Thailand has led the countries of Southeast Asia with unprecedented macro and micro development initiatives, and rapid economic growth and social change over the last forty-five years (Kampe, 1997). Primary goals of these development efforts have been modernization, improved quality of life and preservation of natural resources. Conventional indicators attest to Thailand’s success. Measures such as infrastructure improvements, increased foreign investment, technological advances, reduced infant mortality, increased life expectancy, improved levels of education and health care, and reduced poverty, place Thailand among the most developed countries in the Mekong Subregion (Asia Development Bank, 2008). However, the benefits of development have not accrued evenly throughout the country either socially or geographically. Ethnic mountain groups1 of northern Thailand have been marginalized as a result of several development initiatives and have benefited little from macro economic development, which has served national development objectives through large-scale schemes (Kampe, 1997). Certain initiatives such as wide-ranging forest conservation and crop substitution initiatives have negatively affected ethnic mountain groups by reducing subsistence farming in favor of cash-crop farming and by making their occupancy on traditional lands increasingly tenuous.

1 Although the term “hill tribe” is used in official government language and daily Thai speech, it is pejorative and has become synonymous with forest destruction. Ethnic mountain group is one of the preferred terms and thus is used here except when it is part of official initiative titles or quotations.
Focusing on the Hmong, one of more than fifteen ethnic groups in Northern Thailand, allows examination of links among several of Thailand’s large-scale development initiatives, changing cultural frameworks of minority populations, and spatial transformations within traditional environments. Hmong are a particular emphasis of several Thai development schemes. Because of this, as well as their distinctive and well-documented cultural framework and geographically discrete village locations, Hmong provide fertile ground for such an investigation. This chapter begins by providing some background on Hmong as a cultural group, as an ethnic minority in Thailand, and as emphasized in the Thai Royal Project development scheme. It then briefly introduces the three village study sites and data used in this study as well as the theoretical lens applied in study analysis. The study’s primary focus, traditional and contemporary settlement patterns, as well as development influences in the three case study villages, are then discussed. The chapter concludes with a cross-case analysis examining links among particular elements of the development initiatives, changing Hmong cultural frameworks and changing patterns in the physical environments exhibited in the three case study villages.

Hmong in Thailand

Hmong are an ethnic group with populations in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma. These populations are branches of the Miao people of southern China. Dispersal of Hmong from China to other parts of Southeast Asia occurred primarily as a result of “bloody repressions” of the ruling government between 1795 and 1872 (Tapp, 1989, p. 18). Accounts suggest that Hmong had a strong desire to maintain their ethnic identity and consequently fled when rulers in China began to force them to conform to the dominant Chinese culture. Hmong resettlement was concentrated in the highlands of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Throughout history, Hmong have demonstrated a strong desire to remain autonomous and distinct from all dominant cultures (Faderman & Xiong, 1998; Mottin, 1980). This strong desire to maintain their unique Hmong identity is believed to be the reason for resettlement at the highest altitudes, in mountain jungles that offered a refuge supporting an agricultural lifestyle (Chaturabhawd, 1980). Scholars believe Hmong began to move from Laos into Thailand around 1885 by following the range of mountains along the Burmese border and into northern Thailand (Cooper, 1998).
After resettlement in the mountainous regions of Southeast Asia, Hmong practiced “pioneer swidden farming” (Tomforde, 2003, p. 357). Swidden is an agricultural method, also known as slash-and-burn. Once a village was established, trees and shrubs were cut down. After the vegetation died, farmers would burn it, creating ash that fertilized the soil, then they would plant. When the soil’s fertility was depleted, the farmer would move on to a distant forested area and begin all over again. When all the available forestland around the village had been cultivated and depleted, elders would move the village. This might happen as often as every four years as a result of soil depletion, the most common reason for relocating Hmong villages historically. Hmong cultivation practices, as well as their traditional cash crop farming of opium poppies, have made them a focus of development efforts in northern Thailand.

Since the 1960s, Thai government policies regarding Hmong have been premised on three goals: increased national security, arresting deforestation and degradation of upland environments, and opium eradication. These policies and their application were also influenced by Thailand’s movement to modernize into an urban, industrialized society. This movement views agrarian ethnic minorities, “especially ethnic groups living in mountainous areas and practicing traditional culture, as primitive, engaging in superstitious practices, oriented toward the past, with an inability to adjust to new circumstances” (McCaskill, Leepreecha, & Shaoying, 2008, p. 14). According to the Thai government, Hmong are a central component of the “Hilltribe Problem” outlined in The National Security Council’s Masterplan for Development of Highland Communities & Environment and Control of Narcotic Crops, 1992-1996 (Sukonthaphathipak, 1997). They are viewed as disadvantaged people living in remote, inaccessible areas. As a result of alliances with western countries and western development agencies, the government and government policies have favored a “scientific” modern worldview. This perspective devalues the Hmong traditional worldview, which employs local knowledge and mythical and spiritual understandings of the environment, and casts it in a negative light.

Hmong have been regarded with suspicion by the authorities because they represented pockets of non-conformity in Thailand (Tapp, 1989). From the 1960s through 1982, Thailand experienced a communist political insurgency, the CPT, which focused activities in northern provinces where Hmong were heavily concentrated. Because of possible links, Hmong were considered a threat to national security that was addressed first by military presence and later by relocation of villages outside the CPT-controlled areas (Sukonthaphathipak, 1997, p. 65). While this history linking
Hmong to communist threats to the state may have faded in the minds of many in government, response to Hmong history as shifting cultivators and as producers of opium are now central components of Thai policy that continue to strongly influence Hmong settlement patterns and cultural transformations.

Employing western models, Thai government policies concerning protection of natural resources and addressing environmental problems have particularly influenced Hmong. The Wildlife Conservation Act of 1960 and the National Park Act of 1962 execute conservation through the establishment of state-controlled forest protection areas. This strategy is supported by international agencies such as the UNDP, USAID and the World Wildlife Federation. But because ethnic minority groups, particularly Hmong and Karen, have historically inhabited many areas now “protected,” traditional practices and ways of life are forbidden in these areas and ethnic mountain groups are considered harmful. At the same time, tourists, whose numbers now often exceed the local population, are viewed positively even though their presence is more detrimental to the environment because of their wanton use of scarce local resources (e.g., water) (Chotichaipiboon, 1997: 106-109). Within this context, “Thai environmentalist discourse has generally perceived and portrayed forests as fragile, vulnerable and susceptible to extinction while swidden agriculture and village settlements have been depicted as the ultimate menace to these ‘national assets’” (Tomforde, 2003, p. 351). This discourse has strengthened since the early 1990s with commensurate intensified resettlement of ethnic-mountain-group villages outside protected areas. However, villages connected to Thai Royal Project sites within protected areas have been spared from resettlement (Tomforde, 2003).

The Thai Royal Project, initiated in 1969 by His Majesty, King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand (Evrard & Leepreecha, 2009), is considered one of the most important and successful development initiatives by many Thai (Chandraprasert, 1997). The stated objectives of this policy initiative are to improve the standard of living of ethnic mountain groups, stop opium poppy cultivation, and preserve forests. This major policy initiative has mainly targeted Hmong as they were the primary opium producers historically. Schemes implemented under the auspices of The Thai Royal Hill-Tribe Project reflect an “ideology of improvement” (Crawford, 1995, p. 16) because many Thai believe that by transforming Hmong from shifting cultivators, who practiced slash-and-burn farming and grew opium poppies, to stationary cash-crop farmers, the Royal Project addresses the larger social good by reducing the supply of opium, reversing deforestations and preserving watershed areas.
It is important to note that while environmental discourse in Thailand assumes Hmong pioneer swidden farming is detrimental to forests and watersheds, scholars still dispute the actual reasons for environmental degradation. However, most generally agree that swidden farming is less destructive than highland road construction, large-scale agribusiness, and commercial logging (Delang, 2002; Hirsch, 1990; McKinnon, 1997) sanctioned by the government in the mountainous areas of northern Thailand. Given that government-sanctioned macro development initiatives favor environmentally destructive activities (e.g., tourism, logging, large-scale agribusiness) while at the same time employing initiatives to change traditional Hmong practices (e.g., settlement and land use patterns, agricultural ways and religious systems), it is important to understand the consequences of these government strategies for the Hmong way of life.

These macro-scale Thai government initiatives, premised on western science-based cultural frameworks, place Hmong, who do not share this cultural perspective, in an uneasy relationship with those in power and with the dominant Thai culture. A comparative analysis of three Hmong villages in Northern Thailand, Khun Klang, Pa Nok Kok, and Huay Lok, offers a means to examine in detail the spatial and cultural implications of Thai development initiatives for ethnic Hmong living in villages in northern Thailand. The author collected data for this study during two trips to Thailand and Laos in 2007 and 2008. The 2007 trip included three weeks in Thailand and a week in Laos conducting initial investigations in numerous villages in Northern Thailand and Laos, and visiting Thai government and NGO archives and museums. The month-long 2008 visit to Northern Thailand incorporated intensive village stays of ten days in Khung Klang and three days each in Pa Nok Kok and Huay Lok. During these village stays, the author observed and documented a range of Hmong cultural activities and settings, engaged in discussions with village leaders, elders and residents to understand village history, dynamics and daily life. Additionally, during 2008 the author collected information and documents from officials at the Royal Project Headquarters and from the archive at the Hill Tribe Museum, both in Chiang Mai.

Data employed here include Royal Project archival materials on the three sites, as well as current aerial photographs augmented by documentation of the existing physical environment of each village, interviews with a variety of village residents and extensive observations of everyday village life. These data allow comparison not only among villages but also with baseline documentary evidence on Hmong from existing studies by anthropologists (Chaturabhawd, 1980; Cooper, 1998; Lemoine, 1972; Mottin, 1980;
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Village Established (approx.)</th>
<th>Khun Klang</th>
<th>Pa Nok Kok</th>
<th>Huay Lok</th>
<th>Traditional Base-line (Pha Puen, Laos)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td></td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1978\textsuperscript{\textdagger}</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Research Station Established</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1974\textsuperscript{\textdagger}</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Station Name</td>
<td>Inthanon Royal Project</td>
<td>Mae Sa Royal Project\textsuperscript{d}</td>
<td>Huay Lok Royal Project</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village Form</td>
<td>Geographically responsive</td>
<td>Geographically responsive</td>
<td>Grid</td>
<td>Geographically responsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Population in Agricultural Production Currently</td>
<td>90% (Stationary “improved” agriculture)</td>
<td>50% (Stationary “improved” agriculture)</td>
<td>93% (Stationary “improved” agriculture)</td>
<td>100% (Swidden)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Comparative Summary of Village Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Khun Klang</th>
<th>Pa Nok Kok</th>
<th>Huay Lok</th>
<th>Traditional Base-line (Pha Puen, Laos)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other employment</td>
<td>Wholesalers, commercial</td>
<td>Tourism &amp; Handcraft (in &amp; outside village)</td>
<td>Outside village, Construction</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Population applying Traditional Religious Practice</td>
<td>70% - 80%</td>
<td>5% (at most)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Shaman</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Christian Churches</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location Information</td>
<td>Inside Inthanon National Park</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80 km. south of Myanmar boarder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from Chiang Mai</td>
<td>90km</td>
<td>35km</td>
<td>120km</td>
<td>400km (50km from Luang Prabang)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

a. Chiang Mai is northern Thailand’s largest city. Its metropolitan population is nearly one million.
b. Inthanon National Park was set aside in 1954 to protect the natural setting in the Himalayan foothills.
c. One of the earliest Royal Project sites, it resulted from the King’s 1969 visit to the village. He noted opium cultivation efforts deprived the village of adequate food from subsistence agriculture.
d. The agricultural research station near Pa Nok Kok is an annex of the larger Mae Sa Royal Project.
e. The trend away from large multi-family households in the village underlies increasing home construction.
f. The village was created at the King’s request in 1978 to resettle three Hmong villages from up-land areas. The Royal Project provided many improvements for the village, a school, water and electricity systems, and agricultural education for the villagers.
Tapp, 1989) and data collected by the author in Pha Puen located in the mountains northeast of Luang Prabang, Laos. These comparisons shed light on Hmong cultural and spatial transformations within these Hmong villages and are illustrative of changes in traditional Hmong worldview and lifestyle instigated by the Royal Project initiative. This study employs an analytical framework combining Rapoport’s concepts of “culture core-periphery” and “systems-of-activities/systems-of-settings” to explore cultural and spatial transformations within these settlements as they become Royal Project sites. Table 1 provides comparative data on these villages as well as the base-line village of Pha Puen. These data provide specific background for the chapter’s later analysis.

Cultural Framework

U.S. architect and anthropologist Amos Rapoport (2005) argues that culture categorizes a vast range of human phenomena and that it is helpful, when attempting to operationalize culture, to dismantle such a concept into components and expressions. This becomes one important way to relate culture with the environment. There are two ways to dismantle culture. The first includes social expressions of culture that can be observed and for which accepted methods of study exist: kinship, family structure, roles, social networks, status and identity. The second means for dismantling culture is to derive a sequence of increasingly specific components of a culture: worldview, values, norms, lifestyle and activity systems (Rapoport, 2005). Within these dimensions of culture, Rapoport defines the culture core as those elements of culture most important to the group itself. The culture core defines a user group profile, a particular life-style and a set of important activities (Rapoport, 1980). Rapoport also suggests that elements of the culture core change more slowly while elements in the culture periphery change more quickly.

In a previous study of immigrant Hmong cultural change in the US, the author identified seven cultural characteristics derived from a review of research literature on Hmong that suggest the core of traditional Hmong culture in Southeast Asia: large household size, non-nuclear/extended-family households, strong kinship ties, the three parts of Hmong traditional religion, maintaining independent ethnic identity, practicing

---

2 Most adult Hmong in Northern Thailand speak the Thai language; some are also proficient English-speakers. In cases where the Hmong interview participants were fluent in English, interviews were conducted in English. In all other cases, a bi-lingual, Thai-English translator assisted with the interviews. Although the translator was not Hmong, she was familiar with Hmong village life and culture as a result of her extensive research on tourism in Thailand’s Hmong villages.
swidden agriculture, land ownership/control (see Dearborn, 2004: 55-67). To examine Hmong cultural change in the villages studied, this chapter will focus on three of these characteristics because they are the characteristics which are most distinct from and potentially in conflict with present-day Thai culture and with Thai government development initiatives: 1) maintaining distinct ethnic identity, 2) practicing shifting agriculture in remote highland locations, 3) practicing three interwoven components of their traditional religion: animism, ancestor worship, and geomantic beliefs.

Activities and activity systems are the most concrete expressions of culture and are thus the easiest to link to the physical environment because it is important that the environment be supportive of these activity systems. In order to understand linkages with the physical environment, both latent and manifest aspects of these activities must be understood. Rapoport suggests that activity systems are linked to systems of settings. It is this framework that will now be applied to Hmong identity maintenance, agricultural and religious practices and the associated systems of settings.

### Spatial and Cultural Transformations and Development Initiatives

The three Hmong core cultural characteristics identified above frame this chapter’s main arguments. In this section, they are employed as a lens to analyze spatial and cultural transformations in light of agricultural and touristic development initiatives.

### Maintaining Distinct Ethnic Identity

Historically Hmong employed exceptional efforts to remain distinct from the dominant culture. After leaving southern China to escape domination and forced assimilation, Hmong settled in small villages at very high altitudes. These remote locations allowed Hmong to remain independent and maintain their distinct cultural identity. In remote highland villages, like Pha Puen shown in figure 1, Hmong wanted to live near clansmen with whom certain ritual ties were shared, but because of exogamous marriage customs also wanted to live near people who were of other clans. Thus, although traditional villages varied in size from six to ten households, they were usually composed of more than one clan. The small traditional village size and remoteness of villages, one from another, reflected and supported the subsistence nature of Hmong lifestyle. The village headman, who dealt with government officials, was chosen and supported by village household heads.
Hmong clans employing choice independent of the influence of government and Royal Project initiatives settled Khung Klang and Pa Nok Kok. Both villages were and remain independent political, social, and ethnic entities, distinct from the Royal Project research station and from other ethnic villages, and are home principally to ethnic Hmong. Thus the distinctiveness of these villages serves to maintain their Hmong identity and Hmong-ness of residents and to distinguish Hmong from other ethnic groups. Perhaps because of geographic remoteness and inaccessibility of the village, residents of Khung Klang focus inwardly on village and cultural life to a far greater degree than do the villagers in Pa Nok Kok or Huay Lok. Khung Klang residents maintain that Hmong culture and way of life are expressed in an internalized way. From the daily rhythm of agricultural work, to appeasing animist and ancestor spirits, to sitting with family in the evening, residents report being content with village life (see figures 2 and 3). Although numerous adults had left the village to go to secondary and post-secondary schools in Chaing Mai or Bangkok and had been employed in both public and private sector jobs in Thai society, they returned to the village because of their strong desire to be surrounded by other Hmong and to live according to the Hmong worldview.

Alternatively for residents of Pa Nok Kok, being Hmong was not a way of life but rather something to be commoditized and sold to tourists. Residents did not mention the desire to live in the village because of their wish to live in harmony with the Hmong worldview but rather to be part of active tourist enterprises. Owing to its proximity to Chiang Mai and improved roads, in the mid-1990s tourists who wanted an “authentic” highland tribal experience would occasionally visit the village. Although these tourist visits began in an informal way, villagers soon started to work with the Thai tourism authority, as well as a group of students and faculty from Yale University in the U.S., to strategize how best to take advantage of tourist desires to visit the village. In 2000, with the help of the Thai tourism authority, the village committee considered developing “homestays”3 for foreign tourists. At the same time the village increased traditional handcraft output and established a cultural tourism venture in conjunction with Yale students who came to work with and live in the village for several months. This led to initiation of homestays that offered tourists the chance to get close to Hmong culture and taste traditional Hmong foods. The tourism authority currently has certified ten houses in the village for homestays. Thus, while the pattern of village

---

3 In Hmong villages, homestay opportunities are a form of tourism that allows the visitor to rent a room from and eat meals with a local family to better learn the Hmong lifestyle. The Thai tourism authority encourages homestays as a means of developing the tourism industry and to disburse the economic benefits to rural residents who might not otherwise profit from tourism.
life supports Hmong identity, it is an identity that has been altered by its packaging for tourists’ consumption, as figure 4 illustrates. It is the making and sale of Hmong handicrafts, catering to tourists who are staying in the village, and the representation of being Hmong that underpin daily rhythms of life, not Hmong agricultural or religious practice.

Unlike Khun Klang and Pa Nok Kok, residents of Huay Lok did not employ independent choice in the location or siting of their village. Rather than being distinct from the neighboring Royal Project extension station which sits directly to the south of the village, there is no clear physical boundary between the edge of the village and the extension station. The nondescript edges of the village and the major highway that divides the main part of the village from an ancillary part serve to diffuse the village.
Socially the village is an amalgam of residents from three different original Hmong villages and the kinship ties between residents do not follow traditional patterns of closely linked kin. The relatively flat geography of the site and the fact that the Royal Project station additionally serves two Karen villages that also blend physically with Huay Lok serve to further deny identity to the Hmong village. These conditions may in part account for the sense among residents that they are embattled from outside and that many of the social problems within the village result from their lack of autonomy.

**Practicing Shifting Agriculture**

While Hmong traditionally practiced swidden farming and historically grew opium as a cash crop, they subsisted for the most part on their own production of dry rice, corn and subsidiary crops (e.g., taro, yams, gourds). The activities of swidden farming and the influence of agriculture on Hmong beliefs and traditions are regarded as an important aspect of Hmong culture (Lee, 2005). Historically, Hmong believed in both household spirits and wild spirits inhabiting natural objects. Hmong beliefs in the efficacy of these spirits necessitated many ceremonies to appease them and to obtain their protection for all undertakings. To ensure successful planting, growth and harvest, simple ceremonies were conducted at different times to ask for spiritual cooperation and to honor the spirits for a successful harvest.

The Royal Project initiative intervened specifically to modify Hmong agricultural practices from swidden to fixed-location farming employing modern scientific methods to increase quality and yield and to discourage opium production. These changes substantially modified the daily life and yearly rhythms related to this core cultural characteristic. Scientific methods augmented and in some cases replaced the importance of the spirit world to successful agricultural outcomes. Farmers employ modern farming practices such as applying chemical fertilizer, irrigation, sheltering plants from weather extremes, and using hybrid species developed by the experiment station (see figure 5). However, for those who continue to engage in agricultural production, these changes do not appear to have substantially altered their sense of themselves as Hmong. In fact, those who continue to farm are proud of their agricultural production and see it as an extension of their Hmong identity. Thus it may be the activities of farming even though modified, rather than the specific activities of swidden which remain as a core cultural characteristic. The weakened link between agriculture and religious practice is considered detrimental to overall Hmong identity by Hmong village leaders; but most Hmong who farm only concern themselves with this change when
water for irrigation and basic needs is insufficient or when harvest yields fall below expectations. In Khun Klang, farmers augment scientific methods by conducting traditional ceremonies to ensure successful harvest. In Huay Lok and Pa Nok Kok few appear to engage in ceremonies to appease spirits for improved agricultural outcomes.

Hmong Traditional Religion

Within traditional village life, Hmong religious practice was an important determinant of Hmong cultural life. Sherman (1988, p. 588) describes the Hmong as “a people steeped in animistic ritual, bounded by good and evil spirits to a way of life filled with the magical and mystical.” Three identifiable and interwoven components constitute traditional Hmong religious practice: animism, ancestor worship, and geomantic beliefs. Hmong animism viewed supernatural beings as involved in every aspect of human life, most critically in birth, death and sickness. Shaman could see and communicate with the spirit world, and thus were consulted in the event of illness or misfortune (see figure 6). Traditionally, Hmong believed that specific spirits inhabited the structure and spaces of a house. On a special altar, the spirit of wealth protected all household members (see figure 7). Additionally, Hmong also practiced a
form of geomancy, known as *loojmen*, when siting villages, houses and the graves of ancestors. *Loojmen* is a system for siting these important settlement elements according to mountain contours and watercourses formed in mountain valleys (see figure 8). Strict criteria existed for following *loojmen* principles, to placate ancestor and other spirits to ensure the welfare of village and household inhabitants.

Traditionally, the site for a village was chosen so that it harmonized with surrounding geography. Tapp (1988) notes, in his anthropological study, that villages sited with bad *loojmen* inevitably brought misfortune to their inhabitants. The village should be cradled in a sloping area with mountains rising on either side. Similarly, the site for a house was traditionally chosen to harmonize with the shape of the surrounding mountains. Standing in front of the house, “you should have a clear view to the mountains to your right and left. The sun should rise behind the house and set in front…. If the terrain resembles an elephant, the house should sit between the tusks or on the back where a man would sit” (Ranard, 1986, p. D4).

Both Khun Klang and Pa Nok Kok were originally sited in response to *loojmen*, while Huay Lok was sited and laid out by government authorities responding to convenience of an easily accessible and available site. The layouts of Khun Klang and Pa Nok Kok respond to geography as traditional practices would dictate, but Huay Lok’s layout is a rectangular grid responding to ease of infrastructure development rather than geography.

Religious activities and their settings in each village differ substantially. According
to official government figures, sixty percent of Khun Klang’s population is Buddhist and forty percent is Christian. The village has three Christian churches and one small Buddhist temple. Informants in the village note that despite official government figures, between seventy and eighty percent of the villagers still follow traditional Hmong religious practice (see figure 9). There are six shaman in the village. When villagers become ill, they go to the local clinic but most also see a shaman for traditional healing.

Huay Lok has three Christian churches and approximately sixty percent of villagers follow Christianity. The remaining forty percent of villagers follow traditional Hmong religious practice and are, like those in Khun Klang, identified by government statistics as Buddhists. In Pa Nok Kok about ninety-five percent of residents are Christian, five percent follow Buddhism and ancestor worship. There is no shaman and no Buddhist temple in the village; it has two Christian churches.

### Comparing Cultural and Spatial Transformations

Comparing statistics noted in Table 1 concerning village development, transformation, and the Royal project initiative, in light of the previous sections’ qualitative analysis of three core cultural characteristics, demonstrates not only transformations in Hmong vernacular space but also the intertwined nature of the culture core. Because the three characteristics discussed are inseparable, the true detrimental effects of development initiatives on the Hmong and Hmong culture are best understood by examining the three characteristics together as changes in one lead to changes in the others. This section presents this complex interrelationship.

Khun Klang and Huay Lok are substantially larger villages than the traditional baseline village and Pa Nok Kok. It is clear, from experiencing these villages on the ground, that daily life in the two larger villages revolves around agricultural production and the relationship with the Royal Project extension station, while tourism timetables influence Pa Nok Kok. Daily life in Pha Puen relates primarily to the activities of subsistence farming, maintenance of kinship, and animism and ancestor worship.

Village context and history are important factors that also influence transformations of vernacular space. Examining systems of activities/systems of settings related to two core cultural characteristics, agricultural production and religious practice, demonstrates the interrelated nature of these characteristics and allows exploration of cultural
and spatial transformations within these settlements. The geographic relationship of village to Royal Project appears linked to the percent of village population employed in agricultural production. However, remoteness of a village also influences agricultural employment as remote locations offer few other employment opportunities. If, as this and other studies suggest (Cooper, 1998; Dearborn, 2004; Lee, 2005; Lemoine, 1972), farming and agricultural production are a core cultural characteristic that Hmong believe is intimately linked to their Hmong cultural identity, then the Royal Project initiative supports that core characteristic while tourism initiatives do not.

These development initiatives also appear to have an undercurrent of religious change, in some cases subsuming Hmong who practice traditional animist spirit worship into Buddhist religious practice and in other cases converting Hmong from traditional animism to Christianity. Both religions come with their own sets of activities and settings not found in traditional Hmong vernacular space thus suggesting spatial transformations on the village level. The subtle reclassification of Hmong from traditional animists to Buddhist presents Hmong as more acceptable citizen of the Thai nationstate to the Thai people but also undermines Hmong cultural identity. The Hmong who understand their traditional religion as something that distinguishes them as Hmong, have not endorsed this reclassification by the government. Being considered Buddhist by others not only denies their identification with a main component of Hmong culture but also contradicts the Hmong core cultural characteristic of maintaining distinct ethnic identity. Also, Hmong conversion to Christianity, while a personal choice for religious change, nonetheless weakens links with other Hmong who maintain traditional religious practice and eliminates association with a core Hmong cultural characteristic (Dearborn, 2004). This is particularly true in Pa Nok Kok where the majority of residents consider themselves Christians.

The case of Huay Lok offers an additional point concerning these transformations. As something of a planned village, it fails to respond to resident expectations with regard to loojmen, as figure 10 illustrates. Some in the village blame village troubles with drugs and crime on this physical mismatch with cultural frameworks; others suggest it results from their lack of autonomy and lack of distinct physical identity. Thus, while the benefits of the Royal Project initiative are many in terms of improved access to nutritious food, improved infrastructure, opium eradication, and probable arrested deforestation and protection of watershed, this transformation for highland

---

4Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand; subsuming traditional Hmong animist spirit worship into Buddhism is another means of making Hmong more like other citizen of Thailand.
Hmong farmers has come at the cost of unanticipated cultural change and spatial transformation in their villages. Agricultural development initiatives have resulted in large-scale, irrigated farming involving hybrid species of tropical and temperate food crops, flowers and ornamentals for international markets. Royal Project marketing and quality control specialists regulate access to these markets resulting in social and economic stratification in Khun Klang and Huay Lok that is unusual in Hmong society. Many families who grow for these markets no longer provide for their household subsistence and must purchase food. The lives of most residents of these two villages have become intertwined with the bureaucracy and policies of the Royal Project Initiative which does no incorporate citizen participation in its planning. Likewise government labeling of Hmong as either Buddhist or Christian and the consequences for Hmong identity and ethnic distinctness provide an ironic counterpoint in the broader Hmong history of fierce independence, strong ethnic isolation and self-determination.

**Development, Cultural Change and Spatial Transformation in Thailand**

The preceding analysis of cultural and spatial transformations in light of Thai development initiatives offers several insights concerning development strategies and cultural identity. This study employed Rapoport’s model of a culture core as a means to study cultural change in light of powerful external influences. Examining the consequences of externally induced rapid development to three Hmong core cultural characteristics suggests that forced change can be quite detrimental to a cultural group such as Hmong who have historically 1) prided themselves on in their collective sovereignty but now have few opportunities for control over their collective future, 2) placed great importance on their relationship to the spirit world but have seen that world devalued by science-based farming, other religions, and the government, and 3) identified their place in the physical world by an appropriate relationship to geographic features and natural forces but have been forced to resettle where an appropriate
relationship cannot be established. This study also suggests that rather than acting as independent elements, these core characteristics begin to operate as an intertwined system where each characteristic influences others to varying degrees. Huay Lok offers a potent example of how the core acts as a system and the consequences of external forces that undermine that system. Resettling this village in a flat, lowland area, ignoring traditional Hmong settlement patterns based on loojmen, and ignoring the need for distinct village boundaries, is an affront to village residents’ understanding of their place with regard to animist forces and to non-Hmong. While most Huay Lok residents continue to practice agriculture, many nonetheless believe that their village and all of its residents suffer misfortune resulting from lack of physical separation from non-Hmong and improper alignment with the Hmong spirit world.

Huay Lok offers a clear example of core characteristics acting in a systemic way and the negative effect of enforcing change on a cultural core that cannot rapidly respond to external forces such as Thai development initiatives. Careful analysis of Khun Klang similarly suggests that these three core characteristics link together in a strong cultural system. For Khun Klang residents who sense that their village world is appropriately aligned with the spirit world, no village-wide misfortune is perceived. Elders in Khun Klang, as well as the village headman, describe individual households having seized opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities existing outside the Royal Project. Several families have become produce distributors in addition to farming. These families have built small warehouses in the village and act as middlemen purchasing and disseminating produce that does not meet the quality standards of the Royal Project buyers. This offers another market for farmers’ produce and begins to reduce control of the Royal Project in the lives of Khun Klang residents. Other entrepreneurs have started enterprises like a beauty salon/barber shop and a sewing network that sells to a fair trade group. While Huay Lok residents feel they are at the mercy of the military and the drug trade, Khun Klang residents have been better able to survive external forces and positively guide change.

In Pa Nok Kok, the cultural system is changing as a result of the influence of tourism rather than from agricultural development initiatives. Unlike Huay Lok, the residents of Pa Nok Kok do not perceive change as negative. They do note that the pace of life is too fast and leaves some unfortunate villagers behind because they are unable to benefit from tourism activities. In Pa Nok Kok no informants described tourism as a negative influence, perhaps because the village committee made the choice to engage
tourism as a means to increase local economic activity. It nonetheless is inducing cultural change as noted earlier, by tying village life to the time schedules of tourists in the making and selling of handicrafts and in putting village and household life on a stage for tourists to observe.5

The analysis presented above may at first suggest that development and maintenance of cultural identity and vernacular space are mutually exclusive aims. However, various authors have developed scenarios where these two aims may be seen as complementary (Chandraprasert, 1997; Kampe, 1997). These authors note, however, that if they are to suggest the possibility of maintenance of cultural identity and vernacular space, development initiatives must offer a voice and political power for those who are being developed. Understanding culture as a system with mutually supportive core characteristics also offers a means by which ethnic identity of minority groups may be supported and maintained even within a development frame.

Although the Royal Project development initiative appears to have been successful in eliminating narcotics production, improving economic conditions among the ethnic mountain groups, arresting deforestation and protecting watershed, studies suggest the outcomes of this initiative may not all be positive. Development initiatives directed toward Hmong have assumed that they are a large part of the “Hill Tribe Problem” and that the problem can be fixed by transforming them and making them culturally like the Thai. However, development initiatives which are supportive of core cultural characteristics, and which allow choice and promote resourcefulness among those “being developed,” appear to offer the greatest positive outcomes.

5 With 12.5% of households already certified for homestays, during high tourist season from Mid-November through February, Pa Nok Kok generally has several overnight visitors each day in the village in addition to the vans of tourists who arrive two to three days each week to visit the handcraft market, the small village cultural museum and walk the lanes in the village.
References


