditionally an area of less economic opportunity, has received special focus. Where the per capita income for the Central region is around \$240 annually, for the Northeast it is only \$70 per annum. Soil and water condition, poor communications, and lack of adequate roads have contributed to this predicament.*³

The Isan people are engaged in a negotiation process about their relationships with Thai and Lao identities, relationships fraught with cultural, social and political ramifications. They are confused over whether to choose the Thai identity or Lao identity. Sometimes people cannot differentiate between the Thai and Lao people. The distinction between the Lao and the Thai ethnicities is often blurred. Although there are certain physical features which are prominent in the Lao, the distinctions are primarily ones of culture and language.

Sometimes the Isan people feel that they have become second class citizens in their own land over centuries, as a result of systematic discrimination against them. Many educated Isan people unconsciously think that if they hide their Lao identity of Isan, they will get advancement in Thailand, otherwise they will have to be prostitutes, taxi drivers, construction workers, and low skilled workers in Thailand. Thai people tend to label Lao or/and Isan people by seeing them as inferior to the Thai Chinese.

³Edward W. Mill, 'Thailand Looks to the Future,' *Le Democrate* Bangkok.23 Ma 1970 p. 2

d. Thai Nationalism

In reaction to the threat of Western colonial powers at the end of the 19th century, King Vajiravudh heavily promoted the concept of 'nation, religion, and king'.⁴ These three concepts characterized Thai nationalism and meant that Thai people were expected to speak Bangkok Thai. This was encouraged by the Thai government in order to emulate the cultural traits of Bangkok Thais and to follow the Buddhist religion.⁵ These ideas were channeled through the state led education system, the media, the bureaucracy, and the military. Furthermore, the Thai government firmly discouraged the use of the ethnic labels 'Lao', 'Khmer', 'Malay', for Thailand's people in favour of the one category 'Thai'.⁶

However, as Thailand has opened up over the past decade, there has been a resurgence in ethnic identity. The Lao identity of the northeast has been the most obvious, enjoying commercialization of its culture, like of the traditional music style Mor Lam, celebration of Lao food, and a transformation of the designation 'Lao' from derogatory to complimentary.

Thai nationalism or 'Thaification' was not only a way by the Thai government to embrace the Isan people to become a Thai people rather than Lao people, but also a government reaction to the communist threats that have arisen throughout many remote areas in the Isan region. The Thai government feared that communist subversion could take place in the impoverished region of Isan. Some people speculated that there was a hidden motivation in the government giving more attention to the welfare of the Isan people. They thought that the government had an objective for national security purposes, in the face of communist subversion, rather than for the rural Isan people's

⁴ Sardesi, D.R. *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*, Westview Press, Oxford, 1997.

⁵ Phongpaichit, Pasuk, et al. *Challenging Social Right and Exclusion: Rights and Livelihood in Thailand*. : ILO Publication, Geneva, 1996.

⁶ Jory, Patrick Multiculturalism in Thailand? Cultural and Regional Resurgence in a Diverse Kingdom. *Harvard Asia Pacific Review*. Winter Edition, 2000.

welfare as fellow citizens. Whatever the underlying motivational factor, various rural development programs were initiated by the Thai government.

The first of the major Thai government improvement programs specifically designed for the northeast came during 1961-1962, when the government proclaimed a Five Year Plan for the development of the region with the following objectives:⁷

1. Improve water control and supply;
2. Improve highway and communication systems;
3. Assist villages in increasing production and marketing;
4. Provide an environment for regional industrial development, including bringing electric power to rural areas;
5. Encourage private industrial and commercial development;
6. Promote community development, educational facilities, and public health programs at the local level.

The rural development assistance and modernization of the transportation and communication infrastructure in Isan areas had an important role in order to increase the Isan villagers' welfare. Networks of new roads were constructed to link isolated villages with main highways. These road systems provided easier access to Bangkok, where rural dwellers would eventually find their way to seek better paying employment opportunities. These programs were designed to diminish poverty and to cut communist infiltration in the northeast region. Another purpose was to attract the Isan people away from communism.

⁷ Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 15-16.

e. Isan: the Indigenous People of the Northeast Region?

According to Jary's dictionary of Sociology (1991) an indigenous people is any group originating and remaining in an area subject to colonization. North American Indians, Aborigines and Maoris are the examples of ethnic groups who inhabited lands before colonial expansion (in North America, Australia and New Zealand). Though they have retained their distinctive identities, such groups often appear to go through a sequence of defeat, despair and regeneration, if they have not been exterminated or their culture completely destroyed by the colonial power. The concept of 'indigenous group'⁸ is used by the UN to regain the lost rights of such groups.

The Isan are an ancient people, descended mainly from Lao, Mon and pre Cambodian Khmer ancestry. Although new origin theories have been postulated by revisionists, causing debate mainly among Thai historians, the progenitors of the Isan, together with their Thai and Lao cousins, probably migrated from Southern China or beyond, starting from the first millennium AD and before. This is the traditional view and most widely accepted, consistent with socio linguistic indicators and various ancient chronicles, including Chinese, Khmer, and Indian, as well as established Thai and Lao oral traditions and writings.

This study is not able to identify that the Isan people are the indigenous people of the region. This is because the Isan consist of various small ethnic groups which inhabit Thailand's northeastern region. However, the number of Isan is around twenty million and comprises one third of Thailand's total population, so it can be concluded that due to their large population, the Isan in this study are among the indigenous people in Thailand. Unfortunately, there is very limited research and sources concerned with the indigenous people of the Mekong River area in Thailand, particularly in northeast Thailand. This is one of the difficulties of our research; to further identify the indigenous people of the region.

⁸ A similar term is native people.

A few years ago, the Isan people were not free to enjoy the benefits of democracy as the name of their country may imply. Descended from Laotian Mon and Khmer stock, the Isan were indelibly steeped in ancient customs, traditions and beliefs. The Isan people survive from subsistence level rice farming. The crops normally planted in Isan were: wet land glutinous rice (the staple food of the area), field and regular rice, along with sugar cane, cassava root (tapioca), tobacco, cotton, watermelon etc. As rural farmers, northeastern Thai villagers raise domesticated animals (either for use or consumption) such as water buffalo, oxen, pigs, chickens and ducks. ⁹

The Isan traditionally lived from their family owned rice paddies, their lives under the influence of ancient belief systems and traditions passed down from generation to generation. Up to recently, they were ignorant of the modern world that had grown up around them. However, in the late 1960s and 1970s, conditions occurred whereby they began to undergo a socio economic transformation.

The momentum for change increased in the 1980s and 1990s as Thailand modernized and turned from being a predominantly agrarian oriented economy to an industrialized exporting economy. Living standards in the Isan region began to rise as northeasterners required work to support their newly discovered wants, tastes and lifestyles.

f. The Vietnam War and the Impact for Isan People

Traditionally an area of limited job opportunity, the 1960s witnessed the dawning of a period which would bring needed economic change and new found freedom for the Isan people of rural northeast Thailand. It held the prospect to improve their low standard of living and eventually their place in Thai society. Once considered helplessly ignorant, inferior and an embarrassment to their fellow countrymen because of their lowly station in Thai society.

⁹ Karnchanapee, *Thai Politics*, 7-8, 84.

The beginning of the Vietnam War (the early 1960s) brought with it an era of transition and socio economic change and unique opportunity for the Isan people. They have developed step by step into an integrated part of the Thai national economic system with an elaborated new road network and other technical infrastructure like dams and hydro power stations.

The Vietnam War, for all the suffering and turmoil it inflicted on the people of the Indo Chinese region (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) brought positive effects on the rural population of the Isan region. An era of job opportunities and socio economic change started, the war offered possibilities of occupation at different United States Air Force bases (USAF) and forced the Thai government to develop more interest in its border regions, especially the border areas between Thailand and Laos and Cambodia.

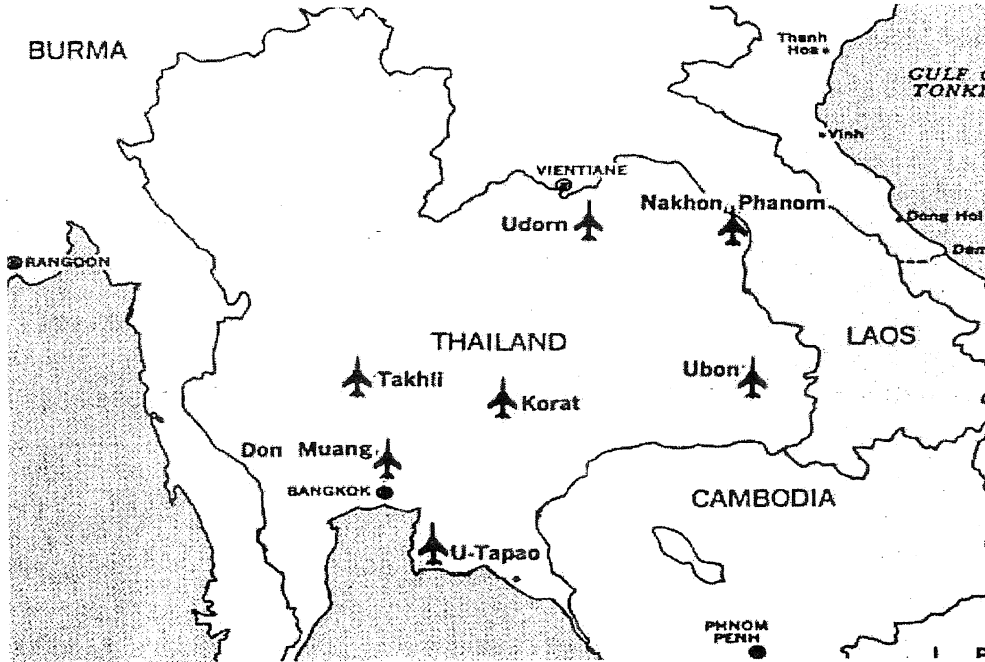
Since the Thai government faced internal instability due to the threat of communism on their border, it made a concessionary arrangement with the United States to build up forces in the Southeast Asian regions. In exchange for permission to set up air bases in northeast Thai regions, the US guaranteed Thailand's safety from external aggression, while increasing its level of military and developmental assistance programs.

Permitting the USAF bases in the Isan region afforded numerous benefits for Thailand and the Isan region in particular. These included the rural development assistance and modernization of transportation and communication infrastructure in the Isan region, all done at US expense. One major improvement was the construction of the Friendship Highway that spanned the entire region.

On the four US bases in Isan (Udon Thani, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon Ratchathani and Nakhon Ratchasima), thousands of Isan people found employment working for US construction companies, gaining valuable skills and experience with a foreign culture they would benefit from later. Other employment opportunities became available in the many and varied local businesses that sprang up to cater for the US servicemen. At the peak of the Ameri-

can presence in 1969 there were approximately 50,000 American servicemen based in Thailand, most of them in Isan (Myers 2004:8).

Figure 4.1
The USAF base map in Northeast Thailand



Source: <http://www.aznet.net/~rmyers/>

In 1975 the Vietnam War ended. All of the USAF bases were closed, the US personnel returned home by the end of the year, and the bases turned over to the Thai military. Thousands of Isan people were left unemployed. All that remained at each air base facility was quickly confiscated by Thai military leaders, who sold the whole business to opportunists at 100 % profit, who in turn dismantled and trucked everything to Bangkok for resale.

But in the same period, the economy took off in the Arab Oil States creating thousands of jobs in the construction and oil industries especially in Saudi Arabia. and the companies which were engaged with the Americans during the Vietnam War were able to negotiate profitable new contracts for Isan people in the Middle East (Chiengkul 1986). Many Thai labourers had to be coaxed to the Middle East by high incentives and attractive wages because of uncertainty and apprehension, since they had never before left their home country.

III. The International Migration from Isan

There are many factors that encourage the Isan people to migrate abroad. We can divide these into two factors: pull and push factors. The push factors are the uneven development that has widened the gap between the rich and the poor, combined with the rising consumer oriented values of the Thai people and the current unemployment problems. While the pull factors are the higher wages, good pay and better employment opportunities in another country, such as in the Middle East and newly industrialized countries in Asia.

The movements of Thai people who go abroad can be divided into three phases or periods:

1. Period One (1975-1981), migrants had many choices because there was a big need for labour in many countries. The salaries were high and employment recruitment was professional and fair. These were the 'golden days' of moving people abroad.
2. Period Two (1982-1987), the majority of Thai migrants went to the Gulf Region. However, when overseas employment was at its peak, exploitation of migrants started. Employment syndicates and 'middlemen' cheated poor people who looked for jobs abroad by charging them a high fee for job recruitment and sometimes failed to provide the promised employment. Some did travel but found bad jobs with low pay. Most of the workers, legal or illegal, were not fully protected by the labour laws.

3. Period Three started after 1987. The new trend of labour migration has been to newly industrialized Asian countries. The major receiving countries were Taiwan, Brunei, Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan. This new trend is called 'Asianisation'. The number of Thai workers going to Southeast Asian and East Asian countries has become higher than those going to the Gulf Region.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the number of Thai labourers in the Middle East had risen considerably and peaked in 1982 and continued until the end of the 2000s. Especially to Saudi Arabia (hence the acronym 'Saudon' from Udon going to Saudi). Although living and working conditions in the Middle East were harsh, wages were much higher than anything remotely comparable in Thailand.

In the 1990s the migration to Saudi Arabia decreased dramatically. The reason for that was not so much the so called 'jewellery scandals', the robbery of jewellery by a Thai citizen, but because of good pay and employment opportunities arising in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. So the movement of Isan labourers changed from Saudi Arabia to the booming economies in Asia. Most of these Thai labourers who work in the construction sector originate from the northeast (or from some regions in the north, Lampang). The Table below shows the Thai labour destinations abroad.

Table 4.2
Number of Thai Contract Labourers by Countries of Employment
1975–1993

<i>Countries</i>	<i>1975</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1985</i>	<i>1988</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>
Malaysia			1,861	1,238	607	2,087	2,473	2,151	11,358
Indonesia			86	150	286	204	146	115	
Singapore		723	3,387	5,262	10,692	6,464	9,488	11,337	14,171
Brunei			2,160	6,792	8,861	8,009	8,840	12,729	14,750
Hong Kong			6	3,988	6,662	7,908	8,431	7,255	5,102
Japan			359	3,942	3,826	4,210	6,263	6,748	5,588
Taiwan				109	168	111	2,237	10,938	66,891
China				28	78	76	134	0	
India				38	100	42	31	0	
Sri Lanka			8	46	23	46	6	0	
Other Asia			78	154	233	335	428	437	660
Total Asia	0	723	7,945	21,747	31,536	29,492	38,477	46,883	118,600
Middle East	984	20,761	61,659	92,175	87,748	27,478	21,354	22,839	17,019
Africa	0	0	67	123	180	100	128	0	0
USA & Saipan			3	3,240	3,864	3,731	2,167	978	706
Europe	0	0	2	893	1,056	1,119	1,007	935	898

Source: Year Book of Labour Statistics, Department of Labour; cited in Pracha 1994

From the Table above, we can see that to the Thai labour destination in the Middle East, from 984 people in 1975 increased sharply to 92,175 in 1988 because of the oil boom. But in 1990 the massive flow decreased from 27,478 people to finally at the end of 1994 become 17,019. On the other hand, the Thai labour destination changed from the Middle East to newly industrialized countries in Asia and increased from 31,536 in 1989 and had its peak in 1994 with a total of 118,600 .

Table 4.3
Number of Workers Deployed Overseas, by Sex and Occupation, Thailand, 2004

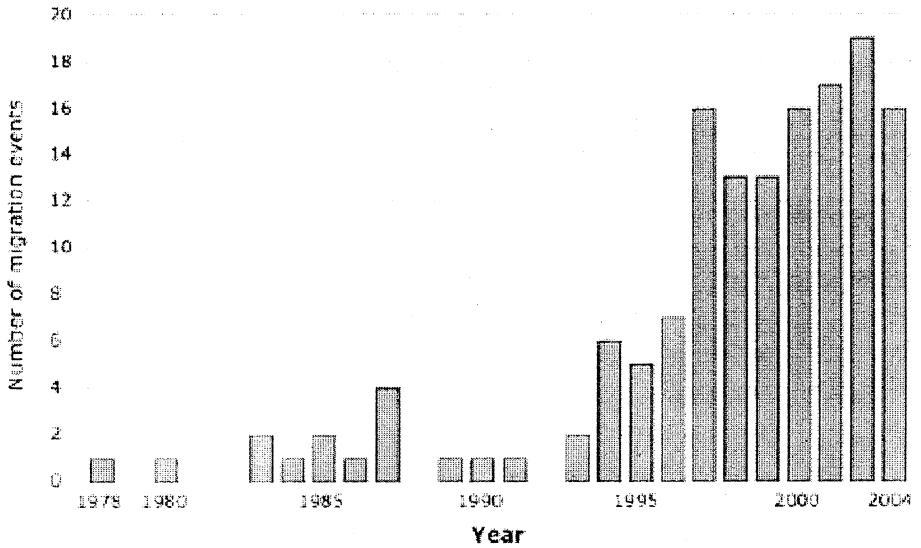
Occupation	Male	Female	Total
All Occupation	121.200	27.396	148.596
Professional, technical and related	3.568	1.437	5.005
Administration and Management	749	239	988
Clerical and related	674	481	1.155
Trade and Commerce	154	163	317
Service workers	5.458	9.435	14.893
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery	11.426	1.537	12.963
Manufacturing	9.502	1.388	10.890
Skilled workers, including in transport	56.162	10.272	66.434
General workers and others	33.507	2.444	35.951

Source: Data provided by Ministry of Labour, Bangkok, 2004

The Table above shows that because of low educational levels of Thai workers abroad, it is not surprising that they worked in relatively low skilled occupations. Less than half of the deployed workers were considered skilled

workers. Over one third of the women workers were service workers, mostly domestic servants, less than 5% were working in professional, technical and related fields; in administration or management or in clerical positions. The Thai migrants were from rural areas with low educational levels. They did not care about their education because their families were poor. Most of them had only primary school education. Figure 2 below shows the migration of Isan villagers abroad.

Figure 4.2
International Migration in Isan villages



Source: Sakdapolrak 2004

From the graphic above we can see that of migration from the northeast started in 1978 after the close of USAF air bases in some provinces in northeast Thai-

land and increased at the end of 1985, but the movement decreased in 1990 because of the Gulf War in Middle East, especially to Iraq – Iran, and then the migration had its peak in 1998-1999 after the economic crisis that hit South east Asian countries, including Thailand. The economic crisis brought great unemployment because many companies collapsed and a lot of employers themselves lost their jobs. So the people who could not find a job in their own country, went abroad to get a job in another country.

International migration is not a general phenomenon in all of Isan. There are some preconditions that have to be fulfilled to turn an Isan village into an out migration village. People need contacts with successful migrants of the first generation and they need money to pay job recruitment agents. In Udon Thani and Khon Kaen provinces one can find this type of village rather often whereas in poor regions in the southern districts of Isan hardly any international migration is to be found.

a. From Isan Village to Bangkok

The other destination of Isan people is Bangkok. This occurred before overseas employment became readily available, and traveling to work abroad became popular among the Isan. They go to Bangkok in order to work as construction workers, hotel maids, taxi drivers and some girls as sex workers. Two million Isan people are working in Bangkok. Many women from Isan are working in many Bangkok factories without certainty of receiving their salaries at the end of the month. They do not always have enough money for all family members and children are not able to go to school to pursue higher education.

b. The Economic and Social Impact of Isan Migration

The migration of Isan people abroad, like the Middle East and Asian countries and also neighbouring countries around the Mekong River have had both positive and negative impact. The positive impact of migration from the economic side, are the increase in wealth and a better life. Almost every villager or one of their relatives who migrates abroad has a Japanese

motorcycle or a pick up truck, television and refrigerator. They also start to consume prepared food, vegetables and goods which are bought in the city. On the social side they have new values and ideas for the future. They can plan what they want to do, for example, try to save their money, care about their children's education etc.

The migrants not only bring back money but also new technologies and cultural experiences. It is a way to 're skill' the poor and to counterbalance the agrarian bases of wealth in Isan. The international labour migration has integrated Isan into the international context. A closed society in the northeast has been forced rapidly to open up to a new economic and social culture.

On the other hand, the international migration of Isan people also has had a negative impact. From an economic point of view the most active and innovative population moves out and only the old and the very young stay in the villages. This happened because they have physical obstacles to find good jobs in the cities or in other countries. They are not strong enough to work or compete with other migrants, so they feel better if they stay at home and work on the farm and take care of their houses and assets.

After returning home, many migrants run into debt or lose their earnings abroad faster than they had earned them. They spend their money on gambling or drinking. Women at home receive a significant amount of money for the first time in their lives and sometimes they look for new husbands. Another negative impact is that a continuing migration cycle turns over a traditional or original life style into a new life style. Some migrants often lose their social roots in the villages because the duration of stay in the new cities or in another country is relatively long and usually influenced by a different social environment and life style.

Thais working overseas may also encounter a number of difficulties with their employment conditions or remuneration. Sometimes, employers disregard the contracts, so that the workers receive lower wages and fewer benefits. Workers may be laid off before the end of their contracts and the employer

may refuse to pay the transportation costs for them to return home. Wages may be paid at a lower rate, delayed or not paid at all. Working conditions may not conform to the employment contract or local labour laws. Employers may transfer workers to other employers in violation of the employment and local laws. Employers may not provide the appropriate benefits or health care services when workers fall ill (IOM 2003b :173-174).

In rural areas, there is a significant impact, especially in the agricultural sector which is the dominant sector in the Isan region and which decreased sharply. The share of the agricultural sector in GRP Northeast in 2000 declined to 21.9 % from 29.5 % in 1990. This happened because of the shortage of labourers working in the field. Most of these productive villagers¹⁰ moved to urban areas to get jobs and only the unproductive villagers stayed in the villages. For them working in the field meant sweaty work in a dirty place to receive low wages. Only a small area of the potential land area is actually utilized for farming and farming is not interesting anymore to the villagers. They prefer to find good jobs with better wages in an urban centre.

Besides the shortage of farm labourers, the land is often difficult to cultivate because the soil is highly acidic, saline and infertile from overuse and also periodical droughts as well as sandy soils with substantial salt deposits. Nevertheless the flat terrain of the plateau is often flooded in the rainy season. Difficult natural conditions have forced people to combine different jobs, for example, temporary employment in Bangkok or outside the country with seasonal agricultural engagement (in rice growing, fishing, harvesting sugar cane etc).

On the cultural side, the effect of migration is *trans ethnicity* in this region. The definition of trans ethnicity here can be: the majority of local people in one region becoming the minority group. This happens because newcomers come to this region and become superior and dominant.

¹⁰ Productive villagers in here mean men or women who are potentials to work, it usually ranging from 18-55 years old. Unproductive age is the antonyms.

For example, in Thai society, the social process since the post colonial period shows that the ethnic Tai, once the majority in this locale have become the minority, like other groups, while the Kinh people have become the majority. These ethnic people had to face the situation in accommodation, incorporation and resistance under the circumstances to balance their demand in centre periphery relations in the new multicultural communities and the construction of a new society and nationality in the politics of recognition of identity and the play of double identity. The phenomena in the field revealed that ethnicity is not a static state but can be adjusted and reshaped through the historical experience of society in the procedure of, so called, *trans ethnicity* (Pattana Kitiarsa 2005).

This trans ethnicity also occurred in the community of the Isan people in the northeast region. The increase of Chinese migration from the Yunnan Province and Hmong migrants from the Lao PDR¹⁰, and also other ethnic groups from the neighbouring countries in the Mekong Region caused the Isan people to move to the periphery and the newcomers gradually replaced the Isan people. As the minority in their own region, the Isan people sometimes have to accept other values or culture brought by the newcomers who dominate in that region. The Isan people have to adopt the dominant cultural pattern, even though this new culture is inappropriate to their own culture and values. Cultural assimilation also happened in this region because of inter marriage between the locals and the newcomers.

IV. Conclusion

Transnational migration is an old and well known phenomenon in Thailand. For many centuries, the country has witnessed foreigners coming to stay on Thai soil and native people leaving for other lands. These flows of migration

¹¹ Quincy report that by 1988 more than 130.000 Hmong had crossed the border from Lao PDR to Thailand because of fighting in Lao PDR.

have an impact on the identity of indigenous people in northeast Thailand, the border areas between Thailand and Laos. We can call the people here Thai Isan or Lao Isan, we cannot differentiate between them, because they have similar physical features, the same hair, skin and clothes. The distinction is primarily one of the culture and language.

Regardless of the identities, shared by both male and female migrants, identity is not a barrier for migrants with limited education from an agricultural background in the countryside, who primarily take their opportunities to invest and thus risk their future to cross international borders to seek a better income and life chances.

Migration also brings some consequences to their economic and social lives. The impact is the increase of wealth and a better life enjoyed by the migrants. The migrants bring back money for the families in rural areas and also bring new technologies and cultural experience to 're skill' the poor and improve the abilities of villagers. From all the description above, one lesson that we should take is that migration should not destroy our original culture, values and social roots.

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CHAPTER 5

ETHNICITY AND COMMERCE IN THE THAI MEKONG BASIN AREA

Suribidari and Betti Rosita Sari

I. Introduction

The Mekong River carves a common border between Thailand and the Lao PDR for 900 km (64%) of their 1400 kilometres common border, starting near Chiang Saen where the borders of Thailand, Burma and the Lao PDR meet.

The basin covers about 183,000 square kilometres or more than a third of Thailand. It lies mostly in Thailand's northeastern provinces, collectively known as Thai Isan (89.5%) together with a small part of its eastern region (2.2%) and also in its northern tip (8.3%). This is the second largest watershed area among the four Lower Mekong Basin countries, covering about 30% of the lower basin, but providing only about 8% of the total Mekong River water. At a broader level, it represents 23% of the 795,000 square kilometres of the Greater Mekong Basin which includes Yunnan and eastern Burma.

The northern section of the Thai Mekong Basin Area (TMBA) is drained by the Kok and the Ing rivers which flow into the Mekong River. This section is typified by north south tending mountains and hills separated by long valleys and wide, level and often swampy intermountain zones. The northeast is dominated by the Khorat Plateau which is a saucer shaped basin that tilts to the southeast, guiding the Mun-Chi River system into the Mekong River. The southern edge of this plateau ends abruptly in an escarpment to separate it from the Tonle Sap sub basin. In the northern part of the plateau, separated by the Phu Phan Range, the Songkhram Oon and the northward flowing rivers near Vientiane provide drainage into the Mekong River. In the eastern section of the basin in Thailand, the land drains into the Tonle Sap system in Cambo-

dia instead.

About 37% of Thailand's population or 21 million people live in the basin region (Table 5.1). This population is unevenly distributed, however, with the highest density in the northeast (equivalent to national average) followed by the north (lower than national average) and lastly the east.

Table 5.1
TMBA Provinces - Area and Population

No.	Province	Area		Population		
		Total ¹	Basin ^{3*}	Total (1994) ²	Total (1992) ²	Basin ⁴
1	Chiang Mai	20,107.06	2,718.00	1,547,085	1,530,779	152,199
2	Chiang Rai	11,678.37	11,712.20	1,251,581	1,229,415	1,141,962
3	Phayao	6,335.06	3,828.70	513,471	512,473	436,875
	North	169,644.29		11,912,719		
4	Amnat Charoen*	3,161.25	2,896.78	350,530	--	na
5	Buri Ram	10,321.89	9,986.20	1,445,053	1,417,329	1,417,329
6	Chaiyaphum	12,778.29	12,871.86	1,083,543	1,086,331	1,086,331
7	Kalasin	6,946.75	7,090.92	955,125	925,254	925,254
8	Khon Kaen	10,885.99	11,124.61	1,678,546	1,662,512	1,662,512
9	Loei	11,424.61	12,454.53	617,919	595,444	595,444
10	Maha Sarakham	5,291.68	5,284.10	908,281	869,118	869,118
11	Mukdahan	4,339.83	3,947.60	312,202	299,280	299,280
12	Nakhon Phanom	5,512.67	4,395.80	682,627	649,933	649,933
13	Nakhon Ratchasima	20,493.96	20,284.08	2,463,870	2,467,366	2,467,366
14	Nong Bualumphoo*	3,859.09	5,664.00	472,203	--	na
15	Nong Khai	7,332.28	7,362.30	866,046	836,693	836,693
16	Roi Et	8,299.45	8,314.45	1,282,947	1,238,930	1,238,930
17	Sakon Nakhon	9,605.76	8,853.00	1,048,901	1,014,343	1,014,343
18	Si Sa Ket	8,839.98	8,562.91	1,384,958	1,335,487	1,335,487
19	Surin	8,124.06	8,276.32	1,330,022	284,138	284,138
20	Ubon Ratchathani	15,744.84	17,517.47	1,679,867	1,945,179	1,945,179

21	Udon Thani	11,730.30	10,792.35	1,441,971	1,846,154	1,846,154
22	Yasothon	4,161.66	4,061.89	537,770	528,277	528,277
	Northeast	168,854.34		20,542,381	19,001,768	
23	Chanthaburi	6,338.00	1,303.00	464,155	455,158	23,643
24	Srakaew*	7,195.14	2,847.00	499,222	na	165,357
	East	36,502.50		19,037,319		
	Total TMBA		192,150.07[†]	24,817,895	21,198,814	20,921,804
	Whole Kingdom	513,115.05		59,095,419	57,293,998	

Notes: * Nong Bualumphoo, Amnat Charoen and Srakaew provinces were created in 1994, with the division of Udon Thani, Ubon Ratchathani and Prachinburi, respectively. The 1992 population figures for Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani cover populations of Nong Bualumphoo and Amnat Charoen as all the four lie within the TMBA. Similar figures are not given for Srakaew since the new Prachinburi as well as a portion of Srakaew now lies outside the TMBA.

† For area figure discrepancies, see explanation in the Methodology section.

‡ The TMBA area value is higher than the NESDB value quoted in Footnote 3 earlier. The discrepancy originates in the NESDB report on the Mae Khong sub basin (NESDB, 1994a), which gives two different figures of 57,422 km² and 60,927.2 km². The difference of 3505.2 km² in the two values is the difference between the value above and in Footnote 3.)

Source: Pednekar, 1997. He compiled it from: 1. Royal Thai Survey Department; 2. National Statistical Office; 3. Compiled from the NESDB Studies on the five sub basins in the TMBA (NESDB, 1994a-e); 4. Except for the northeast, compiled from NESDB studies (NESDB, 1994a, d and e).

II. Historical Background

There are 255 million people living in the Mekong River sub region (ADB, 2004), about three fourths live in rural areas and survive on subsistence or semi subsistence agriculture. These communities face structural impediments that have made it difficult to achieve sustained economic growth. With the onset of peace in the 1990s, they experienced rapid changes and improvements in living standards and conditions, and there has been a gradual shift from subsistence agriculture to more diversified economic activities.

The people of this region vary in ethnic composition, religious affiliation, and linguistic usage. Their cultural heritage though common in many basic respects has a considerable degree of differentiation. These multiethnic groups in this region consist of the ethnic Khmers of Cambodia, the Lao of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Burmans of Myanmar, the Thai of Thailand, the Kinh of Vietnam, and the Han of the Yunnan Province in the People's Republic of China. Approximately 200 ethnic minority groups live in remote mountain areas, mostly along shared national borders. The description of the ethnicity in the Lower Mekong can be seen in the Table below.

Table 5.2
The Ethnic Diversity in the Lower Mekong Countries

Country	Ethnic Diversity
Cambodia	Dominant ethnic group is the Khmer (90%); rest of the population comprises Vietnamese, Chinese and the remaining 4% that includes approximately 36 ethnic minorities of which the largest are the Cham people. About 1% of the population is classified as hill tribe groups, located mostly in the north east, including Tampuan, Kui, Jarai, Kroenung and Phnong.
China	The dominant ethnic group for China as a whole is the Han (Chinese) accounting for 92% of the population. 1990 census data registered 66 million people as a member of 55 recognized minority nationalities. Yunnan recognizes 25 ethnic minority nationalities, which account for a third of the province's population.
Lao PDR	'Lao' 99% comprised of 47 different ethnic groups which can be loosely aggregated into 4 ethnolinguistic families: Tia Kadai 66% (corresponds closely with what was formerly officially known as Lao Loum), Austro-Asiatic 23% (corresponds roughly to Lao Theung), Hmong-Yao 7%, Sino-Tibetan 3% (the latter 2 groups corresponding to Lao Soung).
Myanmar	Myanmar recognizes as many as 135 different ethnic groups each members of the Mon Khmers, Tibetan Bamars or the Thai Shans. The current Myanmar administration aggregates the 135 into 8 'groups of races: Bamars (or Burmese, the most populous), Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhin, Shan.
Thailand	A standard official breakdown says Thai 54%, Lao 28%, Chinese 11%, Malay 4%, highland minority groups 1.2% including Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu, Mien, Akha, Lua, Htin and Kamu.

Vietnam	Vietnamese (Kinh) 88%. Chinese 2%, Thai 2%. Apart from the Kinh majority, there are 53 minority groups spread across the country, but located mainly in the mountains. (Ethnic classification approaches have differed between countries. For example, the Chinese in Vietnam were always classified separately, whereas Chinese in Thailand were from the outset classified as 'Thai')
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Sources: Asian Development Bank (ADB 2001b), Government of the Union of Myanmar, Kunming Centre for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge, Chang Pao-Min (2000) and Charles Keyes (2002). Social Challenge for the Mekong Region, Chiang Mai University, 2003, p: 43.

The ethnic composition of the inhabitants is indicative of the many centuries of migration into or across peninsular Southeast Asia. Newcomers have tended to push earlier inhabitants into more remote and less attractive locations in a given area. Many different minorities now found in the Lower Mekong states contribute to the problems of government. A high proportion of illiteracy, serious problems in health and sanitation, and a shared low standard of living are just a few problems facing the government. Many inhabitants of the watersheds along the Mekong River and its tributaries live on a combination of subsistence agriculture, hunting and limited trade in forest products.

Generally, the majority of resource users in the Mekong region are farmers and fishers who depend directly on the diverse resource base. The livelihoods of large numbers of people have been, and will continue to be, affected by modernization, such as the construction of dams, roads and by resource extraction activities, including logging. In Thailand, the one country in the region where local people have something of a voice in such matters, there has been widespread and increasingly strident protest over large scale development that affects livelihoods. The Pak Mun Dam is a case in point. A number of differentiated resource interests are represented within the broad category of farmers and fishers.

In summary, the total population of the TMBA region in 1992 was estimated at about 21 million (Table 5.1), or 36% of the national population. Average density for the basin was between 108 to 115 people/km², about the

same as the national average. The population was, however, unevenly distributed, with the northeast having the highest density of 112 people/km², the north 95 people/km² and the eastern portion comprising parts of Srakaew and Chanthaburi with the lowest of 45 people/km². Given the data discrepancies in area and population, the density figures should be considered broad approximations only.

Human resource development in Thailand has somewhat lagged behind the national economic growth. In 1991 at the beginning of the 7th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1991-96), only 52% of those who finished primary school went on to secondary school. Even though the transition rate increased to well over 80%, and reached 100% by 1996, by the year 2000, over 72% of the Thai labour force, it was predicted, would still have only primary education or less (TDRI 1994).

In terms of tertiary level training in areas of natural resource management, Thailand has relatively better facilities than its Mekong River Basin neighbours.

Isan (Northeastern Thai) Region

The Mekong forms a large part of the border between Thailand and Laos to the north and east of Isan, while the south of the region borders on Cambodia. The Mekong's main Thai tributary is the Mun River, which rises in the Khao Yai National Park near Khorat and runs east, joining the Mekong in Ubon Ratchatani Province. The other main river in Isan is the Chi River, which flows through central Isan before turning south to meet the Mun in the Sisaket Province. The smaller Loei and Songkhram rivers are also tributaries of the Mekong, the former flowing north through the Loei Province and the latter flowing east through Udon Thani, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, and Nong Khai provinces.

Isan's total population in 2000 was 20,825,000 people. Forty per cent (40%) of the population was concentrated in the provinces of Khorat, Ubon

Ratchathani, Udon Thani and Khon Kaen. These provinces surround the four major cities of the same names; as of 2000, their populations were: Udon Thani 220,493; Khorat 204,391; Khon Kaen 141,034; and Ubon Ratchathani 106,552. However, in 1996 only 6.3% of the region's population lived in municipal areas. Khon Kaen was the most urbanised province (with 12.4% in municipal areas), and Roi Et the least (2.8%). Thus, the population was still largely rural, but concentrated around the urban centres. (www.nationmaster.com).

The Isan people have for centuries cultivated generally inhospitable land in less than favourable conditions as subsistence level agrarians and pastoral hunter gatherers whose ancestors inhabited the area before them. Among the crops normally planted in Isan are glutinous (sticky) wetland rice and regular rice. The main crops of the area are sugar cane, cassava root (tapioca), tobacco, cotton, watermelons and other various locally consumed items and commodity products. Besides working as cultivators the farmers also have some animals like pigs, chickens, ducks and fish.

The northeast is heavily dependent on the agricultural sector, which 20 years ago accounted for half of the region's gross production. Now, its contribution has decreased to 20%. Production has been adapted more into the commercial and service sectors. The industrial sector has expanded, but cannot be described as having a major role in the economy. The following Table shows the contribution of the Gross Regional Product (GRP) by sector in 1980-2000.

Table 5.3
Gross Regional Product by Sector in the Northeast, 1980-2000

Sector	1980 (%)	1990 (%)	2000 (%)
Agriculture	45.3	29.5	21.9
Crops	37.2	21.1	16.5
Livestock	6.5	4.0	2.4
Fisheries	0.9	0.4	0.5
Forestry	0.7	0.2	0.2
Agricultural services	n.a.	1.9	0.9
Simple agri. processing products	n.a.	1.8	1.3
Non agricultural sector	54.7	70.5	78.1
Mining and quarrying	0.8	0.3	0.9
Manufacturing	7.1	8.0	16.1
Construction	5.8	7.9	4.1
Electricity and water supply	0.8	1.5	2.4
Transportation and communication	4.2	4.1	6.7
Whole sale and retail trade	18.6	21.5	17.9
Banking, insurance and real estate	1.8	2.7	3.0
Ownership of dwellings	1.3	5.5	5.3
Public administration and defense	4.1	6.3	7.0
Services	10.1	12.7	14.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NESDB, 2002

The nonagricultural sector grew rapidly and became more important, while the agricultural sector showed minor changes. The share of the agricultural sector in the GRP in 2000 declined to 21.9%, compared with 45.3% in 1980 and 29.5% in 1990. There were a number of reasons for this. The sandy soil on the flat land of the plateau with poor water retention, deforestation

which reduced the forest cover in that area, and workers commonly working in agriculture during the wet season and turning to non farm activities during the dry season. Besides that, many farmers still use buffaloes rather than tractors.

The other sector was the nonagricultural sector, which increased rapidly to 78.1% in 2000 from 54.7% in 1980, while the trade sector decreased from 21.5% in 1990 to 17.9% in 2000. Sectors that increased were the transportation and the communication sectors, the manufacturing sector and the service sector.

III. Commerce, Inter ethnic and Regional Relations

Ethnicity: definition

Ethnicity refers to a shared culture that has a range of distinctive behavioural and possibly linguistic features, which are passed on through socialization from one generation to another (David Crystal 1993).

Ethnic Groups

An ethnic group is a group of people with characteristics in common that distinguish them from most other people of the same society. Members of one ethnic group may have ties of ancestry, culture, language, nationality, religion or a combination of these characteristics. Most ethnic groups are minority groups with at least some values or institutions that differ from those of the larger society. Since ancient times, ethnic groups have resulted from migration, war, slavery, changed political boundaries and other major movements of people. In some countries, the ethnic identification of a person may affect both social standing and access to power. Ethnic groups provide their members with a sense of belonging. They can bring variety and richness to a society by introducing their own ideas and ways of life. Some members of ethnic groups prefer to live with members of the same group. But ethnic groups that

cling to their old values and customs can also threaten national unity. In many parts of the world, neighbouring ethnic groups dislike and distrust one another (Thomas F. Pettigrew 1993).

The Tai People

The forebears of the modern Thai were Tai speaking people living south of the Chang Jiang (Yangtze River) on the mountainous plateau of what is now the Chinese province of Yunnan. Early Chinese records (the first recorded Chinese reference to the Tai is dated sixth century B.C.) document the Tai cultivating wetland rice in valley and lowland areas. During the first millennium A.D., before the emergence of formal states governed by Tai speaking elites, these people lived in scattered villages drawn together into *muang*, or principalities. Each *muang* was governed by a *chao*, or lord, who ruled by virtue of personal qualities and a network of patron client relationships. Often the constituent villages of a *muang* would band together to defend their lands from more powerful neighbouring people, such as the Chinese and the Vietnamese.

Table 5.4

Ethnic minority groups in the Mekong Region (by country)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of ethnic groups</i>	<i>Population (million people)</i>		<i>% Total</i>
		<i>Minorities</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Cambodia	36	0.31	9.45	3.3
Lao PDR	47	2.01	4.88	41.2
Myanmar	>12	>6.8	46.55	14.6
Thailand	10	0.79	58.27	1.4
Vietnam	53	9.88	73.81	13.4
Yunnan	25	13	42	31
Total	183	32.79	234.96	14

Source: Derived from various texts (Ma Yin 1989, World Resources Institute 1994, Kampe, 1997), the data include some ethnic minority people not resident on the uplands.

In the past, the government took the position that all Tai people should be accorded all the rights, privileges, and opportunities that went with being a citizen. In the 1980s, members of non Tai minority groups were afforded similar rights, and efforts were made to incorporate them into the Ekkalak Thai. The higher a person's aspirations, however, the more thoroughly he or she needed to assimilate into the Central Thai culture. Thus, most of the representatives of the government were either from Central Thailand or had absorbed the perspectives of that region.

By law, the Central Thai dialect was taught in all government schools, and all who aspired to government positions, from village headman up, were expected to master Central Thai. Nonetheless, because local dialects remained the medium of communication in schools, markets, and provincial government offices, differences between the Central Thai and other dialects survived. The Central Thai tended to see other Thai as both different and inferior. In turn, the latter saw the Central Thai as exploiters. Inevitably, many non Central Thai sometimes felt inferior to the Central Thai, who represented progress, prestige, wealth and national power.

Moreover, at one time, the government had often ignored the needs of the outlying regions. Neglect, corrupt administration and heavy taxation perhaps affected the Thai Lao more than others. Until King Mongkut established central control through administrators in the nineteenth century, the Thai Lao region was governed by local Lao princes who were really vassals of the Thai monarch. Corvee (forced) labour and oppressive taxation supported a rapidly expanding Thai court, bureaucracy, and military. Peasant revolts erupted and were suppressed. Real social and economic changes did not begin until the reign of King Bhumibol who in the early 1960s was assisted in these efforts by Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, a northeasterner. In the 1960s, programs of community and agricultural development were coupled with counterinsurgency measures; these efforts continued into the 1980s with mixed results.

The problems had accumulated over time, and solutions were difficult. Whether the tensions and the potential for conflict between the central gov-

ernment and the Thai Lao could be understood solely or even largely in ethnic terms was questionable. Besides ethnicity and regionalism, a number of other factors required consideration, including the inadequacy of most economic reform measures and the insensitivity or repressiveness of administrators. The Central Thai lack of understanding of social forms and practices different from their own contributed to the mishandling of local situations and the imposition of so called reforms without full consideration of the effects of these changes on the local people. The Thai Lao had a close cultural and linguistic relationship with the people of Laos that was further strengthened by trade and kinship. Laos was viewed by many northeasterners as their home country.

Between the Central Thai and the Thai Lao Outlying Region (TMBA): Trade and Economic Activities

The Thai economy has been linked to the world trading system since the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1868. Consistent efforts for planned economic development, however, began in the early 1960s, when the first National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) was drawn up. In the three and a half decades since then, Thailand has moved from being one of the world's poorer economies to one of its fastest growing ones. Between 1960 and 1980, the GDP growth was higher than 7% a year, and reached a record 13.2% in 1988. In 1995 GDP was expected to grow by 8.4-8.6%.

Agriculture was the main engine of Thailand's economic growth during the 1970s, fuelled by the buoyant foreign markets and agricultural expansion with the increasing people/land ratio. During that period Thailand was probably the only country with increasing agricultural land per capita (Siamwalla 1991). The land frontier, however, began to decline in the 1980s after having peaked in the 1970s and agriculture was slowly replaced by manufacturing, first labour intensive, then in the early 1990s moving to medium high technology intensity (TDRI 1994). Agriculture's share in the GDP dropped from 27% in 1970 to about 10% at present, while that of industry went up from 25% to 39%.

Only a trickle of that growth has reached the TMBA directly. First, the agricultural economy was, and is still, based on the wet rice cultivation of the Central Plains. Cassava and maize, grown mostly in the northeast and exported primarily to the European Community (EC), contributed marginally to the national economy. The industrial growth that followed was centred on Bangkok and its surrounding areas. Only recently has this growth steadily moved along the eastern corridor as a result of a 'spill-over' effect, and can be expected to further strengthen the fledgling industrial development in Korat and Khon Kaen. The most significant effect of the national economic growth on the TMBA, particularly the northeast, has been labour migration (virtually all of manual labour) to Bangkok and abroad (for more on this look at the chapter written by Lamijo and the chapter by Betti Rositasari). The vast surplus agricultural workforce, unemployed after the people/land ratio stopped growing in the 1970s, was easily absorbed by the rapidly growing industrial, construction and service sectors as unskilled or semi skilled labour.

Table 5.5 shows the differences in the economies of Bangkok and other regions. Per capita GRP (Gross Regional Product) is the highest for Bangkok, and the lowest for the northeast, followed by the TMBA region. In Bangkok, manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, banking, insurance and real estate, and services, are the four largest contributors of value added to GPP, while for the TMBA, agriculture and trade contribute the most (Table 5.6).

TABLE 5.5
Gross Regional Product (GRP): 1989 and 1993 (at 1988 constant prices)

Region	Year	Agriculture							Mining	Mfg	Constr	Elec	Tpt	WhlRet	Bnk/Ins	House	Publ	Sew	GRP	Popl ¹	GRP/cap ¹
		Crops	Livest	Fish	Forest	Ag.w	Agpro	Total													
North	1989	41,767	5,625	445	1,103	3,465	3,144	55,948	7,048	14,165	11,109	3,220	9,040	31,680	6,439	11,013	9,337	26,728	183,327	10,677	17,338
	1993	36,012	6,611	646	89	3,100	3,611	52,669	11,572	17,819	15,485	4,587	13,152	39,259	12,871	12,292	11,382	30,543	222,131	11,143	19,931
North-east	1989	44,725	8,327	932	393	2,479	4,380	61,206	568	16,776	14,899	3,244	7,582	45,661	5,397	12,352	13,210	27,754	208,839	19,068	10,953
	1993	44,111	10,257	977	21	2,198	4,481	62,063	2,899	20,615	18,745	4,688	12,906	38,150	11,299	12,768	16,103	35,546	253,586	30,052	12,746
South	1989	37,279	2,926	13,826	4,739	429	7,011	66,360	2,243	8,464	8,394	2,960	10,165	26,111	4,987	5,837	6,833	20,262	162,916	7,335	22,156
	1993	46,892	3,387	22,829	2,336	396	9,089	84,208	1,791	11,719	11,869	4,546	12,947	31,277	8,305	6,386	8,865	25,086	207,511	7,972	26,005
East	1989	15,216	5,164	5,722	207	1,101	1,565	28,975	11,430	45,927	8,368	4,539	7,312	17,838	4,998	4,423	3,820	27,645	165,995	3,417	48,374
	1993	14,669	4,586	5,158	43	874	1,778	27,108	16,042	79,866	11,107	9,987	10,247	22,693	8,298	5,742	4,746	35,002	230,960	3,693	62,540
West	1989	15,656	1,816	1,462	2,015	1,307	1,164	23,420	1,605	15,371	4,392	1,838	6,526	14,811	2,892	3,856	3,338	8,803	86,842	3,217	26,955
	1993	14,141	2,303	1,870	1,483	1,235	1,462	22,694	1,568	19,316	5,881	2,894	5,805	18,249	4,027	4,412	3,970	8,264	97,079	3,362	28,875
Central	1989	12,444	2,121	240	10	949	644	16,409	4,908	15,707	2,545	2,845	2,766	11,435	2,091	3,246	3,631	7,544	73,128	2,735	26,826
	1993	9,058	2,300	299	2	838	724	13,280	6,375	30,954	3,810	4,577	4,384	14,953	3,824	3,719	4,267	7,757	97,921	2,840	34,479
BHR	1989	7,944	2,454	5,278	0	226	8,818	24,720	425	351,221	45,846	23,393	85,382	149,562	53,452	17,487	17,109	99,385	867,983	8,773	98,938
	1993	7,343	2,421	4,768	0	167	11,708	26,456	466	575,080	89,175	31,694	127,800	219,372	133,825	22,228	19,689	120,527	1,366,291	9,530	143,518
TMBX ²	1989	51,208	9,539	1,454	510	2,843	4,991	70,354	664	18,206	16,327	3,769	9,139	51,751	6,980	14,574	14,645	31,463	298,364	30,966	11,369
	1993	51,006	11,166	1,929	22	2,521	5,209	71,883	2,971	23,141	20,771	5,603	15,442	65,859	13,806	15,389	18,047	39,703	292,392	22,157	13,205
Whole Kingdom	1989	175,031	28,452	27,956	8,487	9,937	36,726	276,569	28,227	467,632	95,354	42,259	128,734	296,919	80,426	58,213	57,277	218,122	1,749,953	55,213	31,695
	1993	174,817	32,124	36,197	3,974	8,817	32,832	288,761	40,713	755,489	156,072	62,973	187,240	403,933	182,449	67,600	69,441	262,527	2,477,278	38,384	42,286

Legend: Agricultural subsectors include: Crops, Livestock, Fisheries, Forestry, Agricultural services, and Simple agricultural products processing. Mining = Mining and quarrying; Mfg = manufacturing; Constr = construction; Elec = electricity and water supply; Tpt = transportation and communications; Whl/Ret = wholesale and retail trade; Bnk/Ins = banking, insurance and real estate; House = ownership of dwellings; Publ = public administration and defence; Serv = services; Popl = population; GRP = Gross Regional Product (GDP for the whole Kingdom).

Note: ¹ See Appendix III for the list of provinces in each region. ² Population figures are in '000. ³ GRP/cap figures are in baht. ⁴ TMBX figures are as in Table 3.

Source: National Statistical Office.

TABLE 5.6

TMBA Provinces: Gross Provincial Product (GPP) in 1989 and 1993; (at 1988 Constant Prices)

Region	Year	Agriculture						Mining	Mfg	Constr	Elec	Tpt	WhlRet	Bnk/Ins	House	Publ	Serv	GRP	Pop F	GRP/cap ²	
		Crops	Livest	Fish	Forest	Ag sv	Ag pro														Total
Burman	1989	2,710	576	36	0	122	297	3,741	84	1,361	951	132	350	3,212	282	881	1,454	13,377	1,386	9,651.82	
	1993	3,074	840	29	0	120	298	4,362	121	1,570	905	208	568	4,118	548	861	1,899	16,120	1,418	11,367.90	
Chhaya	1989	3,021	361	32	43	228	275	3,960	1	1,764	671	146	327	2,382	236	716	1,377	12,141	1,017	11,935.21	
	1993	3,249	552	39	5	202	281	4,327	3	2,271	723	201	511	3,015	435	766	1,389	14,364	1,083	13,263.17	
Kashmir	1989	2,251	300	77	10	106	214	2,958	30	293	573	126	209	1,949	191	578	1,218	8,678	862	10,067.32	
	1993	2,208	364	70	1	94	216	2,953	4	337	614	240	440	2,533	336	579	1,837	10,612	920	11,535.28	
Khon	1989	3,254	611	99	7	186	369	4,526	68	2,966	2,097	517	1,085	4,235	792	1,067	1,457	3,863	22,675	1,627	13,936.44
	1993	2,556	806	89	0	168	369	3,989	1,088	4,169	3,017	724	1,991	5,446	2,088	1,089	1,500	4,115	29,216	1,645	17,760.19
Loel	1989	2,767	214	18	72	278	131	3,479	28	212	493	73	222	1,300	154	369	430	903	7,666	530	14,463.35
	1993	2,500	195	40	0	204	162	3,102	16	294	442	106	323	1,603	386	430	569	8,381	603	13,899.19	
Maita	1989	1,882	483	40	0	81	217	2,703	9	489	680	94	275	2,005	232	578	589	1,999	9,054	874	10,338.76
	1993	2,180	732	43	0	67	198	3,219	5	518	741	129	435	2,517	544	543	732	1,786	11,167	868	12,865.47
Sarham	1989	589	133	13	77	28	64	905	5	183	198	37	117	633	57	168	213	349	2,864	277	10,339.96
	1993	591	252	16	0	32	67	958	6	224	217	54	192	816	141	182	294	371	3,457	303	11,408.25
Nakhon	1989	1,290	299	40	0	38	146	1,813	35	154	383	73	227	1,412	128	368	420	798	5,811	611	9,511.20
	1993	1,584	281	36	0	31	177	2,109	20	190	453	102	383	1,800	211	406	551	1,003	7,228	661	10,935.20
Nakhon	1989	6,706	1,083	23	61	567	617	9,057	93	2,912	2,388	802	1,161	5,719	1,025	1,643	1,988	3,841	30,628	2,304	13,292.40
	1993	6,615	1,530	48	1	498	611	9,303	632	3,288	3,692	1,080	1,884	7,232	1,861	1,663	2,382	5,032	38,049	2,442	15,800.94
Nong	1989	2,361	280	91	4	89	225	3,050	46	1,266	714	99	345	1,965	178	501	448	1,009	9,620	830	11,318.08
	1993	1,967	310	91	5	79	237	2,690	865	1,468	903	138	528	2,517	540	556	594	1,389	12,187	842	14,474.04
Roi Et	1989	2,757	650	69	17	95	288	3,877	13	560	609	140	422	2,730	273	749	801	1,482	11,657	1,186	9,828.67
	1993	2,753	658	73	0	88	333	3,905	10	618	801	227	833	3,665	696	750	1,030	1,888	14,422	1,343	11,600.68
Sakho	1989	1,857	463	129	0	63	189	2,701	0	439	687	123	364	2,309	220	608	630	1,230	9,410	932	10,004.43
	1993	2,081	445	155	0	62	202	2,945	37	472	747	166	682	2,904	373	632	869	1,549	11,375	1,015	11,207.10
Si Sa	1989	2,526	572	49	21	96	256	3,520	71	301	706	104	377	2,910	236	836	669	1,422	11,152	1,267	8,802.09
	1993	2,327	690	57	7	93	275	3,448	18	352	703	179	573	3,900	368	804	880	1,692	12,917	1,346	9,396.59
Surin	1989	2,010	557	42	14	67	263	2,952	49	443	736	131	380	2,924	249	798	731	1,737	11,130	1,241	8,968.76
	1993	2,541	590	43	1	71	275	3,520	18	536	883	262	604	3,492	408	801	913	2,625	14,062	1,325	10,612.89
Ubon	1989	3,310	780	72	52	117	341	4,673	7	1,554	1,536	254	705	4,525	607	1,107	1,452	2,417	18,817	1,346	10,193.48
	1993	2,996	843	72	1	105	333	4,349	32	2,018	2,144	360	1,197	5,718	930	1,179	1,485	22,975	1,969	11,668.59	

TABLE 5.6 (contd.)

Provin./region	Year	Agriculture							Mining	Mfg	Constr	Elec	Tpt	Whl/Ret	Bnk/Ins	House	Publ	Serv	GRP	Popl ¹	GRP/cap ²
		Crops	Livest	Fish	Ag sv	Ag pro	Total	Total													
Udon	1989	4,277	778	78	15	283	387	5,817	25	1,506	1,112	336	804	4,219	630	1,068	1,184	2,564	19,265	1,749	11,014.91
Thani	1993	3,556	927	71	0	249	322	5,125	22	2,074	1,385	429	1,487	5,356	1,153	1,207	1,484	3,331	23,052	1,844	12,501.02
Yasothon	1989	1,156	188	25	0	15	101	1,504	1	176	363	57	191	1,230	106	316	325	641	4,913	309	9,652.64
	1993	1,334	241	26	0	35	125	1,761	2	217	375	84	275	1,517	241	322	417	789	6,001	525	11,430.89
Chiang	1989	3,743	779	43	24	127	314	5,030	237	2,921	2,009	622	2,515	4,605	1,714	1,513	1,679	8,843	31,688	1,343	23,594.67
Man	1993	4,051	1,089	48	0	115	396	5,700	375	4,007	3,505	956	3,604	5,518	3,892	1,897	2,039	8,925	40,419	1,458	27,722.03
Chiang	1989	3,252	557	17	38	182	258	4,305	62	556	967	188	926	2,993	652	1,133	654	1,919	14,356	1,005	14,284.81
Rai	1993	3,329	481	26	0	158	329	4,324	28	677	1,128	325	1,468	3,730	1,085	1,368	971	2,191	17,294	1,172	14,756.27
Phayao	1989	1,306	290	6	39	85	150	1,875	23	244	385	79	242	1,301	176	530	409	711	5,975	490	12,192.89
	1993	1,383	304	31	0	85	184	1,986	19	304	432	124	341	1,526	303	571	509	997	7,111	485	14,662.78
Chanthaburi	1989	1,925	185	499	40	97	202	2,948	12	930	277	259	409	1,776	554	559	372	1,078	9,174	403	22,764.41
bur	1993	2,212	125	876	1	80	215	3,507	25	1,544	466	465	728	2,434	1,119	682	464	1,167	12,601	448	28,126.81
Prachin-	1989	2,880	1,412	16	5	327	216	4,856	43	1,063	621	185	396	3,175	336	939	787	1,233	13,635	811	16,812.67
bur	1993	2,928	1,123	21	0	303	198	4,573	46	1,841	885	271	430	4,261	474	1,198	966	1,458	16,403	881	18,618.15
TMBA ³	1989	51,208	9,359	1,454	510	2,843	4,991	70,364	664	18,508	16,527	3,769	9,139	51,731	6,980	14,574	14,645	31,463	238,364	20,966	11,369.08
	1993	51,036	11,166	1,929	22	2,521	5,209	71,883	2,971	23,141	20,771	5,603	15,442	65,839	13,806	15,389	18,047	39,703	292,592	22,157	13,205.41
Whole	1989	175,031	28,432	27,936	8,487	9,957	26,726	276,569	28,227	467,632	95,554	42,259	128,754	296,919	80,426	58,213	57,277	218,122	1,749,952	55,213	31,694.56
Kingdom	1993	174,817	32,124	36,197	3,974	8,817	32,832	288,761	40,713	755,489	156,072	62,973	187,240	403,953	182,449	67,660	69,441	269,527	2,477,278	58,584	42,285.92

Legend: Agricultural subsectors include: Crops, Livestock, Fisheries, Forestry, Agricultural services, and Simple agricultural products processing. Mining = Mining and quarrying; Mfg = manufacturing; Constr = construction; Elec = electricity and water supply; Tpt = transportation and communications; Whl/Ret = wholesale and retail trade; Bnk/Ins = banking, insurance and real estate; House = ownership of dwellings; Publ = public administration and defence; Serv = services; Popl = population; GRP = Gross Regional Product (GDP for the whole Kingdom).

Note: ¹ Population figures are in '000; ² GRP/cap figures are in baht; ³ TMBA total excludes Chiangmai and Prachinburi.

Source: National Statistical Office.

Some 90% of the TMBA population depends on agriculture for its livelihood and income. Yet, agriculture in the TMBA faces a number of constraints typical to its geography. In the northern part, remoteness and topography have limited agriculture to subsistence, although commercial crops are grown on a small scale for traditional markets in the area and across the borders in Burma, Laos and as far up as the Yunnan Province in China. In the highlands inhabited by hill tribe communities, shifting cultivation was a significant activity until recently. These areas were also infamous for opium cultivation. Recently, with the drive to replace opium with cash crops such as fruit and vegetables, settled agriculture has largely replaced shifting cultivation and opium growing. The change to cash crops and the consequent use of fertilisers and pesticides in the highlands has led to upstream downstream conflicts over water and water quality, with lowland farmers complaining about reduced water yields downstream, and water quality deterioration due to excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides, though there is no hard evidence to prove the effects of the latter. Competition between lowland and upland farmers for arable land has also increased, as pressure on land is pushing lowland farmers upslope in the search for land.

Agriculture in the northeast is affected by several constraints: physical, cultural and economic. Rolling topography and sandy, saline soils, the main physical constraints, commonly occur over much of the northeast and make land unsuitable for water intensive crops like wet rice. Yet, rice is the mainstay of the northeast. Culturally, the northeasterners have a preference for glutinous rice over white rice. About half of the rice produced in the region is of glutinous varieties, which have little if any external market. Much of the glutinous rice production is essentially for subsistence.

The two dominant economic crops are cassava and maize, exported mainly to the European Union markets as animal feed. During the 1990-91 crop years, cassava and maize occupied, respectively, a half and a quarter of the total area under commercial crops (Svetanant 1994). However, during the last few years prices of both the crops have fluctuated widely. There are few

economically viable and physically suitable choices for alternative crops available.

Besides cassava and maize, rice and sugar cane are the other important commercial crops in the TMBA economy, grown mostly in the northeast. Over the years, the importance of rice in the economy has declined while that of cassava and maize has increased.

In the term of industrial development in the TMBA, the constraints were particularly severe in the north where topography is another factor besides distance from the market (Bangkok). In the northeast, light and medium scale, and mostly agriculture based, industries are establishing on a small scale in areas such as Khon Kaen and Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima). In recent years, Nongkhai and Nakhon Phanom have exhibited growth in food processing industries, particularly the tomato ketchup packaging industry, cashing in on the agricultural potential of the area.

Industrial development in the TMBA region is limited to the provinces of Khon Kaen and Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima), and to a smaller extent Nong Khai and the neighbouring provinces and Ubon Ratchathani.

Thus, the Mekong Basin Area is economically diverse. In part this is due to the historical differences and divisions within the region. The Table below shows the main economic indicators for each country.

Table 5.7**Economic Indicators of Mekong River Riparian Countries**

	BURMA	CAMBO DIA	LAO PDR (a)	THAI LAND	VIETNAM	YUNNAN
GDP (billion US\$) (a)	11	2.03	1.46	140.3	17.4	4.51(b)
GDP per capita (US\$)	250	206	335	2377	240	465 (b)
GDP Annual Growth Rate (%) (c)	6.4	4.9	8.0	8.5	8.8	11.8
GDP - Agriculture (%) c)	47.1	44.8	57.4	11.1	32.3	21
GDP - Industry (%) (c)	14.4	19.6	17.9	42.1	25.3</	

Source: Final overview report to AusAID, Philip Hirsch and Gerard Cheong, University of Sydney, 2 April 1996

The most notable economic feature of countries in the basin is the difference in average levels of income between the wealthiest and poorest countries.

Given that Thailand's northeastern region is its poorest, and Vietnam's Mekong Delta is its most prosperous area, the difference in living standards between these two most populous regions of the Lower Mekong Basin is much less than the national comparisons indicate. This is further tempered by the fact that a significant proportion of Isan incomes come from off farm work (largely from labouring remittances sent from Bangkok or the Middle East), while most of the income in the delta is generated from local farm productivity and aquaculture.

While the majority of the basin's inhabitants are farmers and fishers, most of whom maintain a strong subsistence orientation, the main areas of

resource development envisaged for the basin lie in different sectors. In particular, hydropower and forestry are seen as major earners of national income and foreign exchange. This potentially places industrial and export sectors at odds with the subsistence needs and livelihood security interests of the region's poorest people.

The Trade Activities

The trade sector has a significant role in the economy of a country. Trade can be an engine of growth, encourage specializations by comparative advantage and increase national income. Another benefit of trade is getting capital product and accumulating country reserves from currency inflows, spreading information technology, increasing managerial ability, foreign investment, and competitiveness of each country.

According to the Comparative Advantage Theorem from J.S. Mill and David Ricardo (1848), even if a nation had an absolute disadvantage in the production of commodities with respect to the other nation, mutually advantageous trade could still take place. The less efficient nation should specialize in the production of and export of the commodity in which its absolute disadvantage is less. Specialization is very important, especially for the developing countries. This mainly happens because of a small domestic market and mostly commodity trade is primary products, such as agricultural products, cattle, fish and forestry products.

Mekong River countries, like Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand mostly depend on agricultural products, to fulfill the needs for high tech products which these countries mostly obtain from Thailand or other advanced economies. Generally, trade in the Mekong River area is ethnicity based trade. Even though, this ethnicity based trade can be included as transnational trade, because the people or ethnic groups who trade in this region come from other countries, like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and the Yunnan Province in China. Ethnicity based trade is a trade which is carried out by some ethnic groups in

a place or region. This trade pattern usually happens in a border region and involves some ethnic groups from different countries.

Before the construction of roads and railways, a journey from the lower north-east to the central area involved a boat trip along the Mun River from the Mekong at Champasak, down to Tha Chang in the Chakkarat District of Nakorn Ratchasima. From there travel was on foot across mountains and through jungles to the Pasak River down to Ayudhya and continued to Bangkok on the Chao Phraya River. From the upper northeast, people had to go by ox cart, horse, or simply walk. A trip 'to Thai' took weeks or even months, depending on the starting point, and danger was ever present. The main reason the Isan people went 'to Thai' was to trade. Coming back from 'Thai', the traders brought goods needed in the northeast.

The trade activities in this region came with development of road infrastructure. The first road in the northeast was only built at the beginning of the 20th century, and then only along the Mekong River between Nakhorn Phanom and Mukdahan. The second road called the Friendship (Mithaphab) Highway, was officially opened in April 1994 by Australians. The bridge over the Mekong continues to be the main commercial transportation route in and out of the northeast, connecting Nong Khai to Laos near Vientiane.

These road and bridge systems provided easier travel and access to Bangkok. Furthermore they helped rural dwellers to seek employment, higher paying jobs and open up the isolated regions in the northeast. The flow of goods and people in this region became heavier and the northeast region was transformed into an open area for trade activities.

The traders

The local people in the northeast, usually called Nai Hoi, the Chinese, the Thai Leu and the Lao Lum in the Lao PDR are the ethnic traders in the Greater Thai Mekong Region. The *Nai Hoi* traders traveled around the region to exchange their goods. They brought their goods by train and truck from

Nakorn Ratchasima to Bangkok, then to towns and districts along the railway and road. Up to the late 1950s, principal roads were built to link large towns but most of them remained dirt tracks for carts, and were often difficult to pass in the rainy season. Before the construction of roads, this trade is usually called the ox cart trade because the goods are brought by ox cart. The commodities being traded by the *Nai Hoi* were cattle, buffaloes, chilies, salt, pots, knives, and clothes.

The Chinese traders were the biggest number of traders in this region. They moved through the villages around the Mekong River and made contacts with the villagers, and in district towns. The traditional methods of exchange between the Chinese and villagers persisted. They moved along the roads, railways and rivers. As transport links expanded, some of the larger villages saw the arrival of Chinese traders a number of whom settled in these villages.

These Chinese traders gradually replaced the local *Nai Hoi*. They brought agricultural products, sweets, clothes, matches, gasoline, paper, pencils, materials for school, and a range of other basic consumer goods. At the same time, they also purchased agricultural products from the villagers to sell in the towns, where they picked up their wholesale goods. On the trips from the village to the town, the Chinese traders would buy items for themselves from other traders on their return.

Some villagers sell rice to the Chinese who own mills in district towns. They usually bring the rice by small caravans of carts. The Chinese purchase it cheaply to make big profits. Most of the Chinese traders sold the goods in their own shops around the Mukdahan. On every side, we can see Indochinese markets in this town. It means that the Chinese have a big role in Mukdahan and dominate the trade in this region.

The Thai Leu people had a close cultural and linguistic relationship with the people of Laos that was further strengthened by trade and kinship. Laos was viewed by many northeasterners as their home country. Leu people live on both sides along the border of Laos and Thailand. Before the Lao Thai

border opened the Thai Leu were farmers or fishermen and most of the Thai Leu women dominated the niche market of hand woven materials in Thailand. After the opening of the border, some Thai Lau women in Thailand stopped weaving and became traders, while some still managed to weave.

Across the Mekong River, in the Lao PDR region, there is another ethnic group which also takes part in trade around the Mekong River. This ethnic group is the Lao Lum or valley Lao which lives in the lowlands, on the banks of the Mekong and its tributaries, and in the cities. The Lao Lum people often use the Laotian Thai language rather than their own local tribal language. The Lao Lum is the largest ethnic group in the Lao PDR.

Since ancient times, people have crossed borders to visit friends and family, marry and conduct trade. The same pattern of activities was carried out by people who lived around the Thai and the Lao PDR border regions. Before the opening of the border markets, the communication between the Thai and Lao villages was very limited. This is because of the lack of physical accessibility, such as roads. The market liberalization came with the development of road infrastructure that connected those two sides of the area.

The peoples of Laos were divided by language, culture and location. Lao officials distinguish four basic ethno linguistic groups: the Lao Lum or valley Lao, the Lao Tai or tribal Tai, the Lao Theung, better known as the Mon Khmer and the Lao Soung, or Hmong and Man. The Lao Lum are more engaged in paddy production compared to the other three groups. Lao Theung lack natural resources when compared with the other three groups, and they are more engaged in upland cultivation, collection of NTFP (non forest timber products) and paddy production in limited amounts. Lao Theung women are considered to be more patriarchal than the Lao Lum (Schenk-Sandbergen and Choulamany-Khampoui 1995). Lao Soung live in the upland area, although some do engage in paddy production as well as trade and opium production. These different ethnic groups built different villages, but sometimes they were in the one administrative village.

In the Mekong border region between Thailand and the Lao PDR, there are four official crossing points and all of them are on opposite sides of the Mekong River apart from the Chong Mek-Wang Tao crossing point. The official crossing points between Thailand and the Lao PDR are:

<u>Thailand</u>	<u>Lao PDR</u>
Chiang Klang	Houey Xay
Nakhon Phanom	Ta Khek
Mukdahan	Savannakhet
Chong Mek	Wang Tao

Geographically, Mukdahan is one of the official crossing points on the border between Thailand and the Lao PDR. The main official border crossing points for transit trade between Thailand and the Lao PDR are Nongkhai (north-east Thailand) and Thanaleng (the Lao PDR).

The trade in the Lao PDR can be divided into two forms: formal and informal. Formal border trade refers to trade transactions conducted through appropriate customs procedures at the border in accordance with rules, regulations, and agreements from the government and usually custom tariffs are collected. While, informal cross border trade involves transactions that by pass or evade appropriate customs procedures. At formal border points people crossing over require only border passes or passports.

Mostly, the trade between the *Thai* and the Lao Lum was informal trade or illegal trade. They bring goods by ship or motor boat across the Mekong River and they would not pass the official crossing point. The commodities traded are wood and natural resources, agricultural products, clothes, soap and other daily necessities. The traditional currency at the border trade is the Thai Bhat.

The Trade Patterns

The *Nai Hoi* trading system was different from that of the Chinese traders. Differences between them are in terms of price setting, value of goods, high personal relationships and strong friendships among them. In determining prices in the *Nai Hoi* trading system, was not measured strictly by the market system, which means that close family relationships played a big role in determining prices.

The villagers who used the *Nai Hoi* system still belonged to the local culture while trading but the Chinese traders did not. This happened because the Chinese traders came from another country with a different culture, so they traded according to their own rules and customs. The understanding of locals and the patterns of trade and knowledge of cultural values reflected the difference between the *Nai Hoi* and the Chinese traders.

Most of the *Nai Hoi* traders eventually spill out of the competition from Chinese and other traders who have better access to capital and stronger links with the Bangkok ruling class and with powerful Chinese and European merchants. The trade that depends on the wealth obtained from rice, teak, rubber and tin, was traditionally monopolized by outsiders, chief among whom were the Chinese (Pongpaichit and Baker 1995). A small group of Chinese, under the patronage of the Thai elite, controlled much of the commercial activity. There were also more numerous Chinese small scale traders, labourers, and service workers who numerically dominated in the urban centers.

In the 1950s, many villagers had shops in *Mukdahan*, selling the consumer goods that were becoming daily necessities. Some of the shop owners were outsiders, while others were villagers who still had to learn how to trade. Now there are many shops around the city in *Mukdahan*. Mostly, the owners are Chinese. . They sell torch batteries, soap, beauty products and other household goods.

The Role of Chinese Traders

Historically, China Thai relationships occurred over centuries, but the first interaction between them was more cultural and ethnic than political and economic. Politically, since the Ming Dynasty in the 12th century until the improvement in European influence in the middle of the 19th century, China had feudal power in Thailand. This is shown by Thailand's regularly having to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor. This tribute system did not mean that Chinese emperors dominated Thailand, it was just a way of China's international and trade relationships.

The most important commodity in the Chinese Thai trade in this period was rice. Until now, rice still dominates the exports of Thailand and has an important role in determining the trade relationship between China and Thailand. Another important commodity at the end of the 18th century was the migration of Chinese people to Thailand for a better life.

The factors that encouraged the Chinese to migrate to Thailand can be divided into push and pull factors. The push factors were: First, geographic. Thailand has a central position near the Chinese region. Second, Thailand was a Buddhist country with rice and fish as the main food for the Thai people, so it was very attractive to the Chinese migrants most of them also Buddhists. Third, the Chinese had to pay a high tax due to the corruption of the Chinese Qing government, and paying tax was a burden for them which they could not easily avoid except by escaping into the jungle or the mountainous areas, which were inaccessible to outsiders. However, this meant isolation, as men could not travel without tax certification. If they did, they risked two months of hard labour or imprisonment. Finally, they chose to escape into another country, such as Thailand.

The pull factors were that the Thai gave a chance to Chinese people to fully assimilate into the Thai society and culture. Among the Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is the only country that has relatively no political obstacles or huge social discrimination against the Chinese minority, so there was little

social turbulence for the Thai people. The Chinese were very diligent and considered hard workers in developing the agricultural sector to produce commercial products. They brought improvements to the Thai people, especially in economics, and contributed to the social evolution of the Thai people, including by dominating the trade system.

IV. Conclusion

The people of the Mekong Basin Region vary in ethnic composition. Approximately 200 ethnic minority groups live in remote mountain areas, mostly along shared national borders. In the Thai Mekong Basin Area (TMBA), the majority are the Isan, which at the national level is considered as the minority group. Yet, the Isan consist of some varieties of small ethnic groups which inhabit the northeastern region and are considered to have descended from Laotians, Mons and Khmers. Before the 1960s, the people of the Thai Isan were simply labeled Lao and wrote their language in the Lao alphabet before the central government forcibly introduced the Thai alphabet and language in schools. Most Isan people now speak the Isan language which is closely related to the Lao language. Yet, the local people in the northeastern trading communities, were the Nai Hoi, and the Thai Leu.

Generally, there are approximately 21 million people in the TMBA region or about 37% of Thailand's population. However, this population is unevenly distributed with the highest density in the northeast, followed by the north, and lastly the east and most of them live in rural areas and survive on subsistence or semi subsistence agriculture. The communities face structural impediments that have made it difficult to achieve sustained economic growth. Though, in the 1990s with the beginning of tranquility around the basin, they experienced rapid changes and development in living standards and conditions, and there has been a gradual shift from subsistence agriculture to more diversified economic activities.

Historically since the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1868, the Thai economy has been simultaneously developed with the world trading system, particularly after the first National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) was drawn up in the early 1960s. Hence, Thailand has moved from being one of the world's poorer economies to one of its fastest growing in only three and a half decades. Yet only a trickle of that growth has reached the TMBA directly. The industrial growth that followed was centred on Bangkok and its surrounding areas. Only recently has this growth steadily moved along the eastern corridor as a result of the 'spill-over' effect, and can be expected to further strengthen the fledgling industrial development in Korat and Khon Kaen. The most significant effect of the national economic growth on the TMBA, particularly the Northeast, has been labour migration (virtually all for manual labour) to Bangkok and abroad.

The research area was centered around the Northeast Province (well-known as the Isan Region). In 2000 the total population in the Isan Region was 20,825,000 people. Forty percent (40%) of the population is concentrated in the provinces of Khorat, Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani and Khon Kaen. However, as of 1996 only 6.3% of the region's population lived in municipal areas. Thus, the population is still largely rural, but concentrated around the urban centers. The people live mainly in rural areas and these communities/ the northeasterners are heavily dependent on the agricultural sector, which 20 years ago accounted for half of the region's gross production, but recently, its contribution has decreased to 20%. One of the factors in this was that its production was adapted more into the commercial and service sectors. The differences between these two sectors (agriculture on the one hand and the commercial and service sectors on the other) brought economic features into the basin with great discrepancies in the average levels of income. It created the wealthiest and the poorest. This is further tempered by the fact that a significant proportion of Isan incomes come from off farm work (largely from labouring remittances sent from Bangkok or the Middle East).

While the majority of the Thai Basin inhabitants are farmers and fishers, most of whom maintain a strong subsistence orientation, the main areas of resource development seen for the basin lie in different sectors. In particular, hydropower and forestry are seen as major earners of national income and foreign exchange. This potentially places industrial and export sectors at odds with the subsistence needs and livelihood security interests of the region's poorest people. In the term of industrial development in the TMBA, the constraints are particularly severe in the north where the topography is another factor besides distance from the market (Bangkok). In the northeast, light and medium scale, and mostly agriculture based, industries are establishing on a small scale. Thus, the Mekong Basin Area is economically diverse. In part this is due to the historical differences and divisions within the region.

The trade activities in this region came with development of the road infrastructure. These road and bridge systems provided easier travel and access to Bangkok. Furthermore; they helped rural dwellers to seek employment, higher paying jobs and opened the isolated regions in the northeast. The flow of goods and people in this region became greater and the northeast region was transformed into an open area for trade activities.

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CHAPTER 6

GOVERNMENT POLICY ON RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE THAI MEKONG BASIN AREA: Natural Resource Use And Ethnic Minorities

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I. Introduction

The Mekong River runs a course of about 900 km between Thailand and the Lao PDR, defining much of the roughly 1,400 km border between these two countries. Although the river remains as the border, never completely entering Thai territory, its tributaries drain some 183,000 square km, or more than one third of Thailand's total land area. The Mekong River Basin lies mostly in Thailand's north eastern provinces, collectively known as Thai Isan (89.5%) together with a small part of its eastern region (2.2%) and also in its northern tip (8.3%). This, and the fact that within the basin lie common boundaries with the Lao PDR, Burma and Cambodia, marks the basin's importance to Thailand in its socio economic, cultural and political life. These neighbouring countries are increasingly becoming the resource 'frontiers' of Thailand.

The area then is known as the Thai Mekong Basin Area (TMBA), which is divided into two geographically distinct units, the smaller one at the northern tip of the country and the larger one comprising the entire northeast and a small portion of two eastern provinces. The TMBA supports 20.5 million people, a little over a third of the country's population. This is also about one third of the Mekong basin's total population.

One of the key issues facing the people and environment of the Thai Mekong Basin Area is the degradation that has resulted from rapid development over the past two decades. In particular, the rapid loss of the forest area, poses serious environmental and livelihood challenges. There are large scale development plans for the region that could have significant environmental

impact both within Thai borders and in downstream countries, notably Cambodia and Vietnam (Sunil S Pednekar 1997: 5).

In relative terms, Thailand is less dependent on the Mekong Basin and its resources than Cambodia or the Lao PDR. However, Thailand is a particularly significant player within the wider framework of cooperation and competition over the Basin's natural resources. Thailand serves as the major market for hydropower and is a significant investor in neighbouring countries' resource economies. Several Thai companies have a private sector interest in some of the larger dams proposed for the Mekong tributaries in the Lao PDR. Thai logging companies have been active in securing timber from the Lao PDR and Cambodia, (Andrew Walker 1999: 163-185) and Thai companies are even investing in resource related industries such as prawn farms in the Mekong Delta. Thus, despite the slowdown in the Thai economy since July 1997, Thailand is the regional economic powerhouse that lies behind intensified resource development in the Mekong Basin.

II. Historical Background of the TMBA Management

Resource management in the Mekong Basin is bound up not only with the Basin's natural features, but also with mainland Southeast Asia's social, economic, political and institutional conditions. Since the Mekong Committee was established nearly 40 years ago, dramatic changes have occurred in these conditions, and also in ways of viewing the relationship between development, resource use and the environment. Recent changes in the region have thus affected the opportunities and constraints for resource management at different levels. A historical perspective is essential for understanding these changing parameters. Such a perspective requires attention to the changing geopolitics and institutional structures of the region.

From the 1950s until the late 1980s, the geopolitics of the Mekong Basin were governed heavily by the Cold War. The end of strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was thus an important backdrop

to the revived interest in, and opportunities for Mekong Basin development in the 1990s and beyond.

Table 6.1
Geopolitics of Mekong Basin development

Year	Geopolitical developments	Mekong Basin development
1953	Independence for Laos, Cambodia	
1954	Dien Bien Phu; VN independence	
1956	Partition of Vietnam	
1957		Formation of Mekong Committee
1964	Tonkin incident"	
1965	US commits ground troops in Vietnam	
1967	ASEAN established	
1970	End of Cambodia's neutrality	Indicative Basin Plan
1971		Nam Ngum Dam completed
1973	US withdrawal from Vietnam	
1975	Communist regimes take power Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam	
1978		Interim Mekong Committee established
1979	Vietnam invades Cambodia, topples KR regime; border war between Vietnam and China	

1986	Vietnam's Doi moi economic renovation commences	
1987		Revised Indicative Basin Plan
1988	Thailand's "battlefield to marketplace" call; violent change of regime in Burma; border conflict between Thailand and Lao PDR	
1991	Paris peace accord on Cambodia	
1992		ADB commences Greater Mekong Subregion initiative
1993	Elections in Cambodia; end of China's support for Khmer Rouge	
1995	Vietnam joins ASEAN	"Run-of-River" mainstream hydropower dams proposed; Mekong River Commission (MRC) established

Source: 'Natural Resource Management in the Mekong River Basin: Perspectives for Australian Development Cooperation', Final overview report to AusAID, Philip Hirsch and Gerard Cheong, University of Sydney, 2 April 1996.

From a geopolitical perspective, three main periods have set the parameters for the Mekong Basin resource management in mainland Southeast Asia (Philip Hirsch and Gerard Cheong 1996):

a. United States influence: 1950s to 1975

Prior to 1975, much of the Lower Mekong Basin was in the sphere of influence of the United States and its allies. Thailand was a forward base for US military operations in the Second Indochina War. Laos was under US influence, and while large areas in the eastern part of the country were already under communist influence from the early 1960s, the pre1975 Vientiane regime relied on US support. Except for a small area of Lai Chau Province in the

then North Vietnam, the section of the basin within Vietnam lies entirely below the 17th parallel, hence in what was US supported South Vietnam. Cambodia tried to remain neutral, but with Lon Nol's 1970 overthrow of the Sihanouk regime Cambodia also joined the US camp. Only autarkic Burma and post revolutionary China remained outside the US sphere of influence during this period. This is one reason for the historical emphasis on the Lower Mekong rather than the entire Basin in international river management. Within the Lower Mekong region, the River served as a unifying artery.

Although the establishment of the Mekong Committee (MC) in 1957 was under United Nations auspices, the United States was a key player. The US was the largest non riparian aid donor (over 20% of total to 1966). In 1967, ASEAN was established in place of SEATO, carrying with it anti communism as a principal unifying force. Of the riparian states, only Thailand became an ASEAN member. By the early 1970s, the declining military fortunes of the US and its Indochina allies in the region were also reflected in a reduced financial commitment to the Mekong Committee.

b. Cold War divisions: 1975 - late 1980s

In 1975, communist victories in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam signalled a fundamental geopolitical shift. The Mekong River became an axis of division rather than integration within the region. Moreover, Pol Pot's Maoist regime pulled Cambodia out of the Mekong Committee. The revived Interim Mekong Committee (IMC) formed in 1978 was hobbled by the absence of a key member. Under its articles, mainstream development was precluded due to lack of consensus by all the riparian states.

For much of the late 1970s and 1980s, mainland Southeast Asia was marked by geopolitical tensions. Three way superpower rivalry influenced events in Cambodia, as China's support for the Khmer Rouge government until 1978 and rebels from 1979 onward contributed first to tensions with Vietnam and then also to civil war in Cambodia. Thailand's relations with the

Lao PDR were tense throughout the 1980s, culminating in a short but bloody conflict in early 1988 over border demarcation affecting three villages on the border of Uttaradit and Sayaboury provinces. Alleged Thai military support for US and China backed factions fighting the Vietnamese and Soviet backed regime in Phnom Penh further complicated relations, as did alleged Thai support for anti government Hmong rebels in the Lao PDR. There was thus little basis for active development of the Mekong River resources or for common approaches to its management.

c. Regional rapprochement: late 1980s to the present

The end of the Cold War has had a dramatic influence over all the Mekong Basin. In the Lower Basin, rapprochement between Thailand and its neighbours was marked by the Chatichai government's call to turn battlefields into market places. The 1991 Paris Peace Agreement signalled an end to full scale conflict in Cambodia, and even though insurgency by the Khmer Rouge, banditry by other groups and poor discipline within the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces has continued, it has done so without the overt support of other regional players. In July 1995 Vietnam joined ASEAN, and it was seen as just a matter of time before the Lao PDR, Cambodia and Burma followed suit. This reduction in tension has been the backdrop to a revived interest in developing the basin's resources.

As the dominant geopolitical tensions subsided and allowed for consideration of large scale water development on the Mekong and its tributaries, so another set of tensions emerged, more directly related to water sharing. In particular, questions surrounding individual countries' rights of unilateral action or, alternatively, rights of veto, have surrounded discussion of the new framework for regional cooperation in resource development and management. During the early 1990s, several stumbling blocks in relation to such issues prevented full continuation of international cooperation and re incorporation of Cambodia within such a framework. However, in April 1995, the Agree-

ment on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin was signed in Chiang Rai, opening the way for continuation in cooperation among the riparian states. While the Agreement was signed only by the four lower riparian countries, strong proposals were made to China and Burma to join the Commission.

Although the Commission was limited to the four lower riparian states, other initiatives included all the players. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has sponsored a series of annual ministerial level conferences involving all the riparian countries. These economic cooperation meetings on the greater Mekong sub region have identified over 70 projects, many of which focused on large infrastructure developments (ADB 1994).

III. Management Policy of Mekong Resources

a. Natural Resource Management

There are many different approaches to natural resource management in Thailand. On the one hand, the Director General of the Department of Energy Development and Promotion at the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, Dr Prathes Sutabutr, declared that since Thailand has (between) 18% - 23% of the basin watershed area but only 8% of the water flows through its territory, the country had an unquestionable right to extract water from the river system. Dr Prathes is also chair of the Thai Mekong Committee and has said: 'The Mekong is the virgin river. It is a large river but each year it flows uselessly into the sea. This is a loss, that is why we should harness the river' (The Nation 29.12.'95). Meanwhile, on the other hand conservation groups and many scientists within Thailand also show great concern over the grand designs on Mekong Basin resources.

The 1975 Improvement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality (NEQ) Act was the first comprehensive attempt to include environmental concerns in natural resource exploitation. This legislation allowed the formation of the National Environment Board (NEB). However, the NEQ Act

and the NEB were ineffective and proved unable to influence other agencies to take on environmental concerns in their management of natural resources.

Increasing environmental awareness leading up to the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the continuing resource degradation led to the adoption of the Improvement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act (1992). The Ministry of Science, Technology and Energy was reformed into the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (MOSTE), under which the NEB was restructured. This Act was accompanied by a package of other environment related laws which showed a move away from 'command and control' management to the use of economic instruments and community participation to control environmental damage (Mingsarn Kaosa-ard et al. 1995: 70-71).

Current governmental approaches to natural resource management in Thailand have a basis in the new strengthened Act and the impetus it gave to the reformed ministry to implement environmental law more effectively. There is now a transition period with indications that environmental institutions together with resource management agencies are beginning to move towards combined strategies encompassing economic and environmental agendas. There is, however, a resultant tension between the traditional agencies, which focused on economic efficiency and the newly strengthened environmental agencies (TDRI 1995). The goal of integrated policy making is still a long way ahead.

Where the Mekong Basin is concerned, this tension is palpably affected by the relatively poor socio economic status of the population in north eastern Thailand. In a bid to find solutions to the poor economic performance of the northeast, the government targeted large scale water development projects based on supply side projections which tend to exaggerate needs and reduce efficiency. In the long term, this can have environmental costs which outweigh the benefits, in part due to unsuitable saline soils.

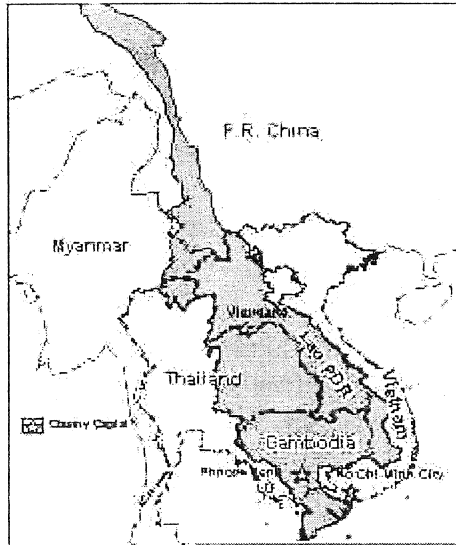
Apart from but also adding to this situation, are the overlapping jurisdictions of government agencies responsible for natural resource management. TDRI has found that water resource management responsibilities are spread over 38 agencies and 8 ministries. This is compounded by poor coordination between responsible agencies (Christensen and Boon-Long 1993).

Other criticisms are that the new environmental laws are applicable to the urban context while neglecting rural areas. In addition, the industrial pollution laws are based on United States laws, which may be 'too stringent to be implemented in Thailand given the difference in the level of development' (Mingsarn Kaosa-ard et al. 1995: 72). While not entering into a debate on levels of stringency here, the worth of legislation largely lies in its applicability and ability to be implemented to the extent that it meets acceptable standards. This implies sensitivity to local conditions and the adaptation of overseas models to meet these local criteria. Expected industrial development and related pollution in the vicinity of the Pak Mun Dam (Roberts (b) 1993) will certainly test the new laws even further.

Thailand's approach to natural resource management in the Mekong Basin is characterised by an increasing capacity to secure positive environmental outcomes, although most of these have yet to be realised. This capacity is demonstrated in the NEB and other government agencies but also importantly, by the local population, academics and NGOs. There are still major obstacles to achieving sustainable and environmentally sound natural resource management practices. These obstacles include poor coordination between government agencies, ill thought out plans (e.g. large scale water development projects), a preponderance of centralised control from and economic focus on Bangkok and complex problems resulting from previous development projects. Notwithstanding the obstacles, Thailand possesses valuable skills in natural resource management, which could contribute significantly to overall management in the entire basin.

Figure 6.1

Incongruent physical and political boundaries of the Mekong Basin



(Source: 'The Mekong Basin and its Resources': Final Overview Report to AusAID, Philip Hirsch and Gerard Cheong, University of Sydney, 2 April 1996)

b. The Establishment of the International Agencies

i. The Mekong Committee

The Mekong Committee (MC) was formed in 1957, incorporating the four lower riparian countries of Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam and Thailand. The Committee was formed, following the recommendations of a seven member expert team for an international body for information exchange and planning coordination among the four riparian states of the Lower Mekong Basin.

The full name of the organisation was the Committee for Coordination of the Comprehensive Development of the Lower Mekong Basin. Funding came from the United Nations' regional organisation, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), the precursor of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). The Committee was also seen as a catalyst for development of the Mekong Basin resources to increase levels of income for the riparian countries.

In 1959, the Committee appointed an Executive Agent with an office (the Mekong Secretariat) in Bangkok. In 1975, the Committee's function was interrupted by the non participation of Cambodia. From then on, and until Cambodia rejoined in 1992, the Committee became the Interim Mekong Committee and remained relatively inactive during this period.

However, some saw the Committee's activities optimistically as a kind of Marshall Plan for mainland Southeast Asia (Jacobs 1995). This is significant, in that the MC and its successors have served a dual role of coordinating management of resources in the basin and of channelling development assistance.

Four key reports give an indication of emerging plans for Mekong Basin resource development during the existence of the Mekong Committee (**Final Overview Report to AusAID**):

- An ECAFE report (ECAFE 1957) was an inception study for early basin development
- A report carried out by the US Corps of Engineers provided the basis for large scale engineering works on the Mekong and its tributaries (United Nations 1958)
- A study sponsored by the Ford Foundation allowed for consideration of non engineering aspects of basin development from an early stage (White et al. 1962)

- The Basin Indicative Plan was an attempt to pull together the individual projects studied through the 1960s into a comprehensive blueprint for basin development (Mekong Secretariat 1970).

Despite those optimistic plans, there were some obstacles during the early phases of the development plans of the Mekong Committee.

The four main obstacles were (Pednekar 1997: 4-5):

1. Lack of capital and shortages of foreign exchange in the four riparian countries;
2. Lack of comprehensive and reliable natural resources and economic database;
3. Lack of skilled human resources to plan, design, implement and operate projects;
4. The chronic problem of reconciling national and regional development goals.

More than three decades later, these obstacles remain far from overcome, particularly for the three countries of Indochina. Thailand, on the other hand, has fared better than the others in terms of capital availability, has developed a relatively more comprehensive information base and benefited from an increasingly skilled workforce, although it still lacks strategies for resource use. The conflict between national ambitions and regional developmental goals remained the most important of all problems and featured prominently in the negotiations leading to the reconstitution of the Committee as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in April 1995.

ii. Mekong River Commission

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) was established with the signing of the Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin by the four riparian states. The Commission consists of

three main bodies: (1) The Mekong Council; (2) The Joint Committee; (3) The Mekong Secretariat.

The Mekong Council is represented at ministerial level and normally meets once per year. This is the political overseer of the Commission. While The Joint Committee is represented at permanent secretarial level and normally meets twice per year. This is the bureaucratic overseer of the Commission; and The Mekong Secretariat is responsible for the day to day business of the MRC, and it is here that the detailed work is carried out. The Secretariat level is where most continuity is apparent from the MC and IMC. The building and most of the staff are the same, although possibly there will be significant changes in structures, location and perhaps personnel. A new Executive Agent (Mr Yasunobu Matoba, a Japanese agriculture ministry official) was appointed in August 1995.

The MRC is a key regional body, which binds the four Lower Mekong Basin countries in the context of river basin management. The three permanent bodies of the MRC play their roles in this context under the guidance of the April 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (the 'Agreement') (Mekong River Commission 1995).

The planning tool to be used by the MRC is the Basin Development Plan (BDP) which is defined in Chapter II of the Agreement as the '*general planning tool and process that the Joint Committee would use as a blueprint to identify, categorise and prioritise the projects and programs to seek assistance for and to implement the plan at the basin level*'. The goals of the BDP include bringing environmental and social issues into the assessment of MRC actions. However, the BDP is some way off completion and is only at the framework preparation stage (MRC 1995).

In Ho Chi Minh City in November 1995, the MRC adopted its first work plan for 1996, in which 77 projects worth about US \$40 billion were identified. Unlike previous work plans which were criticised as 'shopping lists', the

new work plan takes a program approach. The program areas include hydrology, environment, remote sensing and GIS, sub basin and project planning and the various sectors of forestry, agriculture, irrigation, fisheries and transport. This new approach has benefits in many ways. For example, the Environment Program includes, in its tasks, the 'integration of environment components in projects' (Phanrajsavong 1995). Notwithstanding this, the projects are predominantly in the transport and energy sectors.

The MRC, as an international body, is able to receive funding from various sources including foreign aid to carry out projects. The MRC Secretariat is tasked with the definition of particular projects but does not usually implement them (Mitchell 1994). In effect, the MRC does not have a role to play in the final outcomes or even the stages beyond the early investigative phase of the projects in its annual work plan.

IV. Thai Government Policy on Resource Management and Ethnicity

A range of sectoral and intersectoral government agencies are involved in natural resource management: forestry departments, power utilities, environmental agencies, other line agencies, state enterprises, the military, provincial and district authorities. At one level, the perspective of each agency tends to differ along sectoral lines. For example, forestry departments responsible for creation of protected areas may be at odds with agencies responsible for hydropower development. However, there are constraints on these differences being played out publicly, and different agencies have different degrees of influence in each country, depending on national priorities.

In principle, as state agencies, each is ultimately bound to respond to the 'national interest'. Where this is deemed to lie in rapid resource based export oriented production, subsistence and conservation interests may be secondary.

A feature of most countries in the basin is that the military has a significant role in resource exploitation. In all countries, except Thailand, the mili-

tary relies on income generation from logging and other activities for an increasing part of its constricted budget, and in Thailand, several of the concessionaires logging in neighbouring countries have links with military personnel. Military influence lies behind several controversial extraction policies, for example, the recent 1.4 million ha logging concession in eastern Cambodia granted to the Indonesian Panin Corporation and the Lao military's Mountainous Region Development Corporation's (MRDC) logging of the Nakay Plateau. While these are quite sensitive issues, there is an important background context that needs consideration in development assistance programming in the field of natural resource management in the region (Andrew Walker 1999).

a. Policy on Resource Management

Thailand's natural resource base has undergone considerable degradation during the past thirty years as its economy has prospered. The growing export oriented economy and livelihood concerns of the rural population (that represents two thirds of the total and depends mainly on agriculture), have continued to exert pressure on the remaining natural resources, particularly land, agriculture, water, coastal resources and, not least, forests.

Attempts to integrate environmental considerations into resource management policies were first made in 1975 when the Promotion and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act, B.E. 2518 (1975) was promulgated. Under this law the National Environment Board (NEB) was formed. However, neither the law nor the NEB proved effective in influencing other natural resource management agencies to incorporate environmental concerns into their traditional management practices. The continued resource exploitation and degradation coupled with the impetus given by external pressure and international events such as the heightened environmental concerns in the lead up to the Rio UNCED Conference, finally led to the adoption of the Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act, B.E. 2535

(1992). the environmental legislation framework. The new law enabled the strengthening and restructuring of environmental agencies, a process that continues today. One of the first steps was the restructuring of the NEB under the reformed Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (formerly the Ministry of Science, Technology and Energy). Since its inception, some departments in the new ministry seem to have taken the responsibility quite seriously, despite the uphill task before them.

As these environmental institutions have become stronger, existing resource management agencies faced the task of incorporating resource conservation into their mandates; which were focused on economic efficiency in resource use rather than environmentally sound management. While these economic and environmental approaches can eventually be expected to merge into a single strategy of sustainable development, in the current transition process they frequently clash, as agencies sometimes adopt mutually incompatible resource management practices.

Several handicaps ruin the transition to sustainable development. First, inadequate knowledge of resource status and the long term impact of development activities on resources, means that resource policies are ineffective at best, flawed at worst. While concepts such as public participation and 'the polluter pays principle' have been adopted in principle, in reality resource management relies largely on 'end of pipe solutions' with a top down management and regulatory approach.

Second, solving the past problems has become an immensely difficult task, not least because of the political sensitivity of some resource allocation issues, land allocation being the best example. The government plan to demarcate more protected areas is hampered by controversies over the displacement of communities that have been settled on this land for years. Another example is that of water resources. Despite ever growing problems of dry season shortages and allocation, the government is reluctant to increase the price of water for fear of turning it into a political issue.

Third, many agencies have overlapping mandates, and reorganising them has become a major challenge. Water management, for example, is divided into 38 agencies in eight ministries. Often, these overlapping mandates lead to inter departmental jealousy and conflict.

Fourth, political and economic interests of a few influential individuals or groups often take priority over the larger interest of society, making it difficult to address some of the pressing environmental issues. Numerous cases, including well publicised forestry scandals, are reported in local newspapers. Indeed, the role of vested interests in the government and the military, which stands to profit greatly from the continued and increased exploitation of resources in the neighbouring countries of Indochina and Myanmar, is considered to be one of the greatest factors behind Thailand's economic overtures to these countries that began during the Chatichai administration (Pednekar 1997: 7-8, from Innes-Brown and Valencia 1993). Bringing the economic and environmental approaches under a sustainable development paradigm would need visionary development planning, which is still lacking (Kaosa-ard et al. 1995).

b. Ethnic Minority in TMBA

The Mekong Basin is an area of great ethnic diversity. Within each riparian country there is a dominant ethnic majority, but only in Cambodia does this majority dominate the country's basin area. The great majority of the basin's inhabitants are farmers and fishermen, relying quite directly on the natural resource base. Integrity of the basin's ecology is vital to their social, cultural and economic well being.

Different ethnic groups are associated with different resource use practices, although there is a great deal of variation, flexibility and dynamism in such an association. In some cases, there are incompatibilities in resource use practices between people from different ethnic groups (notably upland shifting cultivators and lowland mono croppers).

In others, ethnic minorities represent pockets of poverty (e.g. the Isan people in north eastern Thailand and the Khmer in the Mekong Delta) and deprivation warranting special development attention. Often resource tenure problems underlie poverty, deprivation and associated environmental deterioration. There are thus key resource management interventions that need to take an ethnically differentiated approach to the region.

Demographically, there is considerable variation in the region. In population terms, one giant (China), three middle sized countries (Burma, Vietnam, Thailand) and two small countries (Cambodia and the Lao PDR) make up the riparian states. These size differences also reflect the differences in political clout brought by the respective countries. Annual population growth rates vary considerably, from 1.2 per cent in Thailand to 3.0 per cent in the Lao PDR. The level of urbanisation ranges from 30% in Thailand to 12% in Cambodia. Life expectancy is likewise variable, from 49 years in Cambodia to 67 years in Thailand. Rapid population growth is a significant contributor to resource pressures in the Lao PDR and Vietnam, much less so now in Thailand. While Vietnam has a major population program, the Lao PDR is more ambivalent on family planning provision.

The Thai section of the basin is mainly inhabited by the Lao speaking Isan people (northeastern), the Thai Yuan (khonmeuang) and the Thai Leu of Chiangrai Province (northern part of Thailand). These parts contrast quite strongly with the central region of Thailand in a variety of ways. Within Thailand, the significance of the basin is marked by the fact that it coincides with the country's poorest region. While average per capita incomes in Thailand are nearly ten times those of the neighbouring countries of Indochina, incomes within the northeast are only about one third the national average (Ahmad Helmy Fuady 2002; Erwiza Erman and Mayasuri Presilla 2003: 13-50; Selway 2004).

Table 6.2
Poverty in the Mekong Region:
90% of people living on less than US\$ 1 per day

	1990	2000
Cambodia	48.3	34.0
China	31.3	16.5
Lao PDR	53.0	31.5
Thailand	12.5	3.5
Vietnam	50.8	9.1

Sources: East Asia updates and regional overviews produced by World Bank (WB 2000a). Global poverty monitoring website of World Bank (WB 2001).

The basin provinces demonstrate far greater proportions of ethnic minorities among their populations. They are also relatively less developed, derive most of their earnings from agriculture and trading and the inhabitants have lower average incomes. The annual Gross Provincial Product (GPP) per capita for Bangkok in 1995 was estimated at 160,169 Baht while for the basin provinces, it was an average of 15,579 Baht, or only 9% of the Bangkok GPP. The northeast provinces have the lowest national annual per capita GPP at 14,976 Baht.

Poverty can often be home grown, caused by failed policies. Nowhere else in the Mekong Region is the fate of the poor more determined and mismanaged by the government (e.g. in Myanmar, where half of the country's farmland is under the control of the military government) (Mingsarn Kaosard 2003, from Brunner et al. 1998). The most prevalent policy failure in the region is the land forest policy. In order to protect forests, governments proclaim protected areas, remove people from their original habitats and limit shifting cultivation by reducing fallow periods. In TMBA, the Thai National Park Law prohibits the use of all non timber forest products. A study of vil-

lages in protected areas revealed that the proclamation of a national park has greatly affected poor farmers whose livelihoods rely heavily on natural harvests. At the time of the study, one man out of three households and one woman out of five households had migrated to other provinces to look for non farm jobs, as the forests were closed (Anan Ganjanapan and Mingsarn Kaosa-ard 1996; for more detail the chapter written by Betti and the chapter by Lamijo in this publication).

The policy on ethnicity ultimately related with the land use policy, which correlated with the level of poverty in this region. On the national scale, land ownership has been a chronic problem politically and socially. A TDRI study suggested that by the mid 1980s about half the country was already permanently occupied by private individuals (TDRI 1986). Between 1960 and 1990, Thailand's agricultural population increased by 14 million, while deforestation continued at a rate of 480,000 ha per year or 1.02 ha for each person added to the agricultural population (Kaosa-ard 1993).

As well as the extension of agriculture, the unique problems of the Thai land titling system contributed to land degradation. Despite the relative land abundance, land ownership is a difficult proposition for many farmers, particularly in TMBA. As many as a million farm households, or one fifth of the total, are technically squatters on forest reserves (Siamwalla et al. 1993:100) as their farms are located on lands belonging to the Royal Forestry Department (RFD). Even outside the reserve area, at least 30% of farmers have not been able to get sufficiently clear land titles to use these lands as collateral. The implications are two fold. First, with such a large number of people occupying forest reserve land, the RFD is unable to draw any acceptable set of policies on forestry and conservation. Second, because they cannot use the land as collateral, the farmers are unable to make investments in the land or equipment, in turn affecting the productivity, and further degrading the land (Pednekar 1997: 23).

Nevertheless, Thailand can be described as the most powerful local economic force in the region, which has major resource development interests

within the boundaries of its basin neighbours. Thailand's GDP, export earnings, level of industrialisation and standard of living surpasses those of its neighbours in the basin.

V. Conclusion

The interest of Thai government in the Mekong River has moved beyond the national borders, for obvious politico economic reasons. First, the opening up of the Indochinese economies has offered vast economic opportunities to Thailand as to the rest of the world. Thailand's physical proximity and cultural links with the sub region present it with unique advantages over other regional rivals (such as other ASEAN countries, for example). Second, the rapid economic growth of the past three decades has put enormous burden on Thailand's own natural resource base. At the current critical level of exhaustion and degradation, this resource base is unable to meet the still growing demands from the urban industrial economy, the transformation of which from an agrarian one began relatively recently. Of particular concern, from Thailand's point of view, are energy, water and forest resources. In this context, the supply potential of the cash starved but resource rich Indochina countries offers additional opportunities for regional economic cooperation in natural resource use.

This appreciation of the region's new economic opportunities has not, however, been accompanied by clearly defined government policies and long term strategies. Some analysts view the Thai perception of economic integration and resource development in mainland Southeast Asia as rather short sighted, based on outmoded development concepts and, as Um (1991, in Innes-Brown and Valencia 1993) observes, 'guided by short term extractive activities'. Even the national development and natural resource policies are often criticised as being based on inadequate knowledge of the complexity of underlying issues (Pednekar 1997).

Against an upbeat background of impressive GDP growth, there is increasing concern that this growth in the Thai economy is not sustainable and is causing unacceptable ecological destruction. Increasing social inequities also figure in the debate as the income gap between those in Bangkok and those in the other provinces, particularly the north eastern/Isan region where the Mekong Region is located continue to increase.

There are signs that Thailand is responding to past experience with new approaches to resource management. In part, this is assisted by a declining importance of natural resources within the Thai economy, and in part by availability of resources in neighbouring countries. Because of increasing environmental degradation and growing public pressure, the Thai government, since the 1980s, has had to incorporate the environment into its policy agenda. Indeed, Thailand will have to do a lot of house cleaning as it prepares to take a leading role in the sub regional economic integration.

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Rucianawati

The Mekong River, the fifth longest river in Asia and the tenth longest in the world, plays an important role in the lives of the people who live around it. Almost two thirds of these people are farmers and fishers who depend on the waters of the Mekong. Besides agriculture and fishing, the Mekong is significant in waterway transportation, particularly in the five countries and one province (the Yunnan Province of the PRC, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam) where the Mekong runs.

The great Mekong River has been attracting migrants to this area. It can be said that economic motivation was the most important reason for migrants to move to the Mekong area, besides the political reasons. Traditional ties between border areas in the greater Mekong sub region, including similarities in language, ethnicity and culture, together with cross border transportation networks, facilitated cross border migration of people in this region.

In Thailand, migration in the Mekong River basin has gone on for hundreds of years and had both positive and negative impact on the indigenous people in north and northeast Thailand, mainly in the border areas between Thailand and Laos. The local people of northeast Thailand moved to the remote area (inland). Most of them, survive through agriculture while the newcomers (migrants) dominate the economic activities, especially commerce.

Along the Mekong River basin in Thailand, many trade towns have emerged, such as, Mae Sai, Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong, Nongkhai, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan and Khong Chiam, where the multiethnic people carry out their commercial activities. Each ethnic group has its specialization in economic activity, for instance, the Vietnamese specialize in restaurant businesses as seen in Nong Khai and Chong Mek.

In the Mekong River basin in Thailand, which is usually called the Thai Mekong Basin Area (TMBA), the Isan group is the majority, though at the national level is considered a minority. The Isan, who inhabit the northeastern region of Thailand consist of some small ethnic groups. They are regarded to be the descendants of Laotian, Mon and Khmer people.

The commercial activities in this region came with the development of transport infrastructure. These road and bridge systems provided easier travel and access to the opposite cities, such as Mukdahan – Savanakheth and Nongkhai – Vientiane. The development of roads also made easier access to Bangkok, the capital city. Furthermore, the development helps rural dwellers to seek employment and higher paying jobs as well as opening the isolated regions in northeast Thailand. Many cities on the banks of the Mekong River, such as, Mukdahan, have become the centres of trade activities for many ethnic groups from the greater Mekong sub region countries.

For the Thai government, the Mekong River is not only a national border but also has a social and economic function. For this reason, the government has issued policies to manage the Mekong River, particularly those related to natural resources and environment. Cooperation among the four Mekong countries (China, Thailand, the Lao PDR and Myanmar) in the Commercial Navigation Agreement in 2000 is part of government policies to push trade activities and tourism.

The opening up of the Indochinese economies has offered vast economic opportunities to Thailand and the rest of the world. The rapid economic growth of the past three decades has put an enormous burden on Thailand's own natural resource base, especially in the Mekong Basin. To overcome this problem, sectoral and intersectoral government agencies are involved in natural resource management, such as, forestry departments, power utilities, environmental agencies, and state enterprises, the military, provincial and district authorities.

PENDUDUK ASLI (*INDIGENOUS PEOPLE*), ETNISITAS DAN PERDAGANGAN TRANSNASIONAL DI SEKITAR DAS MEKONG DI THAILAND SEJAK TAHUN 1970-AN - SAMPAI KINI

A. PENDAHULUAN

I. Latar Belakang

Kehidupan manusia tidak dapat dilepaskan dari kebutuhannya akan air. Dapat dikatakan bahwa permulaan peradaban manusia dimulai dari daerah lembah atau daerah dengan ketersediaan air yang mudah dan melimpah. Fungsi air atau sumber air bukan hanya penting untuk kehidupan mereka sehari-hari, namun juga penting untuk usaha pertanian, dan menjadi jalur lalu lintas utama.

Sebagaimana peran dari sungai-sungai besar di kawasan Asia, sungai Mekong yang merupakan sungai terpanjang kelima di Asia dan terbesar di Asia Tenggara mempunyai peranan yang signifikan bagi kehidupan masyarakat di sekitarnya. Sungai ini mengalir dari dataran tinggi Tibet, melintasi Cina, Laos, Kamboja, Thailand dan Vietnam. Sungai Mekong mempunyai beberapa nama, dari daerah asal mata airnya (dataran tinggi Tibet), sungai ini disebut Dza Chu, di Cina disebut Lantsan Kiang, dan Mekong adalah nama versi Thailand dari sungai itu (Butwell; 1988).

Dengan melihat betapa pentingnya peran sungai Mekong, maka tidak dapat dipungkiri bahwa sungai ini telah menjadi pusat kebudayaan, dalam arti yang lebih spesifik yaitu fungsi sungai yang dapat dikatakan tidak hanya sebagai pusat jalur lalu lintas perdagangan transnasional antara berbagai etnis akan tetapi menguasai jalur pelayaran sungai berarti akan adanya pengakuan atas kekuasaan politik terhadap suatu wilayah. Sejak lama sungai Mekong telah menjadi jalur arteri perdagangan, dan juga sebagai batas kekuasaan politis (Hill; 1996:12).

Secara ekonomis, sungai Mekong menyimpan berbagai kekayaan alam yang menjadi sumber penghidupan masyarakat di sekitarnya. Di sungai Mekong terdapat lebih dari 1300 species ikan, bahkan jenis ikan sungai terbesar di duniapun (*giant catfish*) juga terdapat disana. Dalam hal kekayaan *biodiversity* yang terkandung di dalamnya, sungai Mekong menduduki tempat kedua setelah sungai Amazon. Daerah di sekitar sungai juga mempunyai keunggulan ekonomis lain, yaitu hutan yang tumbuh subur yang menyediakan berbagai tumbuhan yang berguna untuk bahan bangunan juga obat-obatan. Tidak kalah penting adalah bahwa kekayaan sumber tambang antara lain timah, tembaga, gas alam, serta tambang emas yang terdapat di Laos. Fungsi ekonomis sungai Mekong inilah yang telah menarik bangsa Barat untuk datang dan menguasainya. Dalam pengertian ini, siapa yang menguasai sungai Mekong, akan menguasai pula pusat-pusat perkembangan ekonomi, politik dan budaya di kawasan itu.

Periode sekitar abad ke-18 merupakan masa imperialisme modern, dimana bangsa Barat berlomba untuk mendapatkan daerah koloni di luar Eropa, dengan berbekal tiga semboyan untuk mencari kekayaan, menyebarkan agama, maupun mencari kejayaan untuk negerinya. Kekayaan wilayah di Asia Tenggara, terutama kekayaan akan rempah-rempah, telah mendorong persaingan di kalangan bangsa Barat untuk dapat menguasai daerah tersebut. Dengan demikian, keinginan yang ada bukan hanya terbatas pada keinginan untuk menguasai ekonomi, tetapi sudah merembet ke arah penguasaan secara politis.

Melihat besarnya peran sungai Mekong bagi kehidupan masyarakat, baik dari sisi politis, sosial budaya maupun ekonominya, maka merupakan suatu kewajaran apabila terjadi arus migrasi dari berbagai daerah untuk membentuk suatu pemukiman di sekitar DAS Mekong. Hal ini tidak dapat dilepaskan dari sejarah pergerakan manusia dari berbagai etnis (*human migration*) yang telah berlangsung sejak dulu hingga saat ini. Proses pergerakan atau migrasi yang berlangsung di DAS mekong tentunya sangat berpengaruh terhadap dinamika masyarakat di DAS Mekong itu sendiri.

Sebagian besar kelompok masyarakat yang tinggal di DAS Mekong mengandalkan mata pencaharian di sektor pertanian, nelayan, maupun dari hasil hutan. Delapan puluh lima persen dari masyarakat DAS Mekong secara ekonomis bergantung pada berbagai sektor tersebut (Steinberg 1989: 7). Dalam catatan sejarah juga disebutkan bahwa para petani di DAS Mekong tersebut telah memanfaatkan sungai Mekong untuk pengairan sawahnya sejak abad pertama Masehi (www.mrcmekong.org). Karena kesuburan tanahnya, wilayah di DAS Mekong ini menjadi daerah penghasil beras terbesar sejak dahulu. Itulah sebabnya pula bahwa delta sungai Mekong bersama dengan delta sungai Merah disebut sebagai pusat kuno penanaman padi (Hall, 1988 : 726).

Sejauh ini, masyarakat yang tinggal di sekitar DAS Mekong tercatat lebih dari 100 kelompok etnik. Mereka membentuk koloni-koloni di sepanjang aliran sungai yang mengalir dari Cina, Birma, Laos, Thailand, Kamboja dan Vietnam. Keragaman suku ini merupakan salah satu karakteristik khusus dari DAS Mekong, di samping keunikan lain, yaitu besar dan panjangnya sungai serta kekayaan sumberdaya alamnya (Charnvit Kasetsiri, 2003).

Di Thailand, beberapa kota muncul dan berkembang di sepanjang daerah aliran sungai tersebut. Sejak pariwisata menjadi sektor unggulan di negara tersebut, Sungai Mekong juga tak lepas dari fungsinya dalam mendukung perkembangan pariwisata, khususnya yang berkaitan dengan eco-tourism.

II. Perumusan Masalah

Daerah Aliran Sungai, biasanya menjadi pusat pertumbuhan ekonomi yang menarik para pendatang untuk tinggal dan beraktifitas serta membentuk koloni di daerah tersebut, demikian juga yang terjadi di DAS Mekong. Bertolak dari hal ini, sangat menarik untuk melihat bagaimana etnisitas, sistem dan struktur sosial di sekitar DAS Mekong, serta aktifitasnya di sektor perdagangan transnasional. Bagaimanakah etnisitas dan perannya dalam konteks budaya dan ekonomi (perdagangan transnasional) di DAS sungai Mekong?

Selain itu, kajian ini juga akan melihat bagaimana isu lingkungan dan marginalisasi masyarakat lokal, serta eksploitasi sumber daya alam di sekitar DAS Mekong. Apakah masyarakat asli (*indigenous people*) juga merupakan golongan yang terpojok, ataukah ada kebijakan tersendiri dari pemerintah setempat?

Persaingan-persaingan antar etnis juga sering muncul ke permukaan dengan berbagai faktor pemicunya. Ketidakadilan perlakuan dari pemerintah merupakan salah satu faktor penyebab persaingan atau konflik etnis. Demikian juga dengan rasa memiliki atau penguasaan suatu wilayah, dimana satu kelompok etnis merasa bahwa mereka adalah kelompok etnis asli yang mendiami dan berkuasa atas wilayah tersebut, atau mereka terlebih dahulu datang ke daerah tersebut daripada kelompok etnis lain. Melihat bahwa *human migration* masih terus berlangsung hingga saat ini, maka bagaimana yang terjadi dengan masyarakat DAS Mekong? Bagaimana hubungan antar etnis maupun persaingan etnis yang terjadi? Bagaimana pula pemerintah setempat mengatasi permasalahan yang ada?

III. Tujuan Penelitian

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji dinamika masyarakat berbagai etnik di DAS Mekong di Thailand sejak tahun 1970-an hingga kini. Penelitian ini juga akan melihat bagaimana eksistensi masyarakat asli dalam menghadapi arus migrasi dari berbagai etnis, dan pengaruhnya terhadap sistem sosial masyarakat asli itu sendiri. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga akan melihat dinamika hubungan etnis dengan mengacu pada berbagai aspek antara lain pertanian, kehutanan, dan perdagangan, yang menjadi bagian penting dari sistem perekonomian di Thailand, Kamboja, Laos dan Vietnam (cf. de Silva; 1988).

Kajian terhadap masalah etnisitas dan perdagangan yang juga menyangkut masalah kehutanan dan pertanian di wilayah DAS sungai Mekong di Thailand ini diharapkan akan mampu memberikan contoh dan inspirasi bagi

pemerintah Indonesia untuk dapat mengembangkan wilayah DAS di Indonesia secara maksimal. Selain itu, hasil kajian ini juga ditujukan agar dapat memberikan masukan bagi pemerintah Indonesia dalam proses pembuatan kebijakan untuk menyelesaikan berbagai gejala yang muncul di masyarakat baik dalam aspek sosial budaya, ekonomi maupun politik, serta dapat mempertahankan pembangunan yang berkelanjutan secara harmonis pada masyarakat di sekitar DAS di Indonesia.

IV. Kerangka Analitik

Penelitian ini akan dilakukan dengan menerapkan pendekatan multidisipliner, yaitu dengan meminjam konsep dan teori dari ilmu-ilmu sosial lain, seperti antropologi, sosiologi dan ekonomi. Pendekatan dari beberapa ilmu sosial ini dimaksudkan untuk mempermudah analisis dalam menguraikan persoalan-persoalan yang berkaitan dengan masalah migrasi, perdagangan, etnisitas dan penduduk asli.

Penelitian ini akan mengkaji bagaimana proses migrasi manusia (*human migration*) di daerah aliran sungai Mekong telah berlangsung sejak berabad tahun lalu hingga saat ini. Dalam proses migrasi tentunya ada beberapa hal yang menjadi faktor penarik (*pull factor*) dan pendorong (*push factor*) yang menyebabkan mengapa orang tertarik melakukan migrasi ke daerah yang baru. Migrasi sebagai proses mobilitas spasial yang diikuti dengan perubahan tempat tinggal yang permanen, antar unit politik, statistik atau administratif yang jelas, telah memunculkan tatanan, sistem dan struktur sosial yang baru di wilayah yang didatanginya. Mochtar Naim, sebagaimana dikutip oleh Singarimbun (1977), menganalisa sembilan faktor yang mempengaruhi migrasi, yaitu: ekologi, geografi, demografi, ekonomi, pendidikan, kegoncangan politik, tarikan kota, dan kebijaksanaan migrasi atau transmigrasi.

Migrasi di sekitar daerah aliran sungai Mekong lebih ditentukan oleh faktor geografi, dalam hal ini faktor kesuburan tanah, dan ekonomi, dalam kaitannya dengan perdagangan yang dilakukan melalui jalur sungai. Arus

migrasi secara besar-besaran terjadi pada masa kolonialisme, dimana orang-orang dari negara induk datang dan tinggal menetap di negara koloninya. Di sisi lain, penduduk di daerah koloni juga bermigrasi untuk mencari daerah yang lebih aman dari gangguan kaum imperialis (Abdillah; 2002: 99).

Migrasi sebagai proses perpindahan yang berlangsung telah memunculkan tatanan, sistem dan struktur sosial yang baru di wilayah yang didatanginya. Proses migrasi terkadang memberikan dampak positif bagi daerah yang baru, misalnya terjadinya proses asimilasi, akulturasi atau campuran tradisi dan budaya masyarakat pendatang dengan penduduk lokal. Disisi lain migrasi bisa pula memberikan dampak negatif, seperti munculnya konflik politik dan budaya, serta kerusakan lingkungan. Terkadang juga muncul sentimen pribumisme (nativisme) yang berhadapan dengan para pendatang. Native atau pribumi ini mengacu pada masyarakat yang mengklaim diri sebagai penduduk asli (*indigenous people*) dari suatu wilayah tertentu (Abdillah; 2002: 99 dan 109).

Dalam proses migrasi yang menyebabkan kontak antar etnis pada akhirnya dapat memunculkan 'ke-ego-an' etnis, yang dalam hal ini etnis lokal atau penduduk asli yang merasa berhak atas wilayah tersebut, kemudian harus berbaur dan mengakui adanya 'orang yang berbeda' atau etnis lain sebagai pendatang, bahkan terkadang ada perebutan wilayah kekuasaan tertentu, misalnya kekuasaan politis atau ekonomis. Dalam antropologi sosial, kata etnis atau etnisitas ini mengacu pada hubungan antar kelompok yang menimbulkan kesadaran diantara mereka akan perbedaan-perbedaan budaya dan penghargaan terhadap perbedaan tersebut (Abdillah; 2002: 79).

Kata etnis disini menjadi suatu predikat terhadap identitas seseorang atau kelompok. Etnis mengacu pada sekelompok orang yang mempunyai keterikatan kelompok atas dasar karakter dan ciri-ciri fisik, serta menempati wilayah tertentu. Solidaritas atau ikatan etnis terwujud dalam kumpulan orang, kelengkapan primordial seperti derajat, martabat, bahasa, adat istiadat, dan kepercayaan yang menjadi tanggungan dari setiap anggota kelompok dan menjadikannya serupa dengan anggota kelompok lainnya. Karakteristik yang

melekat pada satu kelompok etnis adalah tumbuhnya perasaan dalam satu komunitas (*sense of community*) diantara para anggotanya (Abdillah; 2002: 75-76).

Berbicara tentang masalah perdagangan, pergerakan manusia salah satunya disebabkan oleh pemenuhan kebutuhan ekonomis. dalam hal ini menjual ataupun membeli barang. Sebagaimana yang dikatakan oleh Reid, sejak abad ke-15 hingga abad ke-17, Asia Tenggara merupakan tempat yang ramai dalam perdagangan antara dunia Barat dan Timur. Reid menyebut periode ini sebagai “kurun niaga” (Reid: 1992). Jalur utama perdagangan dilakukan melalui samudera maupun sungai-sungai besar, termasuk sungai Mekong. Oleh karena itu dapat dikatakan bahwa perdagangan transnasional di kawasan Asia Tenggara telah terjadi sejak berabad-abad yang lalu.

V. Metode Penelitian

Penelitian ini rencananya akan dilakukan secara bertahap selama 4 tahun, dari tahun 2005-2008. Penelitian lapangan untuk tahap pertama (2005) dilakukan di Thailand, dengan memfokuskan pada isu migrasi dan dinamika etnisitas sejak tahun 1970-an hingga kini, serta kegiatan perdagangan transnasional. Tahun kedua (2006) penelitian lapangan akan dilakukan di Kamboja, dengan menitikberatkan pada persoalan migrasi, hubungan antar etnik, perdagangan, kebijakan pemerintah, dan implikasi kebijakan tersebut dalam praktek sehari-hari. Penelitian tahap ketiga (2007) akan dilakukan di Laos. Pada tahap ini pusat kajian akan terfokus pada isu-isu yang berkaitan dengan hubungan antar etnik, migrasi, ekologi, dan dominasi perdagangan. Tahun 2008, penelitian lapangan akan dilakukan di Vietnam, sebagai muara sungai Mekong. Tahun keempat ini penelitian dititikberatkan pada sektor perdagangan, pertanian dan etnisitas. Penelitian tahap terakhir ini diharapkan memperoleh model tentang pola migrasi dan etnisitas, serta dinamika perdagangan transnasional masyarakat DAS Mekong. Selain itu, model kebijakan pemerintah yang berkait dengan isu-isu migrasi, etnisitas, dan perdagangan akan bisa dirumuskan.

Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui pelacakan sumber primer maupun sekunder. Data-data akan dikumpulkan dari studi kepustakaan (*library research*) dan penelitian lapangan (*field research*). Dalam penelitian lapangan tahun pertama (2005) yang dilakukan di Thailand, peneliti melakukan wawancara dan diskusi dengan beberapa organisasi yang berkaitan dengan pengembangan wilayah Mekong, misalnya the Rockefeller Foundation dan MSSRC (Mekong Sub-region Social Research Centre), dan wawancara dengan penduduk lokal.

B. TEMUAN LAPANGAN

Dari penelitian kepustakaan maupun penelitian lapangan di Thailand yang mengambil contoh di daerah Mukdahan, Chong Mek, dan Ubon Ratchatani, tim peneliti mendapatkan hasil temuan lapangan untuk menjawab permasalahan atau isu utama dalam penelitian ini. Sesuai dengan permasalahan yang telah dirumuskan, permasalahan pokok yang diangkat adalah masalah migrasi, peran dan kedudukan masyarakat asli (*indigenous people*), hubungan antar etnis, perdagangan transnasional, dan kebijakan pemerintah terhadap penduduk asli maupun pengelolaan daerah aliran sungai.

I. Migrasi

Masalah migrasi di DAS Mekong bukan merupakan masalah baru, karena proses migrasi tersebut telah berlangsung sejak ribuan tahun yang lalu. Migrasi di sekitar daerah aliran sungai Mekong lebih ditentukan oleh faktor geografi dan ekonomi. Sejak tahun 1990-an Thailand menjadi tujuan utama arus migrasi di DAS Mekong. Kondisi ekonomi dan suasana politik menjadi alasan utama bagi para migran untuk datang ke Thailand. Selain itu, ikatan tradisional di antara negara-negara di DAS Mekong, terutama kemiripan bahasa, etnik, dan budaya jg menjadi pendorong terjadinya arus migrasi lintas batas di DAS Mekong ini.

Para migran di DAS Mekong rata-rata hidup miskin, tinggal di lingkungan yang padat, kumuh, dan kurang sehat. Bahkan dalam beberapa kasus, para migran ilegal, menghadapi ketakutan tertangkap atau terisolasi. Seringkali terdapat juga kasus kekerasan dan bahkan pelecehan seksual terhadap para migran ilegal, yang dilakukan oleh polisi dan petugas migrasi. Selain itu, persaingan dengan penduduk lokal juga menambah berat beban mereka, apalagi tak jarang para pekerja migran ini dicap sebagai penyebab meningkatnya kriminalitas, penjualan obat terlarang, dan problem sosial lainnya, termasuk prostitusi.

Kondisi kehidupan migran yang rata-rata miskin dan akses kesehatan yang terbatas mengakibatkan mereka sangat rentan terhadap berbagai infeksi dan penyakit. Selain itu, kebiasaan para pekerja migran pria pergi ke bar dan kompleks pelacuran yang menjamur di kawasan ini, serta terbatasnya pengetahuan tentang kesehatan, mengakibatkan cepatnya penyebaran penyakit HIV/AIDS di kawasan ini.

Derasnya arus migrasi lintas negara di DAS Mekong menimbulkan berbagai masalah kompleks terutama bagi negara-negara di sekitar DAS Mekong. Dalam beberapa kasus banyak para migran yang kesulitan untuk berinteraksi dengan penduduk lokal karena perbedaan bahasa, budaya dan etnis, atau mengalami diskriminasi lainnya. Salah satu contohnya adalah migran yang berasal dari Myanmar yang mengalami kesulitan bahasa dan beradaptasi dengan kebudayaan Thailand.

Dampak negatif meningkatnya arus pekerja migran di DAS Mekong di Thailand adalah meningkatnya tindak kriminal dan kasus penderita HIV/AIDS karena prostitusi. Selain itu, perdagangan perempuan dan anak juga meningkat di perbatasan negara-negara yang terletak di DAS Mekong.

Beberapa upaya telah dilakukan oleh negara-negara di DAS Mekong untuk menanggulangi dampak negatif dari migrasi lintas negara ini. Hampir semua negara di DAS Mekong melakukan pendekatan migrasi yang tertata seperti yang diusulkan oleh Organisasi Migrasi Internasional (IOM). Dalam

pendekatan ini fokusnya adalah mengembangkan migrasi yang legal dan teratur, mencegah adanya migrasi ilegal, mendeportasi migran ilegal, melegalisasi status para migran melalui registrasi, serta menghukum para penyelundup dan pihak yang terlibat dalam penjualan anak dan perempuan.

Walaupun berbagai upaya telah ditempuh oleh negara-negara di DAS Mekong, terutama Thailand, namun permasalahan migrasi lintas batas negara hingga sekarang belum bisa diselesaikan secara tuntas. Tingkat perkembangan ekonomi dan kondisi politik yang tidak sama di antara negara-negara di DAS Mekong berpengaruh pula dalam upaya penanggulangan masalah migrasi di kawasan ini.

II. Penduduk Asli

Northeast Thailand merupakan wilayah yang dilalui Sungai Mekong dan termasuk dalam DAS Mekong. Penduduk asli *Northeast Thailand* disebut sebagai orang Isan. Orang Isan merupakan etnis mayoritas di *Northeast Thailand*, jumlahnya sekitar 23% dari total penduduk Thailand. Kondisi sosial orang Isan sangat terbelakang dibandingkan kondisi daerah Thailand lainnya. Hal ini disebabkan karena keterbatasan sumber daya alam dan kurangnya perhatian pemerintah Thailand dalam memberikan infrastruktur, seperti jalan raya, jembatan, pembangkit listrik, dsb.

Letak geografis *Northeast Thailand* yang berbatasan langsung dengan negara-negara tetangga ditambah dengan banyaknya akses untuk penyeberangan secara ilegal menyebabkan meningkatnya arus migrasi di daerah tersebut. Dengan adanya migrasi, keberadaan orang Isan semakin terpinggirkan karena banyaknya migran yang datang dan menetap di *Northeast Thailand*. Secara ekonomi, para migran mulai menguasai perekonomian daerah tersebut. Hal ini bisa dilihat dari semakin banyaknya toko-toko milik migran dari Cina. Sedangkan dari segi budaya, kebudayaan asli orang Isan juga terpinggirkan. Orang Isan mulai mengadopsi dan menyesuaikan diri dengan nilai-nilai budaya yang dibawa oleh para migran, meskipun nilai-nilai budaya tersebut tidak sesuai dengan budaya asli orang Isan.

Kehidupan sosial ekonomi orang Isan mulai berubah sejak dimulainya Perang Vietnam (1960-an). Pemerintah Thailand yang tadinya tidak peduli dengan keberadaan orang Isan mulai memperhatikan kondisi daerah *North-east Thailand*. Pemerintah Thailand sangat khawatir dengan ancaman komunisme di daerah perbatasan ini. Tahun 1961-1962 Pemerintah Thailand menetapkan lima program pembangunan untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan dan menghapus kemiskinan orang Isan dan juga untuk menarik orang Isan agar tidak terpengaruh dengan komunisme.

Selain itu, pemerintah Thailand juga mengizinkan berdirinya pangkalan militer AS di daerah *Northeast Thailand*. Keberadaan pangkalan militer AS ini memberikan banyak manfaat bagi orang Isan. Dibangunnya sarana transportasi dan komunikasi termasuk pembangunan *Friendship Bridge* dan juga jalan-jalan yang menghubungkan dengan jalan besar memberikan kemudahan akses menuju Bangkok. Manfaat lain yang diperoleh adalah banyak orang Isan yang mendapatkan pekerjaan terutama di bidang konstruksi.

Setelah perang Vietnam berakhir (1975-an), pangkalan militer AS ditutup sehingga banyak orang Isan yang kehilangan pekerjaan. Tetapi pada saat yang sama terjadi *oil-boom* di negara-negara Timur Tengah. Perekonomian tumbuh dengan pesat sehingga mendorong pembangunan yang membutuhkan banyak tenaga kerja di negara Timur Tengah. Orang Isan yang kehilangan pekerjaan akhirnya bermigrasi ke negara-negara Timur Tengah. Tingkat upah yang tinggi dan tersedianya banyak lapangan kerja merupakan faktor pendorong orang Isan untuk bermigrasi ke negara ini. Pada tahun 1990-an, jumlah orang Isan yang bermigrasi ke Timur Tengah semakin berkurang. Hal ini disebabkan karena meningkatnya pertumbuhan ekonomi negara-negara di Asia, seperti Jepang, Korea, Taiwan, Singapura dan Malaysia. Negara-negara industri baru di Asia mengubah daerah tujuan para migran dari Timur Tengah ke Asia atau biasa disebut dengan "Asianisasi". Selain negara Timur Tengah dan negara-negara di Asia, orang Isan juga bermigrasi ke Bangkok. Sebagian besar mereka bekerja sebagai pekerja bangunan, pelayan hotel, sopir taksi, dan beberapa wanita bekerja sebagai pekerja seks.

Migrasi internasional orang Isan ke luar negeri memberikan dampak positif dan negatif bagi kehidupan orang Isan di daerah pedesaan. Dampak positifnya antara lain tingkat kesejahteraan yang semakin meningkat, perubahan pola pikir dan nilai-nilai tentang masa depan, dan juga teknologi serta pengalaman baru yang bermanfaat untuk pengembangan teknologi di pedesaan. Sedangkan dampak negatifnya adalah di daerah pedesaan yang sebagian besar penduduknya adalah petani menjadi kekurangan tenaga kerja karena banyak penduduk usia produktif yang bekerja di kota-kota atau bermigrasi ke luar negeri. Orang Isan juga kehilangan nilai-nilai budaya asli mereka karena tinggal di daerah yang baru relatif lama dengan kebudayaan dan gaya hidup yang berbeda. Meskipun demikian dengan migrasi internasional ini telah mengintegrasikan orang Isan kepada dunia internasional, sekaligus membuka daerah *Northeast Thailand* yang terisolasi menjadi lebih terbuka terhadap perkembangan ekonomi dan sosial budaya tanpa menghilangkan nilai-nilai budaya asli mereka.

III. Hubungan Antar Etnis dan Perdagangan Transnasional

Perdagangan merupakan salah satu sektor penting dalam kegiatan perekonomian di DAS Mekong. Pada umumnya kegiatan perdagangan di DAS Mekong merupakan perdagangan antar etnis, meskipun dapat juga digolongkan dalam perdagangan transnasional, karena orang-orang yang terlibat dalam perdagangan disini datang dari berbagai negara seperti Vietnam, Kamboja, Laos dan Yunan di China.

Kelompok etnis yang terlibat dalam perdagangan di DAS Mekong (*Greater Thai Mekong Region*) antara lain adalah Nai Hoi, China, Thai-Leu dan Lao Lum di Laos. Etnis Nai hoi biasanya berkeliling untuk menjajakan dagangannya. Barang dagangan yang dijual antara lain kerbau, lembu, cabe, garam, pakaian dan sebagainya. Kelompok terbesar (pedagang) yang terlibat dalam perdagangan di DAS Mekong di Thailand adalah orang China, bahkan secara perlahan mereka dapat menggeser kedudukan etnis Nai hoi dalam sektor

perdagangan. Mereka memperjual-belikan hasil-hasil pertanian, maupun berbagai barang kebutuhan pokok. Kelompok Thai-Leu yang tinggal di sepanjang sisi Sungai Mekong, di perbatasan Laos dan Thailand, pada mulanya hidup sebagai petani dan nelayan. Setelah pembukaan daerah perbatasan, beberapa dari mereka beralih profesi sebagai pedagang.

Perdagangan yang terjadi antara etnis Thai dan Lao-Lum yang merupakan kelompok etnis terbesar di Laos, biasanya merupakan perdagangan informal/ilegal. Mereka membawa barang dagangan dengan perahu atau kapal motor menyeberangi Sungai Mekong tanpa melalui jalur resmi. Komoditi yang diperdagangkan antara lain adalah kayu, produk pertanian, pakaian, dan berbagai barang kebutuhan sehari-hari.

Sebagaimana yang terlihat di daerah penelitian, aktivitas perekonomian, khususnya perdagangan pada saat ini lebih didominasi oleh etnis Cina. Pusat-pusat perdagangan yang mempertemukan berbagai kelompok etnis dari beberapa negara yang dilalui Sungai Mekong bermunculan, misalnya di Mukdahan, di mana terdapat pusat perdagangan yang disebut *Indochina Market*.

IV. Kebijakan Pemerintah

Masalah kemiskinan dalam masyarakat Isan dapat dikatakan sebagai masalah yang disebabkan kegagalan penerapan kebijakan. Hampir di seluruh kawasan Mekong, nasib mereka yang miskin lebih sering ditentukan dan disebabkan karena *mismanagement* oleh pemerintah. Kegagalan yang cukup merebak di kawasan ini terutama dalam hal kebijakan penguasaan kawasan hutan (*land forest policy*). Kebijakan pemerintah yang sebenarnya bertujuan untuk melindungi hutan, ternyata berakibat fatal bagi para petani miskin yang hidupnya sangat bergantung pada sumberdaya alam dan menerapkan sistem ladang berpindah. Setelah diberlakukannya kebijakan masalah penguasaan hutan lindung oleh pemerintah migrasi yang cukup signifikan terjadi di kawasan ini untuk mencari pekerjaan non-pertanian yang lebih menguntungkan.

Thailand merespon masalah ini berdasarkan pada pengalaman masa lalunya dengan beberapa pendekatan baru dalam hal manajemen sumberdayanya. Konsekuensi dari semakin hancurnya masalah lingkungan serta semakin meningkatnya tekanan publik menyebabkan pemerintah Thailand sejak tahun 1980-an telah memasukkan masalah lingkungan ke dalam agenda kebijakannya.

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