CHAPTER 1

CHANGES IN THE HILLS OF NORTHERN THAILAND SINCE 1957

It is human nature to reminisce about the good old days; tribal peoples in northern Thailand like people everywhere enjoy talking over the past together. Around night-time fires in many northern Thai hill villages old timers tell the youngsters how it was when the forests were full of game, the waters in their valley clean and clear, how it took days to walk to the sound of an internal combustion engine, and how much land they had. In the long ago, they would say when today's old folks were young, there was more food, only rarely did people go hungry, people had control over their destinies and the government almost never interfered in village life. And if things grew too difficult, the villagers could just pick up and move to the other side of the hill where life was greener and their neighbors less worrisome.

Now all the old timers see trials and troubles everywhere. Villagers own all sorts of new-fangled things from pick-ups to videos. Nice enough except the pick-ups bring northern Thais to steal our buffalos and the videos bring Chinese "chop em-ups" to confuse the children. And as for land-use, conditions are so bad its better not to bring the topic up. The Amphoe or the Royal Forest Department or the police arrest villagers at the drop of a hat. Maybe the Thai-Norwegian Project can help; we'll just have to wait and see. And there are so many people these days, there is hardly any forest left and all the big animals are gone. It

would sound from listening to the old folks that living conditions in the hills are declining so fast that no one would want to live there anymore.

There is indeed change; pervasive change affecting all aspects of northern Thai hill life today. Roads enter all but the most remote areas linking almost every village to Chiang Mai city and other centers at least during the dry season. Schools, malaria abatement teams, family planning units, Western tourists opium suppression teams and the military all enter the hills regularly, meeting the people there. Few highland villages are self-sufficient; new crops, new mobility patterns, and new problems have resulted instead. Suicide, almost unheard of 20 years ago in Karen villages has now occurred in many places.

Change per se, however, is not all bad. Not too long ago, there was an American history book written about the 1890s, a time popularly remembered as the "Gay Nineties" when Americans enjoyed many new pursuits from bicycles to baseball, entitled The Good Old Days: They Were Terrible! (Bettmann 1974). Old timers around fires in Karen and Hmong houses as old timers everywhere are inclined glamorize the past and to forget discomforts of days gone by. In the hills of northern Thailand there were problems in the past: endemic malaria, hookworm and other parasites, as well as troubles with wild animals all created high mortality and shorter average life spans. Rice failures in the old days often meant that hill people, who did not have access to roads and rice from distant areas, had to subsist on a kind of tuber called kloi and other items gathered

from the forest. Modern conveniences, from sewing machines to PVC piping were unavailable forcing the people to use traditional methods which although useful in some ways are now remembered as inefficient and time-consuming. Furthermore, some items such as salt were all but unavailable, requiring long walks to market centers. Some changes have been good; some have not.

Since about the 1950s, first the American Baptist Mission and then a variety of governmental and international organizations have entered the northern Thai hills to bring about changes, such as eliminating the cultivation of opium, which the Royal Thai government considered beneficial but at the same time to effect these changes by causing the least damage. In the case of opium the government provided help by introducing replacement crops, while working to reduce other longstanding problems, such as malaria and hookworm.

One of these organizations has been the Thai-Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project (TN-HDP), which began in January 1985, and will carry on until December 1989, operating in three project areas in northern Thailand: Mae San-Pha Daeng, at the meeting point of Lampang, Chiang Rai, and Phayao Provinces; Huai Manao, in the Doi Inthanon Range, just south of Doi Inthanon in Chom Thong District, Chiang Mai Province, and Mon Ya, in and around Bo Kaeo District, Samoeng District, Chiang Mai Province. The TN-HDP works primarily at the village level in the areas of agricultural development and crop replacement, educational development, basic public health development, village initiative support and infrastructure development.

As a part of TN-HDP s evaluation program, Project officials wish to know how effective their work has been. In discussing just what the Project had accomplished, officials wished to learn how this fits in with changes that have been occurring simultaneous to, in spite of, or that would have taken place even if there had been no Thai-Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project. To carry out such a survey, involving an assessment of just what TN-HDP is accomplishing, the TN-HDP turned to the Center for Research and Development, Payap University to conduct the study. A team composed of social scientists, a historian, and an economist was assembled. This report is the result of a one year examination of change in the northern Thai hills. Besides studying changes, particular attention will be given to the role of the Thai-Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project and what impact it has had on the five study villages within TN-HDP areas in comparison with changes in the two that are in in TN-HDP areas. Concluding this study are suggestions regarding what courses the Thai-Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project should take as well as some comments on northern highland development in general.

Seven villages were studied: five of which were in two Project Areas: Huai Manao and Mon Ya. The other two, to serve as control villages were outside TN-HDP areas, one close to Huai Manao and one close to Mon Ya. The one village in the Huai Manao Project Area selected is a White Hmong village entitled Pa Kluai. The village just outside that Project Area, Mae Chon, is a Green Hmong village. In Mon Ya, two Karen villages, the Christian

village of Mae Yang Ha and animist Mae Kha Pu Luang were picked. A Buddhist Karen village outside the Project Area, in Mae Chaem District, entitled Wat Chan was the other Karen village selected. Two Hmong villages, the White Hmong village of Huai Nam Chang and the Green Hmong settlement of Pa Kia Nai were also studied. Because of ethnic differences (no Hmong or Karen live in the Mae San-Pha Daeng Project Area) and time and resource limitations, the study was limited to these two Project Areas. It is hoped, however, that a study of the Yao, Yunnanese Chinese (Haw), and Lisu in Mae San-Pha Daeng can be carried out in the future to provide comparative data for looking at the overall picture of change in the northern Thai hills.

TABLE 1

1985 Population of Study Villages

		Households	Population
Mae Yang Ha	Sgaw Karen	47	259
Mae Khapu Luang	Sgaw Karen	21	160
Wat Chan	Sgaw Karen	30	196
Pa Kia Nai	Green Hmong	66	555
Huai Nam Chang	White Hmong	40	320
Pa Kluai	White Hmong	71	411
Mae Chon	Green Hmong	20	134

Source: Robert tr., 1985, pp. 36-37, 102-103 for TN-HDP Areas, Chiang Mai Province 1986 pp. 18, 28 for the others.

What Changes and How to Measure Them

How, then, does one assess whether this change has been significant or not? The first step is to determine what sorts of changes have occurred. However, this brings up the questions of what is change and how one measures it. Only after answering these questions can attention be given to "significant" changes.

Quite a lot of studies have been conducted on the nature change, many of which are entire books in themselves. Rather than making an exhaustive examination of this literature, the concepts of change proposed by Peter Berger, one of the most widely known and quoted authorities on the kinds of change occurring in the 20th century, will be presented since they seem to apply directly to the kinds of change this study is examining.

Berger envisions change in terms of its impact upon consciousness. As he sees it, "modernization" and "secularization", two topics directly relating to recent changes in the northern Thai hills, involve the introduction of competing systems (a "plurality") which is antithetical to "traditional" society where a "common universe of meaning exists" (Berger 1974, pp. 195-196). What he means is that in the past, traditional peoples had only one choice on determining how to act correctly. This limited options and impeded change. An example from the Chiang Mai hills is the role of spirits in Karen or Hmong life that restricted Karens from, example, for changing cropping patterns, or Hmong from, for example, building two-storey houses. In modern society, however, there are so many possibilities quite a number of "correct" courses of action are possible, and Karens

have introduced many new crops and Hmong often build two-storey houses. When people have lots of choices, thus, their can change rapidly.

Berger is correct in connecting belief systems with social change. This connection (sometimes) helps explain the success of missionaries in effecting change among groups not otherwise open to transforming themselves. Thus it is not surprising that some development workers (at a seminar on Lua held at the Chiang Mai Teachers Training College in February 1988) commented that the Lua resist changes beneficial to them such as washing their hands while that at the same time many of those same Lua had become Christian, a move involving profound changes in belief systems not at all easy to precipitate. Surely the Catholic missionaries working with the Lua could have persuaded those Lua to use hand soap if they had already managed to convince the Lua to abandon spirit worship and attend weekly mass. Berger (or the missionaries) who understand the connection between belief systems and change could surely teach that development worker something.

Berger identifies the alternative to traditional society as technological society. "Packages", institutional processes that act as agents of change, assist in the transformation from the former to the latter. Berger identifies industrial capitalism and the modern bureaucratic state as two "primary carriers", involving the introduction of "packages" that effect change.

Based on Berger s thoughts, changes in pre-traditional times from animism to Christianity would be from one traditional to

another traditional society. Since the rules and rituals of Christianity differ from animism, though, as well as being partly "technological"; many changes accompany conversion from animism to Christianity. More significant, in Berger's view, would be changes from animism or Christianity to modern secularism since more changes should result.

A significant aspect of traditional societies, particularly those examined in this study, is that only a small portion of the population in any society is in a position of authority and able to effect change. However, in "modern" societies, quite a number of people would be authorities and different courses of possible action that could bring about change. Thus an important aspect of the transition from traditional to modern society would be the growth in the number of alternative choices of action. A positive correlation between options and change surely exists.

As a part of Berger's explanation of change in society, most people in traditional societies would be subject to a select few in many important aspects of their life. Religious leaders, according to Berger thus, would wield considerable authority. In both traditional Hmong and Karen societies this has traditionally been true. One question which is examined in this study is to what extent, in the transition from traditional to technological society, can individual members of society make decisions for themselves, determine their own destinies, and be free from external control.

At the group level, similar to that of the individual level, both Karen and Hmong have traditionally lived on the fringes of

societies. There are records centuries old of Miao (of which the Hmong is a branch) in China living (usually in hills) apart from Han Chinese settlements. Although Karen history cannot be traced so far back as that of the Miao, Karens over two hundred years ago were living apart from Burmese on the perimeter of the Burma Delta and along the border between Thailand and Burma. And even though Karens and Hmong imagine themselves as better, more righteous people than the residents of the major civilizations, in terms of actual power they were usually subservient to and set upon by them in a number of ways that varied over time.

This study examines the change in relationships between the highlanders, Karen and Hmong, and the lowlanders, the Thai and northern Thai in the thirty years under study.

Perhaps the most important question this study asks is are the Karen and Hmong more exploited as a group than in 1957 or do they have more options for self-determination and more actual chance of doing what they want to do? A relevant subsidiary concern includes what should be done when Karen or Hmong self-determination (like the freedom to cultivate and sell opium) leads them into conflicts with the state.

An important factor in assessing change in the northern Thai hills is what access the Karens had towards resources--forest, food, water thirty years ago--and how this compares with conditions at present. Access to resources directly influences social change. Without understanding the state of this access it is impossible to accurately determine why social change is occurring.

Once highlander access to resources thirty years ago is understood, it is possible to investigate the reasons for the change. In hill societies of Thailand, where written records are scarce and historical investigations depend on retrospective interviews one must also ask how do the peoples themselves perceive change? Are these perceptions accurate or not? Was thirty years ago the "good old days" or was it "terrible" then? If conditions seem "objectively" better before (more game, more land, for example) but the people in the study villages say that present-day life is preferable, as the study team sometimes was told, what are the reasons for such statements? Only after first answering these kinds of questions can meaningful suggestions for future actions be made.

As will be seen from the histories of the Hmong and Karen villages, the Karen villages have been in their present location for 30 years, although in the case of Mae Yang Ha, just barely so. The Hmong villages, however, have only been in their present locations for somewhat less.