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## Turning Red Rural Landscapes Yellow? Sufficiency Economy and Royal Projects in the Hills of Nan Province, Northern Thailand

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*This paper discusses the efforts of the royal family to moralise the environmental behaviour of their subjects in the name of the Sufficiency Economy philosophy solicited by King Bhumibol since the 1990s in Thailand. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Nan province, Northern Thailand, in 2008 and 2009, I focus particularly on Royal Projects recently promoted to correct the rural practices of the ethnic minority groups living in the hills of Nan. In the past, many of these ethnic groups took part in the Maoist insurgency while at present, they represent a key basin of supporters for the reformist Red Shirts movement which is currently threatening the role of the monarchy in Thai politics. The research suggests that the recently increased trend of staging new projects for sustainable agro-forestry management in a 'red' area as Nan does not only aim at improving the conditions of mountain peoples and of the environment, but simultaneously increases the political influence of the conservative forces over this 'ungovernable' territory in times of political crisis.*

**Keywords:** Lua People; Northern Thailand; Royal Projects; Sufficiency Economy; Thai Politics

*Dieser Artikel diskutiert die Bemühungen der königlichen Familie in Thailand seit den 1990-er Jahren, das Umweltverhalten ihrer Subjekte im Namen der Sufficiency Economy Philosophie von König Bhumibol zu moralisieren. Mit Bezug auf ethnografische Forschung in der Provinz Nan in Nordthailand in den Jahren 2008 und 2009 fokussiere ich insbesondere auf Royal Projects, die in letzter Zeit gefördert werden, um ländliche Praktiken ethnischer Minderheiten in den Bergen von Nan zu korrigieren. In der Vergangenheit waren viele dieser ethnischen Gruppen am maoistischen Aufstand beteiligt, während sie heute ein zentrales Auffangbecken für UnterstützerInnen der reformistischen Rothemden, die derzeit die Rolle der Monarchie in der thailändischen Politik in Frage stellen, darstellen. Die Forschung deutet an, dass der Trend zur Einführung von neuen Projekten für nachhaltigen Feldwaldbau in einem „roten“ Gebiet wie Nan nicht nur die Bedingungen von Bergvölkern und ihrer Umwelt verbessern will, sondern gleichzeitig den politischen Einfluss von konservativen Kräften über „unregierbare“ Gebiete in Zeiten politischer Krisen erhöht.*

**Schlagworte:** Lua; Nordthailand; Royal Projects; Sufficiency Economy; Thailändische Politik

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## ***Introduction***

Since the 1950s, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) and other members of the royal family have funded a large number of rural development projects called Royal Projects. In Northern Thailand, the first projects targeted ethnic minorities living in the upland areas (the so-called ‘mountain people’ *chao khao*) and promoted programmes for opium eradication and substitution and health, educational, and infrastructural facilities. These projects can be seen in the context of counter-insurgency activities in the mountainous regions of Northern Thailand. Rural development was designed to isolate the *Communist Party of Thailand* (CPT) and to integrate the ethnic minorities into the nation state. In some ways, this strategy was successful, and the CPT gave up its armed struggle in 1982. Ex-fighters were granted amnesty and tentatively assimilated back into mainstream Thai society.

However, over the last decade, Thailand has seen a new political polarisation between the conservative Yellow Shirts movement and the reformist Red Shirts movement. The so-called Yellow Shirts movement (yellow being both the colour of the monarchy and of Buddhism in the national imaginary) is a nationalist movement that seeks to restore and consolidate the power of the conservative forces (the monarchy, state bureaucracy – often headed by aristocrats – and the army). It rose in opposition to the figure of the reformist businessman and politician Thaksin Shinawatra and to his party, the *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT), the winner of national political elections in 2001 and 2005 (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008). The Yellow Shirts accused Thaksin of undermining the King, which was one justification for the *coup d'état* by the army that ousted Thaksin in 2006 (Connors, 2008; Ungpakorn, 2007).

In the years leading up to and after the *coup d'état*, a new spate of Royal Projects has been initiated in the region. Ostensibly, the main focus has changed from irrigation and rural development to the promotion of sustainable agriculture, the management of natural resources, and the protection of local biodiversity (Supaporn, 2008), referring to King Bhumibol's philosophy of *Sufficiency Economy* as their ideological framework and inspiration.

This article is based on ethnographic research of these new Royal Projects in the northern province of Nan.<sup>2</sup> It argues that the new spate of Royal Projects represents

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2 I conducted fieldwork in this area from December 2007 to November 2009. The research was conducted within

an attempt by the conservative elite to counter the influence of the ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the Red Shirts movement in Nan. The projects and the class differences between the project developers and those to be developed highlight the social and cultural gulf between the royalist Yellow Shirts and Thaksin-supporting Red Shirts in contemporary Thailand.

The past and present political background of the province invites to map connections between two current parallel trends: the strongly publicised royal interest in sustainable natural resource management of the Nan river basin and the 'yellow' imperative to consolidate the presence of conservative forces in politically sensitive ('red') areas. I will evoke some elements of the cultural and political impact of Royal Projects in Nan, keeping in mind that in this area development projects have often had political and military vested interests. Therefore, I first analyse the localisation of Royal Projects in Nan in the name of the King's Sufficiency Economy philosophy that has been reshaping the expressive horizon of those non-farmers (NGO workers, bureaucrats, civil servants) since 2000. Then, I briefly describe the social environment shared by upland and lowland farmers and the tendential response of these socio-economic groups to Sufficiency Economy and to alternative development devices triggered by NGOs, Royal Projects, and the state. Finally, I discuss the social and political impact of two Royal Projects recently implemented in Nan.

### ***From Red to Red. The Politicisation of Rural Development in Nan Province***

Nan province, in the most eastern part of Northern Thailand and at the border with Laos, is a sparsely populated part of the country. Only about 500,000 people live in the valley along the Nan river and in the mountain ranges on both sides of the river. This geography is reflected in the ethnic make-up. Those living in the valley call themselves *khon muang* (literally 'people of the city') and tend to consider themselves as descending from the ethnic T'ai colonisers. The lowlanders call the mountain-dwellers a generic *chao khao* ('mountain people' – but also 'the others', see Forsyth

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the PhD programme in Anthropology of the University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy. The article draws partly on my PhD dissertation (Rossi, 2012). The data presented here result from a multi-sided ethnographic approach, entailing the intermittent frequenting and the participant observation of about a dozen different key locations in the north-eastern districts of Nan province. The reported interviews have been selected among more than a hundred open and semi-structured interviews to subjects directly involved in agro-forestry development activities (mainly farmers, NGO leaders, conservationist monks, public officers, and managers of royal development projects).

& Walker, 2008, p. 59), although they are made up of various different ethnic or language groups such as the Mon-Khmer speaking minorities Lua, Htin, Khamu, Mlabri, and the Hmong and Mien groups (Davis, 1984; Delcore, 2008; Rossi, 2012).

The mountainous terrain, the social and political marginality, and the ethnic diversity of upland Nan province was conducive to armed guerrilla warfare, and Nan became a stronghold of the CPT during the 1970s. “Most of the province [was] CPT controlled” (De Beer, 1978, p. 147) in the mid-1970s, and the *Maoist Peoples Liberation Army of Thailand* (PLAT) established ‘liberated red villages’ in the mountains. Many ethnic groups like Hmong, Mien, and Lua took part in the Maoist army to gain autonomy from the central powers. The recruitment strategies of the PLAT were based on ethnic criteria: the Hmong were the first to join the guerrilla, while Lua – the largest minority in Nan province – and groups of T’ai *khon muang* (both Yuan and T’ai Lue, the dominant ethnic groups in the region living by the valley plains), followed (Sathyawadhna, 1991). Members of the student movement from Chiang Mai, Bangkok, and other cities found political and material support from *chao khao* groups when hundreds of them decided to join the guerrilla in the jungle after the military repression of the democratic triennium (1973-1976) (Morell & Samudavanija, 1981; Wyatt, 1982/2003).

The counter-insurgency strategy of the army included bombing ‘red’ villages or forcibly evacuating and resettling their inhabitants (De Beer, 1978, p. 147). This was flanked by rural development programmes that were basically driven by security issues and not by social and environmental ones. At that time, the promotion of agricultural and infrastructural modernisation in Thailand was one of the main tools by which the government, intermittently represented by army generals loyal to the Crown, tried to contain the spread of communism. *Accelerated Rural Development* (ARD), combining agricultural extension and infrastructural projects, was promoted to relieve the economic condition of the rural working classes and to prevent T’ai and *chao khao* farmers from joining the guerrilla forces (Charoensin-O-Larn, 1988, pp. 203-232). This especially happened in ‘red’ liberated areas such as Nan, where ARD programmes, conceived under the guidance of the US intelligence, were implemented by the army in areas where communist ‘terrorists’ were believed to operate (Marks, 2007).

In this context, Royal Projects can be seen as part of a consolidated state strategy to contain the economic discontent among farmers (both *chao khao* and *khon*

*muang*), who have been chronically disappointed by incomplete, awkward, and lowly publicised land reforms that systematically left the majority without property rights on the land (Kemp, 1971; Leonard & Na Ayutthaya, 2005). In the 1970s, Royal Projects mainly consisted of irrigation, weir and dam-building projects, and of crop conversion projects that were supposed to eradicate poppy cultivation. Perhaps most spectacular was the Queen Sirikit dam on the Nan river – a symbol of national development that was completed in 1972. Other small Royal Projects were promoted during the guerrilla in the western part of the province (being the eastern part of the Nan basin in turmoil). These projects that included the construction of schools, roads, and water management facilities had been implemented since the 1960s, and their number increased especially in the late 1970s, when the terrorist guerrilla seemed to become a revolution (The Office of His Majesty's Principle Private Secretary, 1982).

According to a recent book, the official definition of a Royal Project is

*a group of organizations joined by the common purpose of realizing the King's vision for the Thai highlands. In this scene the Royal Project is an informal network of numerous organizations both national and international. The first and most important group involved in the Royal Project is the hill-tribe farmers themselves. Not only are they the beneficiaries of the work done by the project, but they are also the ones who actually do the most of the work. (Wichai, PhunthiSung, & Luang, 2007, p. 55)*

In Nan, the 'hill-tribes', mainly represented by Mon-Khmer speaking minorities such as the Lua, were a particular target of the Royal Projects. Following the "strategy of peace" enacted to stop the insurgence (Law 66/23 of 1980), captured and surrendered Maoist comrades were formally defined as 'co-operators for the development of the nation' (*Pu Ruam Patthana Chat Thai*, known as PhoRoTho). The memory of the recent past, thus, still operates through this network of guerrilla veterans: The PhoRoTho initiatives (conferences, workshops, seasonal camps) provide an important identity marker for many Lua (but also Hmong, Mien, and *khon muang*) individuals and families that live on the hills of Nan province today. The network, indeed, led to the establishment of solidarity relations among former comrades and among their descendents all over Thailand.

The amnesty for communist insurgents and the defeat of the CPT can be seen as a victory of the Thai military and monarchy over the first 'red' areas. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, old problems continued, and new conflicts over land and forest resources emerged. After logging in Nan had been encouraged by the army to prevent the spread of the guerrillas in the forest (an experience relayed to me in many inter-

views with conservationist monks and lay activists in the province), the logging ban issued in 1989 (Lakanavichian, 2001) and new national parks created a conservation legislation that was primarily targeted against farmers and ‘hill-tribes’ (Pye, 2005).

In Santisuk district, for example, near the *Doi Phu Kha National Park*, many farmers were encouraged to cultivate genetically modified maize on the forested hills under the contract farming regime promoted by the converging interests of state ministries and large agro-business corporations such as *Charoen Pokhpand* (CP). These farmers often fell in a spiral of debt, and their families were impoverished by this system. They were not the legal owners of the land they farmed, and they had to pay their debts with local entrepreneurs and with the Bank of Agriculture, which seasonally provided the chemical stocks of fertilisers and pesticides and genetically modified seeds for maize farming. To repay their debts, farmers encroached into forest areas to establish new cultivations and came into conflict with the park authorities. This situation is common all over Northern Thailand, particularly for the *chao khao* of this and other provinces (Rossi, 2012).

Poverty, landlessness, and negative experiences with government agencies such as the *Royal Forest Department* were all reasons for the popularity of Thaksin Shinawatra, who offered different kinds of development possibilities with programmes such as debt moratoriums, micro-credit for rural investment (the one-million-baht-programme), and the 30-baht universal health care scheme (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2009). During my fieldwork I could experience the widespread appreciation for the Red Shirts and for the ousted ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

In the eastern area of the upper Nan river basin (Santisuk, Pua, Bo Kluea, and Chaolerm Phrakiet districts), many farmers declared to me to feel largely satisfied with the social and economic policies promoted under the government of Thaksin. Due to the widespread discontent of the rural population and the hope (sustained by Thaksin) to take part in a wider society of consumption, during the decade 2000-2010, in Nan, a general sympathy for the Red Shirts movement among a wide range of socio-economic profiles (farmers, urban and rural workers, both *chao khao* and *khon muang*, small and large entrepreneurs, students) was tangible and has in many ways replaced the widespread support for the CPT. A crucial factor (reported to me by key activists of the *Hug Muang Nan Foundation* and by local leaders) is that the CPT veteran network PhoRoTho, which is particularly popular in Northern and North-

Eastern Thailand, counts many supporters of the radical wing of the Red Shirts movement today. Among the dozens of rural workers I interviewed (both *khon muang* and Lua, men and women) somebody even argued continuity between Thaksin's welfare policies and the communist aspiration of egalitarian distribution of wealth among different classes. The Royal Projects and counter-insurgency rural development could not prevent this turn, full circle, "from red to red" (Kitiarsa, 2012).

### ***Sufficiency Economy and the New Royal Projects in Nan***

In 1997, the year the financial crisis hit the Thai economy and the urban and rural working classes, King Bhumibol announced his concern for the development model embraced by Thailand and spoke out for a radical change. In a now famous speech, he emphasised the necessity for what he called a Sufficiency Economy (*settakit po pi-ang* in Thai). In his opinion, Thai individuals, families, and communities should focus on the satisfaction of their basic needs through their own production and consumption of local natural resources. Moderation and reasonability should drive the Thai people's economic choices before possibly, and not necessarily, engaging in risky investments in the globalised market economy (Grossman & Faulder, 2012, pp. 265-279).

The Sufficiency Economy model was immediately taken up by government agencies but lost real influence under the successful economic policies of the Thaksin government that stressed mildly Keynesian investment strategies as a way out of the crisis. However, after the *coup d'état*, Sufficiency Economy resurfaced as the main ideological flagship of the conservative forces. In 2007, it was included in the new constitution as a fundamental guideline in economic, social, and environmental policies and in open opposition to Thaksin reformism. Substantially, the doctrine was shaped along the lines of a Buddhist moral economy as propagated by foreign and indigenous eco-Buddhist movements, schools of thought, and lay and ordained intellectuals (Rossi, 2012, forthcoming). The Sufficiency Economy model was even declared to be a key tool for the social development of Thai society by the *United Nations Development Programme* (UNDP, 2007). In 2007, the *Ministerial Office of Environmental Quality Promotion* even adopted the slogan: *Yut lok roon, chai settakit po piang* (Stop global warming, use Sufficiency Economy), stressing the positive environmental impact of the King's economic philosophy on a global scale.

During the decade 2000-2010, the King's economic philosophy became *the* national brand of sustainable development and His Majesty's teachings are recalled all over the country through slogans on posters, stickers, TV, and radio advertisements and are explained in websites, video clips, and short films that publicise the King's message. This regime of representation is nurtured with a visual imaginary centred on the presentation of didactic pictures and movies reproducing Thai villages in a romanticised and static perfection. This imagery represents the ideal rural order as it is imaged by the royal elite and by institutions like the *Office of Royal Development Projects* and other foundations set up by members of the royal family.

From the end of the 1990s onward, Sufficiency Economy has become the main *mythomoteur* of Royal Projects and other royal developmental initiatives. It has also become a key ideological framework for the activities of many NGOs and public institutions engaged in land and forest issues. Two new Royal Projects show how Sufficiency Economy is used as a development paradigm in Nan: the *Phu Payak*-Project initiated by the Queen in 2005 and a new huge Royal Project initiated in 2009, called *Phid Thong Lang Phra* (PTLP).

The idea underpinning these two (and many other similar) projects is to create pilot areas in which farmers can learn new models of natural resource management and take inspiration from the King's Sufficiency Economy idea. The activities promoted in the Queen's project and PTLP are: 1) conversion of shifting monocrop cultivations (rice and maize) into sedentary multicrops (including fruits, vegetables, tea, and flowers); 2) substitution of agro-chemical stocks of fertilisers, pesticides, and seeds with biological stocks; 3) reforestation programmes; 4) terracing and planting vetiver stripes (to reduce the space for agriculture, to prevent soil erosion, and to pursue forest re-growth); 5) introduction of water management techniques to avoid floods and droughts; 6) collection, transformation, packaging, and commercialisation of agricultural products; and 7) tourist promotion of the pilot area.

### ***Phu Payak Royal Project***

In Nan province, one of the best known and publicised Royal Projects is the one promoted at the border with Laos in Ban Nam Ri (Khun Nan sub-district, Chalerm Phrakiet district) by Queen Sirikit, the King's wife. The project has been baptised 'Sta-

tion for Agricultural Development according to the Royal Vision' (*Sathanti Patthana Kasettakon Phrarachadamri*). Phu Payak used to be one of the hottest battlefields in Nan province during the communist insurgency and the project is targeted towards *chao khao* communities who were resettled by the army during that time. The project seeks to provide technical advice and material support to local families through the mediation of technicians employed in research foundations and think tanks sponsored by the monarchy. Local people from four villages around the core village of Ban Nam Ri are hired to work within the project pilot area for a salary of about THB 100 (a little more than EUR 2) per day. In Nan town there is an elegant shop set up to publicise the Queen's project to Thai tourists and to sell the project's agricultural products which are neatly packaged and branded with the Royal Project logo. In the shop one can find the official brochure that explains the idea behind the project:

*On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 2005, Her Majesty the Queen travelled and posed her sight on the forested area around Phu Payak where serious problems with illegal cultivation [buk ruk] in the forest reserve still exist. . . . Bun Tap Samuh, general of the Thai Army<sup>3</sup>, has been entrusted with the mission to develop – respecting the local people – a programme to solve the problems of water management following the royal inspiration. This aims to help the local people and to improve their livelihoods. . . . The [target] population is composed of Thai people of the mountains [chao Thai phukhao]. Their prevalent occupation consists in shifting agriculture [luean loi], which is causing the progressive illegal occupation of the reserve [buk ruk] and forest destruction on the slopes. For these reasons soil erosion problems have occurred, with a globally bad impact on the local eco-systems. In this way the agricultural production has diminished. People have become poor and the quality of life is very low. (Thai in the original, translation by author)*

The brochure exemplifies a recurrent rhetoric underpinning Royal Projects in the Nan area. Ethnic prejudice and political oblivion drive the mainstream discourse of the 'developers'. Information about Lua is reduced to the fact that these 'unlucky' Thai citizens are the authors of their own miserable condition and that fortunately, the royal family and the army will help them to adjust their ecological *habitus*. Its depiction of the Lua follows the ethnic scapegoating as environmental 'villains' encroaching on the forest otherwise applied to the Hmong (Forsyth & Walker, 2008, p. 77).

According to the experts involved in the management of these projects that I interviewed in September 2008 and in November 2009, the landscape forged by shifting agriculture is *lambak* (difficult), *mai suaiei* (ugly), and *mai tuk* (wrong). Lua are commonly defined by the developers as very slow in accepting the importance of trees

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<sup>3</sup> This general of the Thai Army is the most influential advisor of the Queen and for several years led the army operations against the Muslim separatist insurgency in Southern Thailand.

and forests and adopting the Thai concepts of development in their life. In Nan, the hegemonic understanding of development is influenced by eco-Buddhist narratives and practices. In this context, many Lua (Mon-Khmer speaking groups) on the hills of Nan do not practice Buddhism, but the Royal Projects staff involves them in eco-Buddhist ceremonies like the *buad paa* (tree consecration, see Darlington, 1998). In Royal Projects it is common for them to receive training from Buddhist monks on natural resource management.

#### ***Phid Thong Lang Phra (PTLP) Royal Project***

The second and much larger project, the PTLP Royal Project (set up by managers of the Doi Tung Royal Projects of Chiang Rai and by the *Chai Patthana Foundation* based in Chiang Mai) has targeted the whole upper basin of the Nan river since 2009. Its name refers to a popular saying about the practice of modesty (symbolised by the act of sticking golden sheets on the back of Buddha statues) and consists of a highly structured environmental intervention that aims to build rice terraces, settle nomadic farmers, and replant the forest over a hilly area mainly populated by Lua ex-communist resettled communities. The project will last at least ten years and will cover a sloped area of thousand hectares, the basin of the Nan river. According to Royal Project managers and local urban environmental activists, this broad organisational enterprise will repair the hydrological balance of the Nan river which is believed to be the main tributary of the Chao Phraya river. In the opinion of the project managers, this massive intervention will not only support the *chao khao* but is primarily aimed at protecting lowland agriculture and preventing floods and water scarcity in the central plain.

The PTLP explicitly aims to involve the communist veteran network PhoRoTho, with the help of army officials. This operation, once again framed by the Sufficiency Economy discourse and imagery, encourages the cooperation of the PhoRoTho in mapping and managing the territory, thus helping other institutional actors in the management of the rich water and forest resources of the basin, damaged by shifting agriculture and maize plantations (Rasakun, 2009).

According to interviews conducted with activists from different organisations, farmers, village leaders, and students at the early stage of the project between Sep-

tember and October 2009, PTLP is intended to strengthen the political influence of the conservative forces on the 'red' territory of Nan. The establishment of formal relations between the PTLP managers and operators and the PhoRoTho was not considered a politically neutral strategy by the majority of my long-term and short-term informants. Firstly, the increased number of new environmental projects in the name of Sufficient Economy implies a consistent flow of funding directed at local villages and sub-district leaders that will join the project. Secondly, it will imply the physical presence of urban upper-class bureaucrats and technicians belonging to royal development institutions on the hills and will be monitored by the army. Thirdly, the project aims to incorporate the local NGO and environmental activist networks into socio-environmental activities promoted by the Royal Project staff. This incorporation of environmental activists within the Royal Project and Sufficiency Economy framework is well underway. The most important example is the Hug Muang Nan Foundation, an eco-Buddhist socio-environmentalist NGO founded in 1993 by the conservationist monk (*phra nak anuraksa*) Phra Khru Pithak Natakahun, Abbot of the Wat Aranyawat in Nan town (Darlington, 2000; Delcore, 2000; Rossi, 2008, 2012, forthcoming). Until 2005, the Hug Muang Nan Foundation network tended to be independent from the royal initiatives but at the time of my fieldwork it was systematically embraced within the new Royal Projects programmes. Royal Project staff consistently asked and paid for advice and collaboration by religious and lay activists of the Hug Muang Nan Foundation network that in some cases have been hired and earn a salary as technicians, managers, and advisors within the Royal Projects.

### ***Sufficiency Economy is not Sufficient – The Limits of Royal Ideology***

Despite the base of the Royal Project in royalist ideology and the repeated use of Sufficiency Economy philosophy imagery, the Royal Projects in Nan show discrepancies between the Royal Project's self-representation and local responses to it. I argue that the hiding or flattening of ethnic specificity, historical identity, and public dissent under ecological classifications reflect a bias that leads to a muted response. This can be seen by weak participation in the projects, a lack of self-confidence of participants, and an almost total absence of compliance towards the project by the target

subjects. Hegemonic socio-environmental projects can often be misunderstood and resisted by the beneficiaries. In part, this is due to the hierarchical nature of projects that are infused with an imagery of members of the royal family helping poor farmers and therefore prevent real participation. As reported by Mr. A., an ex-employee of Phu Fa Royal Project (a project promoted by the Princess Sirindhorn in Bo Kluea district), this lack of interest is connected to the weakness of participation devices enacted within the Phu Payak and other Royal Projects:

*[The target population] doesn't feel they are the owners of the project, but they feel that the owners of the project are people that they don't know at all and who don't give them a chance. This is a problem also in Phu Payak: When some budget is provided, farmers come to the project and join the activities, otherwise they don't care for the project . . . Actually, we should listen to them and ask what they exactly need. But experts from Bangkok come to the project and tell them: "You must do this and that." The project provides natural seeds and fertilisers for free to local farmers, but periodically these stocks deplete and the project goes short of funding from ministries and donors. (Mr. A., Santisuk district, personal communication, April 2009)*

Even if participation and improvement of local costumes are explicit and highly publicised objectives, the removal of the target communities' accurate ethnic profile and historical background characterises the ongoing construction of the public image of many Royal Projects environmental initiatives. Beneficiaries are generally defined as Thai citizens (*chao Thai*), community (*chumchon*), tribe (*pau*), or population (*ratatron*). This lack of acknowledgement of local histories and identities matches with the lack of a reciprocal acknowledgement among the project's experts and the target population.

This situation produces niches of resistance. In Phu Payak, Lua farmers hired by the project used to steal the empty packaging reporting the project logo to sell non-biological products grown in their own gardens (project manager in Phu Phayak, personal communication, September 2008). The beneficiaries of the project complained to me about the salary, which to them seemed too low, while other Lua villagers complained about the fact that the project could not cope with the water scarcity around their settlement. Hills in front of the beautifully shaped pilot areas are still seasonally burned to make space for monocrops, while farmers who accept to be part of the project do this just to get monetary and material support. Only few people spontaneously adopt the royal model and go back to their previous habits as soon as the budget finishes.

A more fundamental discrepancy is what Walker (2008) calls the "elites' misinterpretation" of the Thai village economy, which is deeply embedded in the global market system. Sufficiency Economy emerges in awkward opposition to the rhetoric and practice

of material development pursued by the Thai pro-monarchic governments during the Cold War. Thus, the philosophy has been embraced by bureaucratic elites in response to the business oriented policies sustained by an emergent class of politicians with important careers in the business sector (i.e. Thaksin) but its projection onto rural lives is not reciprocated by the rural subjects themselves. This contradiction between urban fantasies of Sufficiency Economy and the real aspirations of the rural population is played out within the Royal Projects. In Nan, different categories of 'non-farmers' are today working in training activities on sustainable techniques of natural resource management to improve the farmers' situation. Most of the NGO workers and state administrators I interviewed considered Sufficiency Economy as the key solution to farmers' poverty and environmental degradation produced by slash and burn agriculture. These non-farmers involved in community development and sustainable agriculture implement dozens of educational projects around the province to teach rural workers about Sufficiency Economy principles. They are often urban educated people from the middle and upper classes, including technicians and directors of the local Royal Projects, managers of the Office of Agriculture of Santisuk and Nan. The Royal Project managers I met around the province were mainly male urban professionals from notable and aristocratic families, often specialised in the agro-forestry sector.

When asked for an opinion on Sufficiency Economy, my informants among the farmers acknowledged the good intentions of the royal philosophy and were curious about the alternative practices promoted within Royal Projects, but most of them had the impression that "Sufficiency Economy is not sufficient" to relieve their economic condition. Furthermore, some farmers looked at the intervention of urban administrators and NGO workers for educational and developmental purposes as an alien presence in their villages. I noticed a class fracture between developers and those 'to be developed' that in some ways reflected the 'yellow' versus 'red' conflict. Farmers identified NGO workers and local bureaucrats as aligned with the conservative forces and some looked at them as people that

*get money from the state to tell us what to do, while the state gives us nothing. . . . At least, Thaksin gave the budget directly to each village, and we knew perfectly what to do for our communities. (farmer, Santisuk district, personal communication, October 2009).*

On a more explicitly political note, the presence of the army (Royal Thai Army, 2011) monitoring socio-environmental 'good practices' entailed in the project activities, is

a political fact that alone raises serious doubts about the political neutrality of royal socio-environmental projects in this area. Today, Nan province is recognised as a key bastion of the Red Shirts and was among the 15 provinces that experienced the enforcement of the Emergency Decree during the repression of the Red Shirts movement in May 2010 (Nightwatch, 2010). The return of Red Shirt activists who experienced repression by the army may serve to reinforce the scepticism towards the 'yellow' Royal Projects. The election results from 2011, in which the Thaksin party *Phuea Thai* won a resounding victory in all districts of Nan, suggest that the Royal Projects have not been successful in turning the 'red' rural landscapes 'yellow'.

### **Conclusion**

The recent bout of new Royal Projects in Northern Thailand needs to be understood within the changing and polarised political situation and represents an attempt to regain hegemony over the developmental discourse in rural Thailand. Key elements include the combination of traditionally prejudiced depictions of ethnic minorities in the uplands (Forsyth & Walker, 2008) within the Sufficiency Economy doctrine of the King, with an active developing role ascribed to state bureaucrats and the army.

The biggest Royal Project to be introduced in Nan province was the PTLP programme. If Phu Payak exemplifies the 'old trend' of controlling minorities by flattening ethnic and political identities under an ecological stigma (represented by slash and burn agriculture), PTLP combines this with the systematic attempt at incorporating civil society networks. In particular, the managers of the project try to do this by mobilising local networks of former communist comrades (and thus many Lua) and by including the eco-Buddhist socio-environmentalist network Hug Muang Nan Foundation. PTLP thus opens new trends in implementation strategies of Royal Projects. The PTLP project represents a large-scale strategy to win over rural populations in 'red' areas, proved by the fact of the intended implementation of PTLP programmes in Yala and Udon provinces respectively. Yala is perceived as the core of the Muslim contemporary insurgency in the South, and Udon is considered the strongest 'from red to red' province in the northeast of Thailand (Isan). Like these provinces, Nan occupies a delicate position in the national political landscape and the co-optation

strategy triggered by PTLP – which today involves the whole civil society, both in urban and in rural milieus – is aimed at countering a stronghold of former communist resistance with many members of the Red Shirt PhoRoTho.

The new socio-environmental Royal Projects in Nan are far from being politically neutral. Behind a frame that emphasises ecologically sound approaches and the sustainable improvement of rural livelihoods, the proliferation of Royal Projects around the upper Nan river basin in the decade 2000-2010 is an attempt to enforce the presence of conservative networks in a region that strongly supports the Red Shirts and the radical wing of the reformist movement. The strategy implies both de-politisation and co-optation of local communities and networks. In this scenario, the environmental spectacle carried on within Royal Projects in Nan not only offers new solutions to natural resources management in areas afflicted by shifting agriculture but works as an inclusive and soft strategy of conservative rule. However, after the violent repression of the Red Shirts in Bangkok and their re-emergence as a powerful force after the 2011 election victory, it seems unlikely that the Royal Projects will be sufficient to reshape the ‘wrong’ and ‘red’ landscapes handcrafted by the *chao khao* Lua and to re-colour them ‘yellow’.

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