

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Eco-Buddhism and Alter-Politics in the Thai Uplands: A Partisan Ethnography

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Abstract

The article highlights the role of partisan ethnography in studying the chains of co-optation of grassroots environmental activism in ecologically and politically sensitive contexts. In Thailand, such chains are often undergoing the process of institutionalization of eco-Buddhist approaches to nature conservation, also concurring with the detachment of grassroots socio-environmental activism from the recent, urban based pro-democracy uprisings. The discussion will focus on the recent history of the eco-politics related to natural resources conservation in the Nan River Basin (Northern Thailand). It will describe how, since the 1980s, eco-Buddhist NGOs, Royal think tanks, international cooperation organizations, and corporate C.S.E.R. programs, which comply with the latter agencies, have systematically tended to manipulate pioneer, grassroots eco-political imagination and the organisational know-how of local environmental activists. These powerful institutional actors demonstrated interest in the Buddhist moralization of local ecological beliefs and praxis as a strategy to afford privileges of access to land, water, and forest resources through forms of internal “green grabbing”. At stake here is the fact that, beyond the grabbing of Thai river basins’ contested landscapes, activists’ radical imaginations and alter-political practices – an intangible component of such landscapes – are subject to a form of intellectual and political grabbing. The anthropological enterprise and the ethnographic encounter, conceived as partisan collaboration, nevertheless show that forms of patient resistance to such structural dynamics of co-optation might also express an unexpected source for the creative rearticulation of dissent and alter-political imaginations.

Keywords: alter-politics; eco-Buddhism; green grabbing; Nan river basin; royal projects

As the climate emergency impacts more and more people in Southeast Asia and questions our social relations of nature in both rural and urban areas, civil society confronts greater challenges than ever before.

Civil Society Organizations can look to past experiences of working under and toppling dictatorships to tackle the new wave of authoritarianism.

They can draw on years of global campaigns to forge links between local and national struggles and the global climate-justice movement.

(Oliver Pye, *Civil society and environmentalism. Crossing frontiers of activism*, 2023: 341)

Introduction

In Thailand, socio-environmental movements and grassroots rural and forest dwellers' movements in marginal regions played a key role in the emergence of pro-democracy and anti-dictatorship parties and political mobilisations from the late 1980s until the early 2000s. It might thus be surprising that the movements emerged in early 2020 against the authority of the Army General and ex-Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the author of the 2014 coup d'état against the reformist forces connected to ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, are only weakly bound to the contemporary peripheral, grassroots movements for indigenous rights to land and community-based natural resource management (NMR).¹ Indeed, the new political formations tried to challenge Prayuth in the field of human, political, and civil rights, avoiding the populist approach of the reformists of the previous tumultuous political season (the so-called "red shirts" linked to Thaksin). They advanced open arguments for a radical reform of the constitution that would drastically limit the intervention of the monarchy and the military in the democratic process. The anti-establishment factions are mainly led by Thai Bangkokian-educated youth, who have articulated an original political approach based on anti-hierarchical values. This approach involved the rehabilitation of radical intellectuals such as Jit Poumisak (1930–1966), who carried on a Marxist analysis of the *sakdina* system, namely the hierarchical social system of the traditional Thai monarchic state. Youth-led democratic activism is indeed comprised of alternative ways to conceive power and hierarchies and to practise democracy. The practice of spontaneous democracy is enacted through secret co-residencies among young activists in urban peripheries, city apartments, or clandestine meetings and camps. It implies experimenting with dense intellectual and strategic confrontation among militants, the activation of legal networks for advocacy and protection, the experimentation of new protest and demonstration tactics, and the exposure to a high legal risk for individual freedom and safety (Horatanakun 2024). Youth pro-democracy activism also entails a re-mapping of the city – through flash mobs and unauthorised gatherings – and engages in the ritual or occasional subversions of the spatio-temporal routine of the capital, Bangkok. Furthermore, the youth-led uprisings and activism that have taken place since 2020 are cosmopolitan and have been shaped by the constant presence of social media and virtual networks, as well as a dialogue with other pro-democracy movements at regional and international levels (Bolotta and Siani 2024; Sangkhamanee 2021a and b; Sombatpoonsiri 2021).

To go back to the noticeable absence of environmentalist activists and the weakness of the environmentalist agenda in the youth-led pro-democracy movement, Jakkrit Sangkhamanee (2021a) argues that it is not (only) a problem of generational dialogue nor of insensitivity towards environmental issues (which are deemed less relevant in the anti-systemic struggle than other issues as freedom of speech, human rights, and public welfare schemes among others). Neither is it a fact essentially connected to the polarisation between urban and rural political networks. The "absence" is somewhat due to the lack of a strategic articulation between the pro-democracy movement and contemporary socio-environmentalist struggles. In contemporary Thailand, indeed, highly specialised and professionalised environmental activists did not create (nor maintain) a bridge linking local struggles and democratic issues at the national level.

¹The 2014 coup interrupted the increasingly violent confrontation between the reformist forces, indirectly led by the ex-premier and telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, his parties (Thai Rak Thai and Phuea Thai), their delegates, and proxies. He enjoyed electoral supremacy due to the widespread support of the northern and north-eastern rural classes and of the urban poor, also after the crisis that led to his voluntary exile following the military-led coup d'état of 2006. The "red shirts" led by Thaksin animated the anti-dictatorial movement against the "yellow" factions (the pro-monarchist conservatives supporting military backed governments). Recent developments (the 2014 coup, the royal succession in 2016–7, enforcement of provisions against activists seeking to reform the monarchy and the army) saw the emergence of the Future Forward Party-FFP (until its dissolution in 2020, which caused the youth-led uprisings) and of the Move Forward Party-MFP, until its dissolution in August 2024. MFP won the 2023 election, but the victory was usurped by the Pheu Thai Party, which, despite having a lower electoral outcome compared to MFP, was co-opted by the conservatives to counter the reformist wave in the meantime.

The fact that Thai environmentalism tends to be only partially and ambiguously connected to current pro-democracy movements led by the Future Forward Party-FFP and by its reincarnation, the Move Forward Party-MFP, is also underlined by Eli Elinoff and Vanessa Lamb (2022: 12). In their diachronic analysis of environmental politics and social movements in Thailand over the last five decades, the two authors remark the non-linear connections between the environmental movements and democratic mobilisation of the last wave. Since the appearance of Thaksin and his proxies on the political scene, middle-class “deep green” environmentalism and the authoritarian developmental models tended to converge at the expense of a political focus on the socio-economic conditions of people living *in or in the proximity* of protected areas.

In this paper, I will reflect upon other possible reasons lying beneath the recent “absence” of the Thai socio-environmentalist movements from the youth-led pro-democracy mobilisations and agendas. Despite being aware of the historical and ecological shifts connected to globalisation and neo-liberalism, which, according to Oliver Pye, should encourage Civil Society organisations “to transcend the last frontier of environmental activism, to move from rural sites of extractivism to urban centres of industrial production” (Pye 2023: 341), my argument requires moving the lens from Bangkok to the northern, peripheral areas of the country. In the last 20 years, indeed, environmental movements have been impacted by the increased capacity of the privileged classes and political forces (the aristocracy, the military, the techno-bureaucratic apparatus, etc.) to co-opt *political, economic, and social alternatives* that emerged from rural grassroots before the Thaksin era.

Ghassan Hage (2015: 4) defines *alter-politics* as a dimension “capturing the possibilities and laying the grounds for new modes of existence.” In this article, I will mobilise the concept of alter-politics by referring to non-state, locally determined ecological narratives and practices that compete with authoritarian, top-down approaches to rural development and environmental conservation. I will attempt to expand the concept proposed by Hage, taking into account specific characteristics of the Thai case. In particular, I will emphasise the constraints and tendencies connected to the engagement of Buddhist monks in the debate on deforestation and sustainable agriculture, as well as to the eco-political impact of the elites’ soft power in the realm of rural development during the decade 2006–2016. In this scenario, eco-Buddhism proved to be a key ideological device in the de-politicisation of local conflicts and for the absent articulation between eco-activism and pro-democracy mobilisations in the aftermath of the 2014 *coup d'état*. The elites appropriation of eco-Buddhist approaches – praised by many Western scholars as positively impacting indigenous ecological practices– worked as an *anti-politics machine* (Fergusson 1990), through which they pulverised grassroots political initiatives and dissent around NRM, the commons, and land rights.

After a short (self-)critical premise on the importance of the ethnographer’s positionality in the study of “alter-politics,” I will focus on salient facts of the recent developmental history of one of the most “remote” and densely forested provinces of northern Thailand, Nan Province, where grassroots and eco-Buddhist environmental activism arose since the mid-80s. Data collected over a decade, from 2006 to 2016, will provide the main ethnographic repertoire for this contribution.

Ethnography and the Ambiguity of “Political Passion” in Thailand: A Partisan Premise

As anthropologists, we should not mold our interpretation onto those of our interlocutors. Notwithstanding, the learning process through which we acquire information regarding cultural issues, problems, and conflicts is partly in the hands of our informants and collaborators. Anthropological fieldwork teaches us the role of empathy in human communication. For this reason, while immersed in the context of my PhD and post-doc fieldwork research on rural development in Northern Thailand,² I often felt disturbed about what was going on at the local and national level

² In the past 15 years, I conducted fieldwork in Thailand (focusing on Nan Province uplands) during the following time slots: November 2007–March 2008; September 2008–April 2009; September 2009–December 2009; August–September 2011; September–November 2012; March 2013; March 2014; September–November 2015; March 2024.

in Thai politics. During my stays in the rural areas of Nan Province, I could feel the frustration of farmers suffering poverty and marginalisation, as well as the disappointment of lay and religious activists endlessly working against a capitalist mentality among rural workers. I realised very soon that state processes and aggressive capitalism in Thailand were often violent and essentially authoritative. Subdue violence (leading to farmers' suicide for debts connected to the contract farming system, arrests in national parks for forest encroachment, persecution of environmental activists, residents' frequent health diseases connected to the use of pesticides, etc.) and a widespread fear of power abuse complicated the context. Royal projects were often managed by aristocratic individuals and accompanied by military officers. A sophisticated form of "domestic" soft power and co-optation³ were the main political tools adopted by the aristocratic establishment to consolidate its power in remote areas, which were considered politically unstable and generally hostile towards the conservatives. Royal projects, furthermore, did not disdain the financial support of corporations deemed responsible for the perverse impacts of industrial agriculture.

I had friends in both the two factions that confronted each other until the 2014 coup. Indeed, during the political turmoil that engulfed Thailand in those years, the farmers in rural areas tended to align themselves with Thaksin and the red shirts, while NGO leaders were closer to conservatives, namely the Democrat Party and the yellow shirts. The distrust of villagers towards local aid agencies was openly declared by the representatives of the villages where I conducted the larger part of my data collection. Particularly, farmers had the perception that NGO workers "cared for trees more than for humans." NGO leaders were intercepting funding from state and non-state agencies, which could have directly benefited the rural population. Local farmers were suspicious about my relationship with urban NGO leaders, among who I found key informants and friends. Furthermore, my informants and hosts in the village where I conducted most of my fieldwork initially were afraid that I might behave like a spy. They feared that I could reveal details of the daily environmental misconduct of the local farmers to the authorities or NGO workers themselves. It took a long time for me to convince villagers that local NGOs were themselves part of my research focus and that it was a priority of my investigation to understand and compare competing perspectives. For both village leaders and NGO leaders, anyway, overt passion could not work against the establishment's soft and hard powers. In the context in which I conducted research, "political passion", a crucial concept in Hage's theorisation of alter-politics (Hage 2015: 4–10), was tendentially expressed through attendance, silence, and containment, as well as by sarcasm, irony, self-control, and restraint.

It was almost impossible in the years 2007–2015 – as it remain in recent years – to openly speak in public about political opinions or to criticise the monarchy in public. The situation required citizens to be calm, *jai yen* (literally: cool hearted): a passive attitude that significantly conveys alter-political imaginations and actions. In sum, it required a "politics of patience," that, at least, allows for progressively accessing minute achievements (Appadurai 2013; Procupez 2015). *Passion* and *patience* share the same etymological roots in the ancient Greek word "pathos," pain, suffering. However, while the word "passion" entails a prompt reaction, the idea of patience implies a form of resistance and apparent neutrality toward a painful stimulus. I had the impression that individual and collective political engagement was more often and better expressed in speeches and acts through indignation, seriousness, balance, and an elicited attitude towards self-sacrifice, as well as avoidance of open protests and, in case of protest, a preference for highly symbolic non-violent acts or messages. Such an attitude can entail a set of radical passive actions, from boycotting to absconding, self-exclusion, and inefficient participation. This inclination, one may find consistent with Buddhist teachings that permeate public morality and with the Buddhist condemnation of "passions" (*kilesa*) at large, with a particular condemnation of "anger" (*khuaam khrot*), understood as a loss of "patience" and a loss of one's face

³The concept of soft power is usually referred to international/world politics and concerns a nation's ability to exert political influence by soliciting admiration and emulation from its counterparts. As classically argued by Nye (1990), the deployment of soft power relies on co-optation. Co-optation takes place when "influence can be acquired if an actor is able to mold the preferences and interests of other actors so as to converge closer to its own preferences and interests" (Gallarotti 2011: 14).

(*sia na*), was dramatically reinforced by the political crisis that connoted the decade 2006–2016. Despite the widespread dissent against the military backed governments in Northern Thailand and Isan, violent confrontations between the “yellow” and “red” factions only occurred in Bangkok. The capital was the “main stage” of national politics and a place where face-to-face relations with one’s moral community could be diluted in the anonymity of the metropolitan *dedalus*.

However, in Nan, the necessity of not exposing oneself or others to legal accusations of lese-majesty or other forms of persecution, such as the prohibition on gathering in public spaces, tended to discourage the population from talking about politics in public. These dimensions also had a political meaning and impact on the developments of environmental alter-political imaginations and practice. As a PhD and post-doc student, I was there to learn and study about eco-political conflicts, and I was deontologically committed not only to my informants and interlocutors but also to the Italian University that had granted me funding for many years. During and after fieldwork, the production of anthropological knowledge was never meant to be a politically neutral fact, despite my never seeking an activist or militant role in the context. A militant posture would have required a strategic and operational role in one or more P.O.s and local NGOs, or the local red shirts networks. An activist role would have required my situational engagement in a single campaign or on a specific issue. But in the end, I found myself engaged in the partisan effort of shadowing non-aligned activists and villagers and collecting their dreams of change. I could not feel satisfied with a simply public or engaged anthropological posture based on the communication of some issues to the public and on a distant sympathy for the oppressed. The ultimate task was to give back a vivid picture of the softly violent processes and forms of underground resistance to the chain of cooptation initiated by powerful religious and state agencies. This is the best I could do to amplify the voices of those who felt oppressed by the system. Following Cinzia Greco, I conducted a partisan ethnography, namely a research enterprise that was not politicised by “default” but which tended to accompany the work of indigenous activists and to put research outcomes at the service of the interests of a determined, underrepresented group (Boni *et al.* 2020; Greco 2017). As Greco points out, commenting on the heuristic possibilities disclosed by partisan ethnographic approaches (2017: 92):

Although choosing a partisan position can be linked to theories of standpoints and situated knowledge, here I am less interested in epistemological questions concerning the (im)possibility of a neutral knowledge than I am in advocating that anthropologists should be permitted and sometimes encouraged to take a partisan approach towards the asymmetries of power that characterize our societies. (...) Consciously taking sides can allow us to draw attention to inequalities that might otherwise be hidden in a muddled continuum.

“Taking sides” with ethnic farmers and their defenders, to whom I dedicated the most significant part of my writings, meant that at a point in my research, I decided to follow and convey the echoes of their whispered dissent. Also, after years of frequentations and exchanges, in several cases, this was the declared ultimate expectation and desire of my interlocutors. This attitude prevented unnecessary and potentially dangerous exposures, while allowing the researcher to follow the intimate articulation of underground alter-political initiatives for years. In my understanding, becoming a partisan researcher has been an unintended, serendipitous process, initiated with the impossibility of avoiding a painful concern for the marginalised families of ethnic farmers. I arrived in Thailand in 2007 with the idea of documenting good practices connected to the work of ecology monks and the Community Forest movement. However, years later, I ended up with a committed investigation on the socio-environmental conflicts affecting the descendants of upland peoples who were once involved in the Maoist guerrilla. Without interfering with my interlocutors’ agenda and strategic planning, after the first years of research, I started monitoring the rural rearguard, where informal networks of farmers, local leaders, non-aligned activists, and commoners drafted alternative political and economic futures *through* forms of silent situational resistance to the invasive developmental projects designed

and implemented by the conservative urban élites. Such silent resistance may be interpreted as an “absence.” Nevertheless, as James C. Scott (2009) teaches, the backstage or the remote arenas, where political passions are hidden and appears to be cooled down, may represent the reserve of self-muted acts and strategies of unspoken dissent. I will offer some examples of this on the following pages.

Eco-Buddhism and Alterpolitics in the Thai Uplands

Here, I will deal with the role of ecology monks, the royal ideology of Sufficiency Economy, and Royal Projects (RP)⁴ and of the professional trajectories of local socio-environmental activists as key factors through which Nan province became central to the national developmental and environmental agenda in the last thirty years. I will show how eco-Buddhist alternative ecological concepts have evolved into mainstream discourses in the governance of the Nan uplands. This is an area historically characterised by the presence of “ungovernable” ethnic minorities (Scott 2009) and which, as other Thai regions like Isan, hosts radicalised political affiliations which tended to shift “from red to red”⁵ (Kitiarsa 2012; Rossi 2013a, 2017). The process of institutionalisation of eco-Buddhist environmental approaches in this province involved meaningful ideological and organisational transformations for the local socio-environmental activist scene.

A significant portion of Nan activists who professionally grew up and trained in the late 80s and during the 90s within the progressive political environment fostered by Community culture (in Thai: *whattanatham chumchon*) school of thought (Chattip 2000 [1980], 1991), the Assembly of the Poor (AoP) (Missingham 2003), and the Community Forestry movement (CFm), had become professional NGO workers at the dawn of the new millennium. They were increasingly drawn to by the powerful networking potential of charismatic activist monks like Phra Khru Pithak Nathakhun (Darlington 1998), who initially seemed to radicalise the critique of the Thai development model along an eco-Buddhist trend initiated by the prominent Buddhist philosopher Buddhadasa Bikkhu in the early 1980s. From the 2000s onward, the leftist and pro-democratic approaches (often even inspired by Marxism) of environmental activists born between the 1950s and 70s, as well as their understanding of community-based natural resources management (NRM) and rural development, started to diverge consistently from the populist “self-help” approach promoted by the emerging political movements and parties connected to Thaksin Shinawatra and his proxies. The latter provided individual credit to poor citizens and advocated for the emancipation of rural areas from the intrusion of international and local aid agencies (Sangkhamanee 2021b). As Thaksin delegitimised the work of professionalised socio-environmental activists, specialised in attracting funding from international foundations and NGOs, these same activists became exposed to the soft power of the conservative élites, keen to acknowledge their expertise and to use it to counter the reformist forces led by Thaksin. These activists and NGO professionals, also seeking agencies that could provide them with material support for their activities, started then to comply with the conservative bureaucratic and technocratic apparatus represented by aristocrats engaged as experts and officers in royal think tanks and royal projects (RP). Professionalised activists, indeed, were often inescapably seduced by attractive material compensation offered to them by the conservative agencies for contributing as mediators and facilitators to the normalisation of conflicts around agriculture and natural resources in rural areas. This shift dug a deep void between the expectations of the rural classes, which on one side started to conceive of themselves as small entrepreneurs more than as simple farmers and rural

⁴Royal Projects (*khroengkhan luang*) are development projects implemented with funding, technical staff and strategies provided by the Royal institutions typically connected to singular members of the Thai Royal Family (namely, foundations and research centres) in various fields, including education, health, housing, environmental conservation, agricultural extension, and many others. There are thousands of Royal Projects throughout the Thai territory.

⁵As noticed by Pattana Kitiarsa (2012), in Isan and northern Thailand, the grassroots support to the communist insurgency between 1965 and 1983, in the early XXI century, tended to converge into a wide support to Thaksin and to the red shirts, as well as to other radical factions, like the United Front against Dictatorship (UDD).

workers, and -on the other side- the ambitions of the middle-class activists convinced of the unskillfulness of the peasants in protecting their own economic and political interests and the Thai fragile environment (Forsyth and Walker 2008; Walker 2008).

A detailed reference to a prominent activist's biography, in the second part of the article, will allow us to unveil the chains of progressive co-optation of grassroots environmental activism by royal think tanks and foundations representing the conservative establishment. Ethnographic evidence shows how powerful institutional actors used the Buddhist moralisation of local ecological beliefs and praxis as a strategy to capture and exploit existing eco-Buddhist and lay activist networks, legitimising and affording undebated privileges of access to land, water, and forest resources. They did so through forms of internal "green grabbing," understood as:

(...) the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends (...) 'Appropriation' implies the transfer of ownership, use rights and control over resources that were once publicly or privately owned – or not even the subject of ownership – from the poor (or everyone including the poor) into the hands of the powerful. (Fairhead *et al.* 2012: 238)

Such exploitation, I argue, has been possible through the systematic and strategic co-optation of key activists and their professional and community networks by eco-Buddhist NGOs and by Royal Projects. To enable the green-grabbing of natural resources and human labour (Rossi 2014a, 2016, 2017; Rossi and Na Nan 2017), activists' alter-political imaginations have also been disintegrated and green-grabbed by eco-Buddhist top-down development politics. This process led to the de-politicisation of grassroots socio-environmental activism in rural areas. The disappearance of socio-environmentalist groups at the national level of political mobilisation, as noted by Sangkhamanee (2021a, 2021b) and Elinoff and Lamb (2022), could also be one of its ultimate consequences. At the same time, as revealed by the long-term ethnographic study of the context and by the partisan substance of such study, silent efforts to break the chains of co-optation can emerge and shape new, alter-political imaginations and actions.

From Ecology Monks' Alter-Politics to Royal Eco-Buddhism

Embracing a historical perspective, I will first highlight some issues associated with the adoption of eco-Buddhist approaches and of the Sufficiency Economy model in remote areas of Northern Thailand since the 1990s. Being founded upon principles of radical conservatism oriented to revive the natural and cultural environment of Nan province, on one side, Eco-Buddhist approaches embodied an impulse for alter-political experimentations, promoting non-capitalist forms of organisation of life and labour, valuing the cooperation and relation between humans and non-human beings, stressing the importance of nature and of cultural heritage conservation and revitalisation. Yet, on the other hand, to build their activist network, ecology monks were able to use an extremely accommodating diplomacy based on non-confrontational methods (the so called *santhiuthi*, or peaceful method) and were successful in encompassing the work of pioneer lay activists. These activists were the protagonists of the environmentalist arena in Nan and had already been operating with their alter-political environmentalist battles, visions, and projects within the Nan territory when eco-Buddhist initiatives stepped in with their conservationist concept. Later, in the early 2000s, the initial alter-political impulse of eco-Buddhist activism started to embody an anti-progressive agenda, which blamed rural working classes for enthusiastically participating in the "commodification" of rural areas promoted by Thaksin Shinawatra and his proxies. After having influenced socio-environmental politics by largely expanding their network and lines of collaboration with institutional and non-governmental actors, eco-Buddhist monks and lay activists agreed to put their social capital at the disposal of large-scale Royal initiatives (2009–2019). This trend, I argue, contributed to dissolving non-aligned forms of socio-environmental dissent and of alter-eco-politics in the region, contributing to the disappearance of socio-environmentalist claims in today's pro-democracy mobilisations.

The Eco-Buddhist movement in Nan

Since the late 1980s, Buddhist activists and local civil society have played a pivotal role in experimenting with grassroots eco-Buddhist approaches to NRM in areas damaged by massive deforestation in the Northern Thai province of Nan. For this reason, the province has received the attention of Western anthropologists who focused their research on the experience of a local activist monk, Phra Kru Pithak Nanthakhun, an important follower of Buddhadasa Bikkhu.⁶ As pointed out by these Western social scientists, at its early stages, the eco-Buddhist movement in Nan competed with the model of development established by the state-corporation alliance and did so in creative ways. For example, it promoted the adoption of “local knowledge” in NRM, the collaboration among local activist networks, avoiding direct clashes with authorities and companies (construction, logging, and agribusiness sectors) and adopting the so-called *santhiwithi* (peaceful method) that implied the gathering of different stakeholders within innovative eco-religious ceremonies.

Since the early 1990s, a significant number of anthropologists have focused their attention on a singular ritual, namely the so-called *buad pa* or forest consecration ceremony, in which the largest trees threatened by deforestation are symbolically “ordained” as Buddhist monks (see Darlington, 1998, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Delcore 2003, 2004, 2008; Gabaude, 2010; Isager and Ivarsson 2002). According to this ritual, the consecration is achieved by the suggestive symbolic gesture of wrapping ancient trees with the monk’s saffron robes. Phra Khru Pithak is the monk who performed for the first time the *buad paa* in Nan province.⁷ When the very first *buad paa* was performed in 1992 by Phra Khru Pithak in Ban Kiw Mueang (his native village, Santisuk district, Nan province), as reported by Darlington and Delcore, not only did the monk consecrate the forest, but he also declared that the consecrated forest was given by villagers as a present to King Bhumibol, thus asserting his intention to not challenge the conservative establishment. In the same year, the People Organization *Hug Mueang Nan* (HMN) was founded by this monk and by his network of followers (mainly environmentalist laypersons). After a few years, this organisation became an NGO and a Foundation with a Learning Centre called JOKO, placed on the road from Nan city to Santisuk district. Since 1992, HMN has been active in promoting a range of initiatives to enhance the adoption of Buddhist and animist local knowledge in land and forest community management.

Integrating lay environmental imaginations into the eco-Buddhist network

I now want to briefly review some of the people and initiatives that were invited by Phra Khru Pithak to form the HMN foundation. It is essential to note that the umbrella of eco-Buddhism has tended to integrate already existing activist realities that were completely independent of Buddhist morality before they were encompassed within the HMN foundation. Phra Khru Pithak’s Buddhist conservationism soon became a form of alter-politics. He promoted a shared moral agreement based on Buddhist principles of compassion and moderation, as well as anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist values. These values have become the common ground for a joint action with the local civil society to revitalise the pre-industrial rural landscape of Nan.

⁶As observed by relevant scholars, the figure of Buddhadasa Bikkhu has been one of the most influent during the whole XX century in Thailand, challenging the westernisation of the country chosen by Thai governments during the Cold War (see Gabaude 1988; Queens and King 1996; Suchira 1991, 1992).

⁷It is said that Phra Khru Pithak took inspiration from Phra Manat, a monk living in a village in Phayao province, near Nan province, who was the first monk to perform such a ritual in Northern Thailand in the early 1980s, to stop the aggressive logging in his hometown village. The idea of Phra Manat from Phayao was to use the local people’s traditional understanding of natural elements, shaped by the still lively animistic belief in ghosts (*phi*) that live inside trees. By wrapping ancient trees with saffron robes, a simple forest is transformed into a sacred place, a source of fear and respect, in the view of Northern Thai (*mueang*) villagers, who traditionally pay homage to both the hegemonic Buddhist religion and the ancient brahmanic religion (Davis 1980). The worship of nature spirits is indeed widely performed both among the lowland villagers (T’ai Yuan and T’ai Lue speakers, Tai-ised lowland and upland peoples) and by the upland communities (like Lua, Htin, Khamu, Hmong, Mien, and Mlabri minorities).

The first HMN co-founder I met in 2008 was a pioneer activist, nicknamed Nai Pan, who, in the memory of the local environmental movement, was recognised as the first farmer in the 1970s to publicly oppose the abuses of the RFD and the cutting companies in Ban Luang district, still very rich in natural teak forests (*tectona grandis*, “*ton mai sak*” in Thai). In the year of the foundation of HMN (1992), he headed the creation of the Nan Province Community Forestry Network (*Khruakhai paa chumchon changuad Nan*) (RFCN) together with other local leaders. At the time of my research, Nai Pan was around 70 years old and known for his political commitment as a village head and as a representative of his sub-district. This ante-litteram environmental activist who, in his past confrontation with logging companies, organised the people’s resistance, even with the use of barricades, was alleged of having indulged in sympathies and connections with communist combatants. I met him several times at conferences organised by HMN and the NCFN, and according to his declarations during my interviews and in public speeches, his political concern had nothing to do with religious issues.

Another lay activist who joined the HMN work team and participated in its foundation is Chusak Hadparom, a farmer who, in the late 80s, initiated a sustainable agriculture and training project for farmers. As far as I know, it was the first of many training centres that, like the JOKO Center, would later arise in the provincial territory thanks to the eco-Buddhist network. Nai (mister) Chusak headed his training centre, the “*Sun rien ru Ban Deng*,” located on his land property in a village situated about 20 km from the provincial capital in Mueang district. There, he provided sample plots on which farmers of the province could learn past agricultural and farming techniques that had fallen into disuse. During the early years of my fieldwork, the centre was still in full operation and received government funding from the Ministry of Agriculture. In September 2009, during my only visit to his centre, Chusak told me that the decision to get back to his parents’ agricultural methods came from his disagreement towards the economic system that had caused massive deforestation. According to him, the landscape of the past could only be recovered through an abandonment of industrial agriculture, and this was the same opinion of all HMN activists. However, in our interview, he made no open reference to Buddhist values, nor was there any reference to Buddhist or royal environmentalism explicitly exhibited in the training centre area (through didactic posters, stickers, captions, etc.), as one could find them in other training centres connected to HMN that I had visited during my fieldwork.

When I encountered the two activists, I noticed a loose, almost absent reference to their work and motivations in relation to Buddhist values. Forest conservation activism (exemplified by the work of Nai Pan) and organic farming training projects (witnessed by Nai Chusak’s case) were already present in the area of Nan before their integration into HMN through Phra Khru Pithak diplomacy. Initially, such first experiments were not inspired by eco-Buddhist morality but by spontaneous anti-capitalist political engagement that led people to claim land and forest rights from the grassroots, in opposition to state led development. In addition, these were not the only initiatives that arose in the secular world and then merged into the HMN organisational machine. Indeed, Phra Khru Pithak’s conservation effort involved maintaining the language of the northern region, known as *kham mueang*, which is significantly different from the Siamese spoken in Bangkok. HMN then integrated the initiative of some lay schoolteachers, residents in the city, who had already promoted teaching classes in the local language and were invited by Phra Khru Pithak to join the creation of the eco-Buddhist NGO. In order to complete the founding committee, the famous ecology monk also recruited local professionals with proven experience in national and international aid agencies and NGOs. For instance, an influential NGO worker, who had previously served in food programs for refugees at the border with Laos, became the director of HMN training centre for sustainable agriculture and forestry, the already mentioned JOKO centre.

In the years following its birth, HMN also promoted the engagement of other temples within the network, such as the Wat Pong Kham headed by Ajan Somkit in Santisuk District (Du Pong sub-district), which hosted a training centre for farmers and was surrounded by forests ordained through the *Buad Pa* ceremony (Darlington 2019; Rossi 2014b). Phra Khru Pithak’s NGO also laid

the foundation for new non-governmental organisations to engage in the rural development of the province, such as the Organisation for Natural Resource Management and Sustainable Agriculture (in Thai: *Ongkhan sappaiakhon thammachaat lè khasettakon iang iuem*, hereinafter OKST). This NGO, founded in 2004 and based in Nan, was established by collaborators trained within HMN. At the time of my research, this entity played a key role in the local environmental arena, proving to be very active in fundraising and coordinating environmental activists from across the entire province. It also maintained relationships with non-governmental organisations in Bangkok, such as RECOFTC (the United Nations Regional Community Forest Training Center for Asia and the Pacific), and played a fundamental role in providing legal support to farmers arrested for illegally encroaching on forest reserves. The most active member of OKST, Mister Tak, agreed to be one of the informants and collaborators of my research. I came to understand the conflicts around NRM in the area, especially through his eyes, which weren't the eyes of an eco-Buddhist militant, but those of a lay radical partisan supporter of the upland farmers. Despite his anti-Thaksin sentiments and his strong connections with HMN, Tak reasoned outside the eco-Buddhist box and theorised original solutions based on the cultural, economic, and ecological wisdom and desires of poor farmers scattered in forest reserves. Before examining his biography, it is necessary to add some additional historical details to the description of the co-optation chain, with HMN as the protagonist.

Integrating the eco-Buddhist network into royal projects

During the decade of 2000–2010, representatives of the eco-Buddhist movement in Nan started to interact explicitly with the monarchy's environmental initiatives, at least in two ways. Firstly, their offices, training centres and temples became a vehicles for advertising the concept of Sufficiency Economy-*Settakit Po Priang*, the economic philosophy promoted by Rama IX, the previous King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927–2016) in the aftermath of the violent financial crisis faced by the country in 1997. Secondly, eco-Buddhist activists begun to co-operate with the staff of small local royal projects (RP) or forest protection and sustainable agriculture. The most important RPs in Nan at that time were the Phu Payak Royal Project (in Chaloeerm Phrakiat district) and the Phu Fa initiative (in Bo Kluea District), both founded in the early 2000s in the northeastern districts bordering Laos, in areas essentially populated by Lua and Hmong minorities (Rossi, 2017, 2019).

The Sufficiency Economy and Royal Projects are closely connected. Since 1998, all Royal Projects started exhibiting the powerful moral brand of Sufficiency Economy, whose principles are profoundly connected to Buddhist moral teachings.⁸ Moderation, ecological mindfulness, sustainable development, financial self-sufficiency, and the exaltation of locality *versus* globality (village/community exchange of services, labour, and agricultural products) are some of the principles that lie at the core of the Sufficiency Economy philosophy. In the idea of Rama IX, these prescriptions were suitable for both rural and urban subjects affected by global and national financial crises (Danai 2000; Thai Chamber of Commerce 2007; UNDP 2007). The royal economic model has been openly promoted within the 2007 Constitution and, in the early 2000s, provided an ideological tool for Thai conservative *intelligentsia* to contrast the so-called “Thaksinomics” – a *mix* of neo-Marxian populism and aggressive capitalism – enhanced by reformist ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 99–133, Schaffar 2018: 8–15).

Regarding the participation of HMN in implementing the royal philanthropic and ecologist vision in the Nan uplands, this fatal attraction towards the conservative forces became particularly clear at the end of the decade. As HMN systematically integrated anti-capitalist socio-environmental activists

⁸The developmental concept envisioned by His Majesty the King during the 1990s (especially after the 1997 Tom Yam Kung economic crisis) was not only inspired by Fritz Schumacher's book on Buddhist economics, titled *Small is beautiful. A study of economics as if people mattered* (1974), but was receptive towards the message of Buddhadasa Bikkhu and of his lay and religious followers. The Community Culture school of thought (see Chattip Narthsupa 1991, 2000) is another – partially Buddhist inspired – intellectual wave that might have had an impact on the elaboration of the Sufficiency Economy philosophy.

in the 1990s and 2000s, the royal intelligentsia was ready to integrate eco-Buddhist activism from 2009 onward. Indeed, in 2009, the *Phid Thong Lang Phra* Royal Project (hereafter shortened to PTLP), a massive royal initiative aimed at redesigning the landscape and land/water management of the upper-Nan river basin, reached the province.

As I discussed elsewhere (Rossi 2013a), the title of the project, *Phid Thong Lang Phra*, is a formula that recalls a specific Buddhist practice for making merit. It consists in sticking golden square leaves on the back of Buddha's image. To hide gold behind the statue's back means to make merit without boasting about it in a humble way. Ironically, and unlike what this name suggests, the implementation of PTLP would have taken about ten years on a territory corresponding to the entire upper Nan river basin. Furthermore, the initiative has been widely publicised by national media, aligned academics, and state institutions.

See, for instance, Sombat Rasakul's article titled *Reviving the fortunes of Nan*, and published in the *Bangkok Post's* insert "Spectrum" on April 5, 2009. The article clearly notes the proportions of the initiative, which significantly exceeded those of already existing royal initiatives in the province. Furthermore, it reveals that PTLP has been conceived primarily to cope with water disasters and floods in cities and the central plain, rather than to address socio-environmental and economic criticalities in the uplands. As reported in the article, according to Thai royal think tanks, the problem of lowland floods requires a more centralised approach to the hydrogeological management of upstream river basins, and the involvement of upland populations in the project is deemed of paramount relevance for its promoters. The organisational skills of the local population and its networks could be fundamental in the realisation of the project on a large scale, and this idea was at the core of PTLP understanding of "community participation." Indeed, Nan was known as a stronghold of the Communist Party of Thailand. Some former comrades, who were one poor farmers and members of the People's Liberation Army of Thailand, have used their knowledge of regarding guerrilla military techniques to mobilise the population from below in rural areas and to establish mortgage relief networks among communities. The PTLP concept, furthermore, was based on the idea of recovering forest soil in the uplands by reducing areas dedicated to crops and by replacing rotational and swidden forms of agriculture with permanent terraces on the slopes, where rice, vegetables, and fruit trees could be grown.

As I have been able to testify by participating in public meetings held during the implementation phases, the project leaders thought that Nan's newly terraced landscape could become like those in Bali and the Philippines in about a decade and that it could attract tourists and capital, thanks to the help of Lua and Hmong ex-communist leaders and with the support of local civil society networks.

Prior to the PTLP's installation in Nan, the involvement of HMN's activists and professionals in Royal initiatives remained sporadic. They only had a role as trainers or consultants in the RP boards. However, after 2009, key HMN representatives were hired on the board for the realisation of PTLP. Phra Khru Pithak, Ajan Somkit (his very active pupil, who heads Wat Pong Kham temple in Santisuk district), the director of the JOKO centre and many of its trainers, as well as fellows of the HMN Foundation have been engaged in the Civil Society Committee for PTLP's implementation in Nan. This organ accompanied the technocratic teams of the royal think tanks, the Chai Patthana and Doi Tung foundations, during the whole process. Simultaneously, some of these activists and professionals (largely lowland Buddhist middle-class citizens) have been directly hired and were provided with remunerative wages and career positions within the project. Just one year before the violent political crackdown of 2010, the HMN network was integrated into the PTLP developmental machine. This transition (from grassroots to institutionalised Buddhist approaches and from grassroots alter-politics to aligned politics) had significant implications for the local activist landscape, leading to the definitive polarisation between the expectations of NGO activists and those of upland rural workers.

Grabbing Alter-Political Imaginations

The articulation between HMN and PTLP was essentially made possible through the prompt co-optation of the social capital of connections, friendship relations, and local environmental knowledge of a well-known local activist whom I introduced earlier, namely Mister Tak from the local non-governmental organisation here shortened in OKST (Organization for Natural Resource Management and Sustainable Agriculture, in Thai: *Ongkhan sappaiakhon thammachaat lè khaset-takon iang iuem*). More precisely, such articulation and the definitive transition of HMN to the green politics of the conservative wing was entangled with the fate of this activist's environmental alter-imaginings and alter-politics. To explain such developments, it is necessary to focus on his life and professional trajectory. Tak's alter-environmental imagination, indeed, understood in the light of the controversial implementation of PTLP in the upper-Nan river basin, provides insights into one of the neuralgic "rings" of the co-optation chain responsible for the progressive de-politicisation of the local socio-environmental arena.

Tak's alter-environmental imagination

As previously mentioned, Tak was the animator of OKST, a socio-environmental NGO founded in the early 2000s by young activists trained in the 1990s by HMN. He studied at the Agricultural Technical Institute of Nan and was approximately 45 years old when I began my fieldwork in Northern Thailand. He owned rice plots inherited from his family, located around his village, a couple of kilometers eastern outskirts of Nan town. His salary was a modest seven thousand baht per month (approximately 200 euros in 2010) despite working twenty hours a day, as I had the opportunity to witness firsthand following him in various areas of the province. Even before leaving HMN to form OKST, this professional activist (Tarrow 1998) collaborated with the above-mentioned Nai Pan, a pioneer activist from Ban Luang district and co-founder of HMN. He also served as a monk at Wat Aranyawat, the HMN headquarters. Tak's closeness to Phra Khru Pithak and Ajan Somkit was probably motivated by professional opportunism, as the activist himself ironically suggested to me. In fact, regarding his experience at the Phra Khru Pithak temple as a novice, he told me that he resided there for only nine days. The reason for such a short stay was that he felt "too hot" when wearing the monk's saffron robes; this meant that his religious sentiment was not a priority.

During the period when I began to frequent Tak, he participated in training events as a mentor and trainer for local leaders. In many cases, often alone and sometimes accompanied by other OKST personnel, he traveled around lowland and upland villages to collect complaints from farmers who had been arrested or fined for growing crops like rice and maize in protected areas. He also monitored the activities promoted by HMN and OKST, such as crop substitution, reforestation, and Community Forest management, serving as a broker between farmers and local authorities. However, Tak had never traveled abroad, not even to neighboring Laos. Indeed, he maintained that if he had traveled to Laos, he would have had problems with the Thai authorities and risked being accused of communism. According to the activist, this had been the fate of around twenty Thai activists in the previous decades (in the nineties), all of whom had disappeared or been killed because they were considered spies or terrorists. Indeed, Tak, like all my informants in Nan, has always been highly reluctant to talk to me about his political ideas. He never declared himself a communist, nor did he ever speak out against communism. However, sometimes, he wore the *muak dao daeng*, the cap with the red star used by Maoist combatants during the guerrilla. In Nan province, the Maoist caps are still produced and used daily at the border by Lua and Hmong ethnic communities previously involved in the insurgence. He also went as far as to declare that during the period of the Nai Pan's struggle against logging corporations, some students from Chiang Mai who joined the insurgents' guerrilla war in Nan suggested to Nai Pan some opposition strategies to the government. Tak believed that communists had equipped the people of the villages with new ways of managing collective work.

Like all other Nan activists, Tak declared himself a supporter of the Sufficiency Economy and organic farming projects sponsored by the monarchy. In the early 2000s, his NGO, OKST, had been contacted by the Office of Royal Development Projects Board (ORDPB) of Chiang Mai to disseminate Vetiver grass in the Nan area. The project was co-funded by an important company, Petroleum Thailand (PTT), and I witnessed that in Nan, both RP and eco-Buddhist temples implemented it, trying to engage local farmers. This grass, due to its long roots, is believed to slow down soil erosion if planted on the slopes. Dedicated royal projects have been promoted to stimulate its adoption in the uplands.⁹ However, Tak's position on Vetiver was less aligned with the dominant narrative than that assumed by his OKST colleagues and other HMN-related activists. For instance, he told me that where this grass is planted, it is not possible to grow corn because one of the first effects of soil restoration is the spread of weeds in the fields. Planting this grass is particularly onerous work, given that the long roots and the anti-erosion effects require at least two years to produce the much-advertised results. Although the OKST office itself had signs printed to advertise royal projects promoting Vetiver, Tak never scolded the farmers who did not use it and never spoke out negatively towards *chao khao* (Non T'ai speaking mountain minorities) in my presence, as other lay and religious activists sometimes did. Instead, he possessed a deep knowledge of the local human geography and treated the minorities, especially the Lua, with great respect.

Tak's interests appeared more oriented towards the protection of the farmers' "communities," of whatever ethnicity than towards the conservation of the environment. Unlike other religious and lay activists, administrative officers, and experts whom I interviewed over several years, he always insisted on the fact that the demographic problem was at the root of provincial environmental problems, rather than farmers' greed and ignorant mentality as argued by most HMN activists. In the 1980s, Nan province experienced a demographic boom that changed the economic and ecological balance of the past, a change that HMN activists recalled nostalgically. In sum, Tak's views were more "secular" than those of local eco-Buddhist activists, and he gave off an aura of radicalism that was completely absent from the motivations of the latter. He was entirely absorbed and concerned by the problems faced by upland communities.

Furthermore, Tak adopted an approach that relied more on "knowledge politics" than on "street politics," in line with the trends described by Jakkrit Sanghamanee (2021b: 235), who saw "the environmental movement shifting from mass mobilisation to epistemic contestation" as a strategy to counter Thaksin's ideas of rural development and NRM. The "knowledge politics" that Tak enacted emerged from his effort to conceive and implement new organisational solutions and campaigns based on upland communities' wisdom. Thanks to his long-term observation of the upland farmers' economic and ecologic behavior, he was persuaded that the forest in Nan was so well conserved in the area where *chao khao* resided precisely because they had been practicing rotational farming (*rai mun uien*) for centuries. However, this historical and ecological evidence was disregarded, de-emphasised and neglected by both lowland eco-Buddhist activists and state-driven development models, including those adopted by royal think tanks. Conversely, the introduction of industrial crops and techniques has led to the permanent settlement of agriculture, which threatens forests and river basins. For this reason, he was less interested in promoting alternative organic farming than in protecting the rights of the local population to use rotational slash-and-burn agriculture for non-industrial crops (such as rice and orchards), even in natural reserves and state forest enclosures. He also thought that the revitalisation of the Nan river watershed and basin, whose depletion has been identified by the Thai authorities as one of the main causes behind lowland floods (in Nan, but also in the central plain and in Bangkok), should rely on local wisdom of *chao khao* and the organisational skills and cooperation network of the ex-communist militants, living in the remote villages close to

⁹See the ORDBP online publication titled: *Collection of articles on Vetiver* (March 2010) retrieved in April 2024 <[4D6963726F736F667420576F7264202D20E0B9D7E9CDCBD2A2E9CDC1D9C520A92EC0D2C9D2CDD1A7A1C4C9](https://rdpb.gob.th/4D6963726F736F667420576F7264202D20E0B9D7E9CDCBD2A2E9CDC1D9C520A92EC0D2C9D2CDD1A7A1C4C9)> (rdpb.gob.th)

the river's spring and upstream. As he had told me since our first encounters, it was his dream to create an integrated network of engaged communities able to preserve the forest and the water streams that flow into the Nan river, through indigenous forms of agriculture and communitarian values connected to the Maoist past of the residents. For this reason, since I met him for the first time in 2007, he has been looking for financial support to realise his alter-political vision.

For this same reason, he became the most important "ring" in the co-optation chain launched in Nan by the royal think tanks. Indeed, to get back to the involvement of HMN network activists in the PTLP royal project, Tak was the very person who, in early 2008, conceived the idea of seeking support from the Doi Tung project technicians in Chiang Rai. The Royal think tank replied by using Tak's concept to initiate a pilot project of joint watershed management in Nan province. Needless to say, thanks to Tak's dream, the Pid Thong Lang Phra royal project came to fruition.

Co-opting environmental alter-politics

When he asked Doi Tung's technicians to support OKST in achieving its objectives, Tak probably did not imagine that he would thereby attract the monarchy's unstoppable development machine to the province. Indeed, the idea of coordinating local civil networks, linked together by the common militancy of many village leaders in the Thai People's Liberation Army (PLAT), the armed military force of the outlawed Communist Party of Thailand, as mentioned in the *Bangkok Post* article, had been Tak's idea. He believed that the communist memory, around which the former insurgents had coalesced, could be helpful in making the participation and cooperation of the villages more effective than the traditional networking strategy of local NGOs. These former insurgents have been reintegrated into mainstream Thai society through military re-education programs.¹⁰ According to Tak, the joint effort of the communities settled in the northern districts (such as Pua, Bo Kluea, Chaloeerm Phra Kiat, and Thung Chang) would have allowed them to avoid local conflicts over water, forest resources, and agriculture. Furthermore, the project dreamt by Tak would have benefited the central plain (the rice-growing valley of the Chao Phraya River, on which a large part of the national economy depends), preventing inundations of the Nan River and its drying out in the hot season.

It was largely thanks to Tak's involvement that the HMN network begun to play a central role in the implementation of the project, which started disbursing the first funds in mid-2009. While I was away from the field, Tak's career enjoyed a rapid advancement. When we met again months later, in September 2009, Tak was no longer working for OKST but had become the main coordinator (*pu phrasa ngan*) of the PTLP project and a privileged interlocutor of Doi Tung technicians. He had changed his car, and a new grey Honda pickup had replaced his old, dilapidated blue truck. He dressed more elegantly, and when in town, he wore closed shoes and linen shirts, avoiding T-shirts and rubber slippers. He was proud of his success. He told me that for him, the project would finally lead to the actual participation of village communities, "not like in other royal projects in Nan uplands. Not like in Phu Fa and Phu Payak, where, without offense, there has never been real participation".

Tak was convinced of the virtues of the terraces, but he was also explicitly aware that, for practical reasons, these could not be realised on top of the mountains, but only down in the valley, at the mountain's feet, where the Lua people had already been carving them for decades. He supported the theory of a Chinese derivation of the technique, according to which it was introduced in the areas inhabited by the Lua during the Cold War by indigenous PLAT fighters who took refuge in

¹⁰"In the aftermath of the defeat of the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT), the so-called Santisuk and Karunthep military programs were promoted to reintegrate the insurgents into mainstream Thai society. In this way, rebels were identified, temporarily detached from their villages and communities, and reeducated (implying basic schooling and conversion to Buddhism) (...). The people who benefited from the amnesty (1982) were defined as "partners in national development" (*phu ruam patthana chat thai*, or *Pho Ro Tho*) by Saiyud Kerdpol, an army officer who directed the military operations against the PLAT in the northern region, and by other influential political leaders, such as Surayud Chulanont. Most Lua rebels happened to receive the same treatment as other Thai citizens involved in the rebellion and have been integrated into a nationwide network of former fighters" (cited from Author 2017: 212–213).

China to escape capture by the Thai army. Upon their return to Thailand, they carried with them this agricultural innovation.¹¹ This theory was also held by some of the actors involved in implementing the *Phid Thong Lang Phra* Royal project.

In fact, in Chaloem Phra Kiat district and other northern districts, some terraces already existed. They were not as high as those created by the royal projects and had a larger width (not less than 6–7 meters). The old terraces were not dug on the slopes and hilltops but at a lower altitude, in the valleys, between the slopes of the hills. According to Tak and the PTLP project board, the fact that the realisation of terraces was accepted during the guerrilla war meant that the upland residents were already familiar with the technique. Consequently, the Lua and other minorities would have accepted the PTLP terracing effort without opposition. According to the board members, among which a handle of anthropologists engaged in the project as “culture managers,” the complicity of the Lua of Nan could therefore be strategically negotiated, manipulating communist memory to prevent foreseeable events of resistance to the project, also due to the anti-establishment sentiments of the “red to red” residents.

Tak was delighted to accompany me to a northern district to interview one of the sub-districts’ head (*kamnan*), a former Lua fighter, known in the province for being a supporter of the red shirts and a political mobiliser. On that occasion – at the end of September 2009 – the *kamnan*, a man of about forty years, confessed to me that he was proud that the PTLP project touched that area. According to him, even if some Lua farmers were to oppose its implementation, the project would give good results. He told me:

“For now, they (the Lua of my district) don’t understand what’s happening. They see a lot of people coming in their land and they don’t quite understand why...they see that their boss suddenly has ten extra cows when before he had one like everyone else, they don’t understand that the project is for them”.

With this phrase, the local leader was referring to his new car, bought with money he received from *Pid Thong Lang Phra*, thanks to the new responsibilities that project officials had delegated to him, namely, convincing the local population to set terraces in order to proceed with the agricultural conversion and re-forestation. He also stated that during those weeks, he was scanning the forests of the area with the project technicians, and that he felt like he was back during the Cold War, when he traveled and mapped the territory in guerrilla actions. The transfer of funding to activists and local leaders was a clear exercise of a domestic soft power through cooptation. The interaction between conservative technicians, project managers, and progressive local leaders is something that the RP board solicited to reconfirm hierarchical relations between the possibly rebellious uplanders and the technocratic and bureaucratic élites (*ammat*), but with awkward results.

The circumstances of the trip with Tak (at the end of September 2009) also allowed me to visit some of the villages where the PTLP initiative was starting to be implemented. The PTLP board was persuaded by the fact that other nearby villages would be keen to emulate the pilot cases. I could see some OKST operators at work, side by side with PTLP technicians and military staff, intent on mapping the territory, organizing assemblies, counting, and measuring the size and numerosity of houses, livestock, fields, and forest plots. I was struck when one of Tak’s collaborators, also an OKST volunteer in charge of facilitating the dialogue with the villagers, asked about how their work was going and immediately confided to me in a low voice: “these people are crazy (*ba* in Thai) [touching her temple with his index finger], they don’t care about the project, they don’t want to participate,

¹¹In this regard, some members of PTLP’s civil society board told me the story of Dr. Somchai’s father (I use a pseudonym here). Somchai was a medical doctor from Nan city, well-known for his work with ex-guerrilla associations and also a member of the Civil Society Assembly. Doctor Somchai’s father was a communist combatant who, in the 70s, tried to escape the Thai army and went to China. He later returned to Thailand under a false name and disguise. In China, he had learned the terracing technique from the communists and spread it throughout the northern districts of the province.

but rather go into hiding.” In the last days of my stay in Nan I asked Tak and his colleagues what they thought of the foreseeable resistance of the Lua to the project, and for the first time, I heard him argue this issue using the same stereotypes about upland minorities that I had often heard from other lay and religious activists, but not from him: “the Lua have always been like this. They are lazy and if there is a problem they don’t face it, they don’t get busy. Instead, they run away, they change places, and they go further and further into the forest.”

The broken ring

What Tak knew, but the project managers did not want to understand or listen to, was the fact that the upland villagers would never accept permanently cutting the forest on the hilltops, as required by PTLP landscape designers. Digging terraces at lower altitudes (between the slopes and not on their tops), as taught by Chinese comrades, indeed allowed for lower workforce investment. It is less tiring due to the low inclination and the lesser presence of rocks, and more productive, as water tends to gather and flow more quickly. On the contrary, realizing terraces on the top of the hill would have resulted in an excessive workforce investment, at the same time requiring the permanent deforestation of the peaks and increasing the risks of landslides, erosion, water depletion, and lowland inundations. Tak himself was against this practice and would not have allowed it. Furthermore, the Lua would never have been keen on welcoming the prolonged presence of lowland technicians in the upland, which they considered their ancestors’ land.

In March 2010, Tak voluntarily abandoned his position as project coordinator for the royal think tanks. I got this information from Tak himself, and I discussed it with a JOKO Center’s Buddhist activist on the occasion of my trip to Nan in August 2011. Tak’s resignation was due to the fact that a powerful entrepreneur of a conservative orientation, involved in the timber trade, had assumed the role of project director. Tak did not believe that this entrepreneur had the necessary competence for the mission. On the contrary, Tak was convinced that the decision of the ORDPB officials (Office of the Royal Development Project Board) to grant management of the works to a private individual was motivated by an economic interest in local forest resources.

Moreover, Tak, on whom the coordination, as well as the complicity of the Lua in the project, depended, had begun to be criticised by the leaders of PTLP. This happened because, as the JOKO Center’s activist admitted while showing herself openly supportive of Tak, he wanted to defend the Lua interests and their environment. Despite having been among the most enthusiastic promoters of the project, Tak was unable and no longer willing to manage communication between Lua village leaders and PTLP officials once he understood the ORDPB officials’ aims. In August 2011, Tak, embittered by the affair, returned to work twenty hours a day as a volunteer for the people of the villages in dispute with the local National Parks. He renounced the economic privilege obtained by playing a part in the show of the conservative élites.

During my subsequent short visits to Thailand in 2014 and 2015 (March and October), I met Tak again. While PTLP continued its effort to terrace the upper basin and to plant orchards and forests, also with the help of questionable corporations like the Charoen Pokphand Group (CP), Tak had decided to set up an alternative network, the *Klumchonlumnam Nan* (“The People of Nan River Basin Group”). The network mainly included village leaders and representatives of the villages touched by PTLP initiatives. Its aim was to collect complaints against PTLP in the target communities, to protect them from technocratic interference, and to support them in legal issues arising between villagers and the royal project. For instance, some communities were engaged by PTLP technicians to cut down the trees in reserved areas to build check dams and thus slow down the water streams. As happened in one of the villages where I conducted my fieldwork along the border between Santisuk and Bo Kluea districts, the farmers were arrested, fined, and/or sued by National Park officers for obeying such requests. Through *Klumchonlumnam Nan*, Tak stepped in to support them with legal advice and funding. During these years, he also set up a local radio channel, and I saw him back to his activist

work, albeit in a more disenchanted manner, yet still with his strong spirit and generosity, as well as his extraordinary capacity to connect lowland and upland people.

During the course of my research, I refrained from directly involving myself in my informants' political activities despite my sympathies and inclinations. At least until his experience with royal think tanks, Tak tended to position himself with the conservatives due to their role in countering Thaksin's popularity. However, he did not dismiss as wrong, short-sighted, or immature the progressive claims of the farmers and villagers, who tended to support anti-establishment parties and movements. After the 2014 coup, he commented that he no longer knew anymore whom to believe. Only his partisanship towards the upland villagers was something that did not bring up any doubts in him.

My partisanship for his cause in the years 2014 and 2015 started to become more explicit. My collaboration involved small tasks, such as recurring translations from English to Thai and vice versa for his outreach plans. Once, Tak gave me a stock of amulets that he had produced in series from a temple for his campaign to "protection of the forest of Ban Nam Mit", a Lua village located in the north-eastern side of the basin, which had been the new network's pilot project. His understanding of Buddhism as a teaching on more-than-human interrelations, as hybrid religious semantics, and as a pragmatic weapon for secular tasks, was expressed by the amulet's feature. Made of flower ashes, the amulet's disc presented the Buddha's image on one side and the Hindu divinity Ganesh on the other. "This will give you strength, and the first wish you make will be soon accomplished," he told me when he gave me one of the amulets as a present. I sold all the amulets to my friends and fellows in Italy and returned the money to him. He also involved me in shooting a video documentary for outreach and campaigning. For two weeks I interviewed him daily, and we selected pictures and videos to add to our montage; we asked a friend of mine, who often assisted me with translation, to create a translation into English for the subtitles. However, due to my inability to come back to the field, our work could not be completed, so as to give resonance to his initiatives in Italy and Europe beyond the academic milieu. Within the university context, I attempted to analyze and warn about the de-politicizing effects of Royal Projects and eco-Buddhist approaches in Thailand. This task became even more important to me after Tak resigned from PTLT, as a tribute to his alter-political vision, based on personal sacrifice and a sentiment of political and existential commonality with marginalised people and abused ecosystems.

After 2015, life took me away from Thailand and from academia for years. We kept in contact through e-mail exchanges until the end of 2021. I could only meet Tak again for a couple of days when I returned to Thailand in March 2024. By then, the *Klum chon lumnam Nan* was not active anymore, although Tak still had connections with local leaders in the upper Nan river basin. He was now working as chief coordinator for a local NGO that was not directly involved in environmental issues. Also, he and his wife had started to permanently host Mon, a Lua lady from Ban Nam Mit, and her two children, who studied in Nan town. With her, we went to buy pasta and wine for the last dinner I had in Nan, and we cooked together, as we would have done in her village or at my home. During the dinner, with his family, Mon, and other friends and fellows around us, Tak answered my short questions on the developments of PTLT's story: "It's closed, PTLT stepped back, they moved the project to Isan, to Udon Thani" he told me with a smug smile, "they could not convince the people, they could not force them to terrace the basin." He knew that I could understand his satisfaction, as after more than ten years of patient, silent struggle, the ungovernable ones had proven to resist once again.

Conclusion

Tak has been the most important person, allowing me to connect with and understand the life and history of the human and non-human inhabitants of the upper Nan river basin as a complex,

lively, pulsating whole. His patience in trying to make me understand very complex social, ecological, political, and economic details and dynamics of the Nan River basin's hydrogeological crisis progressively allowed me to appreciate his incomparable knowledge of the upland forested territories, villages, village representatives, elders, families and kids, forests, streams, and animals. Tak, born in the late sixties, was a self-expanding net himself, embracing the upper Nan river basin with his tireless work. Unfortunately, he was captured in a net wider and stronger than himself. By portraying his trajectory, I tried to show that, beyond the appropriation of Thai river basins' contested landscapes, activists' radical imaginations and alter-political practices – an intangible component of such landscapes – were also affected by a form of intellectual and political appropriation. I guess this is one of the sources, along with those identified by other political ecologists, of the current pro-democracy political movements' detachment from socio-environmentalist activism and struggles.

The official recognition of the Sufficiency Economy and the effort to promote and implement its principles at every corner of the country and in every household, on behalf of royal think tanks, is a trend that affects the indigenous ideologies of socio-economic inclusion/exclusion. This process, I argue, allowed several hegemonic agencies to manipulate eco-Buddhist socio-environmental narratives and scientific data to produce bi-dimensional and de-historicised portraits of underdevelopment in remote areas like Nan (Forsyth and Walker 2008). Such an attitude, furthermore, justifies specific agencies' intervention on the ground, excluding or selectively involving other agencies, and thus replacing participation with a non-inclusive process of technocratic territorialisation exercised by conservative networks in the name of the nation's socio-environmental wellness.

A similar trend sharply affirms the political and moral role of the monarchy (and of its bureaucratic and technocratic expressions) in determining the righteous direction for the development of the Thai nation and for the conservation of the national environment. As illustrated in this article, a paradigmatic case is presented by Nan province, where reciprocal acknowledgement and enforcement between royal development projects and the veteran eco-Buddhist network is the most relevant trend in the (often overlapping) fields of rural development, natural resources grabbing and environmental exploitation/conservation. The maturation of such dynamic in the years 2006–2016 and beyond led to the absorption of grassroots environmentalism (already encapsulated into an eco-Buddhist developmental discourse) into the technocratic frame of the conservative forces. The complicit moves towards the institutionalisation of the eco-Buddhist movement in this process are unquestionable. The unescapable adoption of universalistic and eco-Buddhist codes by people organisations and NGOs in Nan, despite encouraging the spread of an environmental concern among lowland and upland farmers, sharply contributed to the almost complete de-politicisation of local environmental activism. The eco-Buddhist approach to the environment, thus, challenges – instead of preserving – the local ecological knowledge and fixes specific standards of management and participation that tend to conflict with both indigenous and progressive conceptions of land, forest, and water management.

Non-aligned activists like Tak, who were caught in these processes, had to make choices and renouncements. The anthropological enterprise and the ethnographic encounter, conceived as a partisan collaboration, allowed for the long-term shadowing of some of my informants and collaborators. In the case presented here, the reciprocal trust and unquestioned esteem connecting the researcher and the “researched,” led the latter to share his dreams of resistance and his new alter-political projects with the anthropologist. Such political and existential empathy is the communicative ground that demonstrates how structural dynamics of co-optation can be resisted through brave professional ruptures and through more prudent, although more disenchanting, activist practices. Furthermore, the ethnographic encounter, conceived as an open-ended relational field, can reveal unexpected efforts of creative re-articulation of faded alter-political imaginations. As show-cased here, such efforts may be grounded in the strengthening of informal strategic collaborations and more-than-political, even

existential forms of resistance. For this reason, I tend to be confident about the fact that the absence of Thai grassroots environmental movements on the national arena will not be definitive. Underground and backstage activism, indeed, often prepares the following acts of a movement, and nourishes its rearguards. The repression of urban pro-democracy activists, as well as the flight and disappearing of many militant citizens over the last ten years, might well have been a source of disenchantment among non-aligned Thai socio-environmental activists and NGO professionals. Last but not least, one should not discard the important climatic, energetic and hydro-geological challenges that Bangkok and the rest of the country are likely to face during the next few decades, as well as the legitimacy provided by grassroots transnational youth-led movements for climate justice. These ecological and geo-political factors, indeed, could sooner or later solicit new strategic entanglements between urban and rural areas and the return of socio-environmentalist movements as a dynamic, overt component of the Thai reformist forces.

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