

Environmental Subjects and Displays of Political Order: the Case of Ecology Monks in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

In the late eighties the Thai eco-Buddhist movement, led by a fragmented network of Buddhist monks, mobilized in defense of the forested ecosystems and advocated rural communities in forest and land conflicts against the state-corporation alliance. The present discussion challenges the assumptions of those observers who described the local articulations of the eco-Buddhist movement in the nineties. By analyzing the life trajectory of two ecology monks operating in Nan and focusing on their representations of the righteous rural order, I will argue that the eco-Buddhist environmentalist approach, throughout the decade 2000-2010, became a hegemonic force, supporting the conservative powers' effort to softly contrast the expansion of reformist social movements in the Northern Thai territories.

Keywords: eco-Buddhist movements, ecology monks, Royal Projects, Northern Thailand

“From early times Buddhism has been positively related to a conception of an ideal politico-social order whose cornerstone was a righteous monarch who would promote a prosperous society and religion (...).”

Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 1976, p.431)

Introduction

By crossing anthropological perspectives on environmental narratives and movements (Brosius 1999) and the interest for the historical emergence of environmental subjectivities (Agrawal 2005), I will show how the analysis of Buddhist monks' subjective visions of the righteous rural space and landscape leads to unveil the political directions of eco-Buddhist approaches in the Northern Thai rural *milieu*. The eco-Buddhist movement tends indeed to support an elitarian ideal environmental order; a perspective which is

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paradoxically very far from the major economic ambitions of the very rural classes the movement claims to represent (Walker 2008).

This process, for example, has a strong cultural impact on the hills of Nan Province and is dramatically affecting both T'ai and ethnic peasants.

Nan Province, located at the northern border with the Popular Republic of Laos, is well known across Thailand for its strategic forest and water resources, and in recent years has become the core of eco-Buddhist experimentations in Northern Thailand. The hills of Nan host many groups of *chao khao* (mountain people), like Hmong, Lua, Khamu and Mien. At present these groups are a depositary of identities and of a strong collective memory of the communist guerrilla, through which former generations sought to gain autonomy from the central state. Due to their peculiar "art of not being governed" (Scott 2009), *chao khao* have been considered rebellious towards and negligent of state imposed political order; many of them, not unlike many farmers and rural workers belonging to the hegemonic ethnic group, the T'ai *khon m'ueang* or T'ai Yuan, tend to sympathize with or to engage in leftist political movements. At present these ethnic groups are the target of many environmental projects oriented towards disciplined ecological conduct.

Data collected during my fieldwork in Nan province in 2008 and 2009 suggest that the present political and economic status of the rural classes and groups in Nan is influenced by the action of eco-Buddhist environmental networks, and that recently these networks have tended to cooperate with monarchic development foundations and to support the strategic establishment of channels of political influence by which conservative stakeholders try to prevent reformist feelings within the northern rural electorate.

Socio-historical background: environmentalism in Thailand

Recently Thailand gained international leadership in the promotion of environmentally sound developments in the South East Asian context. Thailand, for example, has already hosted important and well publicized United Nations meetings on Climate Change (i.e. in 2008, 2009 and 2011) and plays a central role in the worldwide promotion of agro-fuels for the substitution of fossil fuels.

According to many authors (Stott 1991; Hirsch 1996; Rigg 2003; Forsyth, 2003; Forsyth, Walker 2008), in contemporary Thailand the environment (*singuedlom*) has become a symbolic and material arena where political power is profitably staged. Both the international public image of the country and the internal political dialectic are at play in the environmental arena. This space of dense confrontation - amplified by social media networking, by summits and public events and by audio-visual communication tools manipulated by different interest groups - encourages and legitimizes specific forms of political territorialization. This happens through the imple-

mentation of environmental projects and activities that transform strategic portions of rural livelihoods and of the local cultural landscapes, impressing on them the footprint of the hegemonic forces governing the country.

In Thailand the rapid loss of forest in the last forty years was substantially due to the overt uncritical trustfulness in capitalistic patterns of economic development (Pye 2005; Wyatt 2003; Cavallaro 1992; Bello, Cunningham, Poe 1999; Marks 2007). After amnesty and the end of communist insurgency (1982) and while the first rough social, economic and ecological contradictions of development were rapidly becoming a structural feature of Thai society, political control of the countryside started to specialize in new directions and to dress in something other than the anti-communist uniform: the greening of state *governmentality* in the rebel peripheries of the country became the main feature of the re-territorialization strategy of the post-Cold War state.

In the eighties and nineties, ecological disasters like floods and droughts, started to be blamed on, and were almost certainly due to, over-exploitation of natural resources, by both lay and Buddhist intellectuals and by the local media. These debates produced a collective environmental sensitivity in all parts of Thai society, soliciting the proliferation of environmentalist narratives on behalf of the emerging cosmopolitan middle-class and, as a reaction, of many other stakeholders interested in the management of the rich natural resources of the country (Hirsch 1996; Forsyth, Walker 2008). New preservationist policies, like the Logging Ban (issued in 1988) and the radical empowerment of the National Parks Division, tended to restrict, centralize and severely discipline the existing uneven access to natural resource management (NRM) by the peasantry (Sureeratna Lakanavichian 2001), which in Nan and other northern provinces largely consisted of ethnic minorities. This trend led to an exacerbation of a myriad of local conflicts over the economic exploitation of land, water and forest resources. At the same time, people's movements started to diverge from pre-constituted ideologies such as communism and socialism, and change their stances towards local issues regarding environmental justice and the decentralization of NRM (Missingham 2003; Pesses 2010).

As noted by Philip Hirsch, in Thailand there are many forms of environmentalism, and each of them responds to a specific interest in NRM. A "moral economy of control over resources" is what connotes environmentalism as a socio-political force, especially for peripheral indigenous groups (Hirsch 1996, p. 34). Among the actors potentially involved in the Thai environmental debate, I will especially concentrate my discussion on activist monks belonging to the Buddhist Sangha (monastic order) and on the environmental projects of the Royal Family. Their production of a moral economy of control on resources represents the most original contribution of Thailand to the global environmental debate.

The source of eco-Buddhism: Buddhadasa Bikkhu's vision of Nature

As acknowledged by many, a central role in the genesis of Thai ecology movements has been played by Theravada Buddhism (Stott 1995; Rigg 2003; Queens, King 1996) and must be connected to the speculations of Buddhadasa Bikkhu¹, a monk who tried to emphasize the intrinsic environmentalism of the Lord Buddha's teachings, stressing the importance of ecological conservation for a righteous society. Overtly criticizing the development oriented policies of Thai authoritarian governments, Buddhadasa sought to compose a set of moral suggestions to make Thai Buddhists aware of the swift decay of the environment and of social boundaries due to the rapid westernization of Thailand. Buddhadasa was convinced that the restoration of the forest monks' (*phra pa*) tradition², which was almost obliterated after the Second World War due to state persecution and the disappearance of the forest, could be an important step in this direction. He suggested that contemplation of nature and livelihood in the forest had to be constantly practiced and revived, and these were indeed key features of the forest monks' tradition (Tambiah 1984; Taylor 1993; Kamala Tyia-vanich 1997).

The preservation of trees and forest, seen as sacred resources for the human body and mind, was thus one of the main teachings of Buddhadasa, who tried to model his temple in the fashion of the remote forest temples and shelters created by forest monks in the jungle. Surrounded by trees, animals and watercourses, the *Wat Suan Mokkh*, founded in the district of Chaiya (Surat Thani Province) became a model for the pupils and followers of Buddhadasa who wanted to live as in the time of the Lord Buddha, thus developing a moral awareness towards nature (Suchira 1992, p. 174).

The eco-Buddhist approach to the environment suggested by Buddha-

1 Buddhadasa Bikkhu (1906-1993) was born in the southern province of Surat Thani and was consecrated as a monk in 1927. With his brother, he founded the religious review *Buddhasatsana* and in 1932 he founded a temple, the *Wat Suan Mokkh* (The garden of liberation), which became the core venue of his activities. He was one of the first Thai Buddhist monks to spread his religious message through audio/visual media, like tapes and documentaries, and was the author of many pamphlets on issues like world politics and democratization of Buddhist teachings (Gabaude 1988; Suchira 1991; Swearer 1996). Due to his active concern for society and the environment, and to his opposition to authoritative politics in his country, he is acknowledged as the pioneer of engaged Buddhist movements in Thailand (Queens, King 1996).

2 As enlightened by Stanley J. Tambiah, the monastic tradition in Theravada Buddhism has two different currents, the first and most relevant one is known as *gamavasin* o *nagaravasin* (village or town dwelling) and includes those monks who live in towns or villages to teach the Buddhist precepts to lay people. The second current (*arannavasin* o *vanavasin*) privileges meditation retreats and pilgrimages in the forest, away from society and in self-seclusion within impervious environments (Tambiah 1984, p. 16).

dasa was acknowledged by both lay and religious people and by both upper and lower class people. Between the eighties and the nineties new religious subjectivities and projects oriented towards environmental protection and community advocacy started to appear in the footsteps of the authoritative monk. Susan Darlington, one of the first anthropologists to give an account of the Buddhist moralization of the Thai public discourse on environmental side effects of development, labeled these monks, in English, as *ecology monks*. Depicted as “grassroots”, “revolutionary”, “resistant” and “radical”, and even accused by military governments of being communist sympathizers, in the early stages, the monks involved in this movement and their initiatives clearly showed the anti-systemic potential of Buddhism in challenging the official direction of Thai rural and urban development (Kamala 1997; Darlington 1995, 2000; Isager, Ivarsson 2002; Brown 2006).

Environmental subjects: the ecology monks of Nan Province

Here I will explore the local articulation of environmentalist discourses and practices in Nan focusing on the changing historical positioning of two famous Buddhist activist monks I met in Nan (Rossi 2008), Phra Khru Pithak and Ajan Somkit, whose life stories have been reported by such anthropologists as Susan Darlington and Henry Delcore (Darlington 1995, 1998, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2005; Delcore 2000, 2004).

During the eighties and nineties, Phra Pithak and Phra Somkit rose as leaders in their own villages in the Santisuk district. They became active in forest protection and started to support many local communities in their fight to gain access to natural resource management. In theoretical terms, they acted as environmental subjects, and matured a specific orientation towards ecological transformations occurring in the area where they were born. Ajrun Agrawal (2005) defines “environmental subjects” as those individuals who develop a specific subjective attitude towards the natural environment. Institutional transformations of environmental governamentality, the widespread socio-environmental conflicts and differing local ideas of the self are some key dimensions that help to describe the situational positioning of social actors engaged in NRM.

I argue that the stories of Phra Khru Pithak and Ajan Somkit and generational differences between these two protagonists of the local environmental arena may illustrate the process of institutionalization of eco-Buddhist approaches within Thai society. Indeed, these stories show a structural shift occurring within the life cycle of this movement: from being radical and progressive it has become conservative in many of its features.

Phra Khru Pithak

When I first met Phra Khru Pithak he was almost sixty years old. The monk was a son of a Thai *khon mueang* and an ethnic Khamu. He entered the monastery of his village when he was a teenager. Hurt by the rapid forest loss on the hills where he was born, and shocked by the violent behavior of the local people against trees and animals, he decided to work to invert the trend of environmental over-exploitation practiced by the state-corporation alliance in the name of capitalist growth. Phra Khru Pithak portrays himself as the first monk who attracted the attention of national media and local intellectuals to the ritual of forest consecration (*buad paa*).³

The monk developed his eco-Buddhist practices, rhetoric and educational skills after attending seminars held in Bangkok by followers of Buddhadasa Bikkhu when he was in his twenties. In 1993, Phra Khru Pithak established the NGO *Hug Mueang Nan* (HMN), the first and most important socio-environmental NGO in Nan Province. HMN was initially mainly concerned with forest protection, but soon after its foundation a group of farmers joined the project to promote traditional agrarian techniques that could replace industrial agriculture. Maize production under the state sponsored regime of contract farming in Nan has been one of the main forces to cause a dramatic range of forest loss since the late eighties. But many other activities were achieved over the years, and many collaborations were activated. As mentioned by Henry Delcore (2004), Pithak started to promote the *santhiwithi*, the 'pacific method' to solve and prevent conflicts between local authorities and farming communities. This method led to the capability of his network to negotiate communications and decisions with powerful stakeholders involved in environmental disputes with local people.

While I was working in Nan, Phra Khru Pithak's position, richly documented by western anthropologists, seemed the same as in the past. In his public speeches he still tended to identify himself with the local communities of farmers. At the same time, the audience of his discourse has become extremely wide and has systematically included local authorities and other stakeholders with different points of view on NRM. For example, during a state sponsored meeting at Wat Aranyawat held in January 2009, in front of an audience that included army and state officers, NGO workers and village leaders, the Buddhist monk's vision of the righteous landscape emerged clearly, showing radical political positions through the claim for a democratic and decentralized approach to NRM in Northern Thailand. The main focus of his speech was his recent visit to Laos, which the monk considered

3 This ritual, invented by Phra Manat in the nearby province of Phayao, is a highly suggestive ceremony which implies the gathering of people to bless the forest; its acme is in the collective action of wrapping forest trees with religious saffron robes to sacralize and protect them from human aggression (Darlington 1998; Gabaude 2010).

a good example that all Thai Northern Provinces ought to follow:

I went to see by myself the Laotian livelihoods to understand why they don't suffer from famine. The reason is that their environment is healthy (...). For this reason I would like that Nan Province and Northern Thailand (*pak nuea*) could be like half of what Laos actually is (...). If we help one another we will be able to protect the forest, even if nobody is able to acknowledge our effort (...) I would like that the power that really matters could be the people's power, that the village council's power could be what really matters (...) (Phra Kru Pithak, Wat Aranyawat -Mueang Nan - January 29th 2009).

Darlington (2005) points out that, like other environmentalist monks, Phra Khru Pithak took great risks in his pacific fight. Once, he was mysteriously attacked with a gunshot, probably a case of revenge due to his charges against state policies, agro-business and greedy villagers. But when I attended his temple and connected to his network, I could witness how his work granted him nationwide fame and a prestigious religious career in the local Sangha hierarchy. His organization, Hug Mueang Nan, benefited from the financial support of different donors and within it operated a paid staff of at least twenty people. During my sojourn, Phra Khru Pithak was partially abandoning his activities, but other religious and lay people engaged in the environmentalist network set up by him were keeping it alive by developing many of his projects to foster the Buddhist approach to forest and land conservation on the hills of Nan. Among them, the most zealous worked on the staff of JOKO Center, the HMN training center for farmers founded in 2003 in a village 15 km from Nan town, where Buddhist middle-class activists try to implement agricultural solutions and rituals against industrial agriculture and deforestation.

Ajan Somkit

The most active among Phra Khru Pithak pupils is Ajan Somkit. A Buddhist monk himself, Somkit is about fifteen years younger than his teacher. I attended Somkit's temple about once a week for around six months, as I was hosted in the nearby village of Ban Don Klang (Pong Sub-District, Santisuk District), which is mainly populated by ethnic Lua. Somkit grew up in a Lao family in the village of Pong Kham in the Du Pong Sub-district (Santisuk District). This village was a colony of Lao *khon mueang* that migrated as a labor force from Luang Prabang to Nan Province in the early 20th century.

He often underlined that, even if his family was Lao, he was a *khon mueang*, a person of the city, a civilized man and not a *chao khao*, a person from the mountains, like many other semi-nomadic groups who came to live in Santisuk from Laos (i.e. Khamu and Lua ethnic minorities). In his

opinion the ethnic minorities who populated the hills located behind the Santisuk valley were uncivilized forest destroyers. In contrast to Pithak, who was a *luk khrung*, half T'ai and half *chao khao*, the younger monk was very bitter in his judgments of these groups. Ethnic and environmental labels overlapped in his representation of the local cultural hierarchy: *T'ai khon mueang* were civilized, believed in the lord Buddha, were sedentary rice farmers, and respected the forest; *chao khao* were nomadic farmers, believed in spirits (*phi*), practiced slash and burn agriculture and damaged the forest and water resources.

Nevertheless, Somkit was more educated than the older Pithak, who couldn't finish his studies due to his family's poverty. Somkit studied his MA in Environmental Management at Chiang Mai University and obtained a bachelor's degree at the age of 35. He traveled much more than Pithak, who first traveled abroad to Laos only in 2009. As reported by Darlington, Somkit was the author of environment oriented innovations of the local Buddhist practices. For example, he contrived a modification of the traditional Phra Phaa ritual, by which local lay communities normally collect alms for monks, giving them food, clothes, money and so on. Phra Somkit asked the people of his village to donate trees instead of goods. With those trees the monk could start to re-plant the forest on maize fields lying behind the temple, following the example given by Buddhadasa Bikkhu. By doing this he has transformed his monastery into a *wat pa*, a forest temple. After training in environmental conservation and community development, he even set up a model of bio-agriculture behind his temple (Darlington 2000).

Despite these contributions and innovations to the eco-Buddhist praxis, during our frequent talks, Somkit often asserted that he just wanted to continue Phra Khru Pithak's work and proclaimed that he didn't want to change any part of Phra Kru Pithak's path. Like his master, he held *buad pa* ceremonies, seminars and educational activities for local people (especially students, farmers and their families) to vivify and implement the Buddhist concepts of Nature, to dissuade farmers from mono-cropping agriculture and to convince them to protect forest and water resources.

Phra Somkit was also following new directions: for example, he was an enthusiastic promoter of the Sufficiency Economy model designed by King Bhumibol in 1997. While Phra Khru Pithak was convinced that the King had taken inspiration from the ecology monks' exemplar exegesis, Somkit declared himself a follower of the King's new economic and environmental path which he considered a supreme synthesis of the Buddhist approach to rural economy and forest ecology. Furthermore, Somkit was actively seeking connections with central powers, and during my fieldwork he was forming new alliances with key stakeholders of the national environmental arena, like the RDPB (Royal Development Project Board) and with Petroleum Thailand, partners who were initially excluded by the diplomatic network

set up by Phra Khru Pithak. At the beginning, the network was simply made up of lay individuals and groups which, before becoming part of HMN, in some cases preferred confrontational strategies to collaboration with corporations and state institutions.

Merging eco-Buddhist landscapes and Royal environmentalism in the upper Nan river basin

The ecology monks of Nan, with the help of many lay followers, became specialized in the enclosure of new spaces that intentionally reflect eco-Buddhist principles in NRM. Pithak's followers and Somkit display moralized visions of the righteous relationship between mankind and the natural environment, a righteousness that in the monks' opinions was intrinsic to the Nan rural landscape before the boom of maize production. The Nan landscape, indeed, is forged by marked oriented forestry and agriculture and is characterized by maize fields and by artificial patches and corridors of commercial forests.

In about twenty years the Hug Muang Nan network set up by Phra Khru Pithak sought to redraw the local landscape, exalting its traditional aesthetic and moral qualities and producing new places that reflect eco-Buddhist environmental consciousness and morality: consecrated forests threatened by logging, village and city temples fashioned as forest temples and sustainable agriculture, and experimental training centers are new places that express the original eco-Buddhist vision of the righteous environment. They are places which have been materially and symbolically constructed through typical eco-Buddhist initiatives based on ideas of space and time which stand in visible rupture with the dominant landscape. "Of space" because the ideal landscape should be made up of dense wild forest, clear and abundant water torrents and traditional irrigation channels, orchards, vegetable gardens and paddy fields of local varieties of rice. These places, in addition, are based on a rupture with the modern agrarian rhythms and promote the revival of the past livelihoods of rural people.

From forest consecration to moralization of agriculture: localizing eco-Buddhist visions of the rural landscape.

I argue that visions of the ideal ecological order implied in the two monks' practices and discourses are a symptom of the conservative posture of eco-Buddhist activists and imply a wider idea of political, and not only environmental, order. It is an order that seems to imply a detachment from the farmers' point of view. In Santisuk, and all over Northern Thailand, farmers prefer to consider themselves as small entrepreneurs and to receive profits from harvesting corn, even if the contract farming system leads them into a

spiral of loans and debts. Furthermore, the wide support of reformist movements in the north is partly due to the ambition of being legal owners of the land they farm, and not illegal occupiers or, as in the luckiest cases, legal usufructuaries without rights to sell the land. To show eco-Buddhist visions of landscape in Nan I will briefly discuss three main points.

First, it is important to emphasize a historical shift in activists' environmental narratives. While the main focus of the early eco-Buddhist initiatives in Nan were the local forests, and Buddhist monks were especially active in the restoration of forested land (by consecrating the forest and trees, replanting the forest, and negotiating with forestry institutions), during my fieldwork agricultural issues were the foremost environmental concern. HMN activists were convinced that to save the forest it was necessary to "change farmers' minds". Activists had to give good examples not only of forest community management, but of agricultural techniques as well, because deforestation was mainly due to farmers' participation in unsustainable agricultural systems.

Secondly, scientific knowledge, according to eco-Buddhist activists, had to support, enrich and empower traditional agriculture. Some HMN key activists working with Ajan Somkit and Phra Khru Pithak were educated in Agricultural Extension or specialized in agrarian sciences. According to a wave of intellectuals seeking a Thai way to economic development, who since the late eighties have gathered around the Community Culture school of thought (*Wattthanatham Chumchon*) (Chattip 1995; Delcore 2007), traditional agricultural systems were based on collective labor, on diversification of agricultural species and on the adoption of bio-dynamic and biological systems.⁴ The past techniques and economic habitus were oriented towards community re-distribution and to self-consumption, and activists considered them to be much more sustainable than modern market oriented industrial agriculture, which is based on hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizer and pesticides. These techniques and the local rituals connected to them had to be revived. During my interviews with the two monks and with the HMN staff, the idea of tradition supported by activists was the hegemonic cultural patterns of the valley (Davis 1980) while they ignored or discouraged traditional techniques practiced by non-Buddhist minorities scattered on the hills, whose economy was based on rotational or nomadic slash and burn agriculture.

The third observation aims to emphasize that the shift from forest to agricultural issues, the "scientific revival" of rural traditions and a high professionalization of activist profiles have implied the progressive institu-

⁴ For instance, the thesis submitted by Phra Somkit at Chiang mai University is titled *The Study of community cultural roles affecting the success of the aquatic animal conservation network organization, Ban Hat Pha Khon, King Amphoe Phu Phiang, Changwat Nan* (2005), and represents an example of the application of the Community Culture theory (see below) to the local NRM. The author wishes to thank the anthropologist Sakkarin Na Nan, from the same university, for providing detailed information on this issue.

tionalization of eco-Buddhist approaches in the Nan area. Eco-Buddhist agricultural solutions entail a moral discipline that goes beyond the initial simple precept: “don’t touch the forest!”, and imply further restrictions and difficulties for local farmers, who already feel squeezed by agricultural intensification policies and forest protection laws. Today there seems to be an unbridgeable distance between the environmentalist monks and the farmers’ cause, for this relation implies blame being severely placed on farmers’ economic attitudes.

Royal Projects and eco-Buddhist networks: coping reformism in Nan

The institutionalization of the eco-Buddhist approach is further confirmed by the recent collaboration between the ecology monks’ local network and the Royal developmental Projects initiated in Nan between 2000-2010. The hard political season that followed the *coup d’état* of 2006, by which the reformist leader of the Red Shirt movement Thaksin Shinawatra was exiled, has probably conditioned the recent conservative trend embraced by the two monks’ network, while statements against the political establishment characterized their early environmentalist militancy and still connote self-representation practices of eco-Buddhist activists.

During the last decade the monarchic institution has lost its prestige and influence in the countryside and especially in the Northern region, where the reformist Sino-Thai leader was born and has his main base of influence (Pasuk Phongpaichit, Baker 2009, Laravera 2011). It is thus likely that the Chakri dynasty is trying to forcibly moralize its public image in the eyes of the ungovernable subjects in the periphery of the kingdom, many of whom support the Thaksin political movement. The Royal Family is doing this mainly by riding the machine of environmental protection and rural sustainable development in the name of Sufficiency Economy, a Buddhist inspired economic philosophy conceived by King Bhumibol Adulyadej and first proclaimed in 1997 (UNDP 2007). It is important to remark that the initiatives sponsored under the label of Sufficiency Economy are very distant from the macro-infrastructure projects realized by the monarchy during the Cold War and, in turn, seem to be inspired by the small projects which were initially (at least fifteen years before the royal eco-Buddhist statements and projects) set up by the local lay and religious eco-Buddhist networks in many provinces of the country, including Nan.

On the basis of these similarities, it is perhaps not surprising that the co-optation of networks of local radical activists and intellectuals tied to the NGO set up by Phra Khru Pithak has recently become a key strategy for the expansion of the royal developmental apparatus in Nan Province: alternative territorialization, potentially enhanced by this network through the years, has recently been redirected and appropriated by the royal bureaucrats and think tanks.

For example, Somkit's temple in Pong Kham has become a center of diffusion for Vetiver grass for soil rehabilitation; a project that aims to plant Vetiver along the slopes and close to artificial water basins to prevent landslides and erosion. Vetiver grass represents a 'keystone' of the royal environmental concern, even if farmers are not satisfied at all with this solution, as it implies the contraction of cultivable soil. Somkit, furthermore, in recent years, started a durable collaboration with the Phu Fa Royal Project, which was conceived and sponsored by the king's third daughter Phrathep (Princess Sirindhorn) in the Bo Kluea district, located near the Santisuk District and mainly inhabited by non-Buddhist minorities. Somkit often visited the project area to consecrate the local forests and act as an advisor and trainer in eco-Buddhist practices.

Not only Somkit has been caught in the royal development network: JOKO Center's leaders, since 2008, started to benefit from the advice of experts from the Office of Royal Development Projects (Chiang Mai Province), and the Mae Fa Luang Foundation (Chiang Rai Province). The whole area of JOKO Center, not surprisingly, is covered by stickers and posters with the Sufficiency Economy brand.

The unquestionable evidence of an overlap between environmental and political visions of the righteous landscape is especially represented by the recent implementation of the so-called *Pid thong lang phra* (PTLP, that means *Gold hidden behind the Buddha's image*) project, which started in 2009 and is directed to rural ethnic communities scattered around the upper Nan River Basin. This project is coordinated by Mr. Disnadda Diskul, an aristocrat counselor of the Royal Family, who at the time of my fieldwork was presiding at the Doi Tung Foundation in Chiang Rai. The project is based on intensive GPS mapping of watersheds and forested areas, carried out under the supervision of army officers, touching border areas that suffer from chronic political instability. Phra Khru Pithak and Phra Somkit and at least ten key HMN activists have been involved in the project, since its initial stages, as key advisors and coordinators.

PTLP will dramatically transform the hilly Nan landscape – mainly occupied by ethnic Lua, Hmong and Mien villages – by promoting the diffusion of rice and fruit terraces to settle, diversify and reduce agricultural land, enlarge forest areas, and attract tourism. Many HMN leaders initially considered PTLP as a net benefit for the farmers of the province. But, in fact, both in the city and in the countryside, the project has been bitterly criticized by rumors and confidential reports. I collected them – often during informal conversations - when interviewing state officials, farmers and independent activists. My sources, indeed, revealed that for many key actors involved in the environmental management of the Province, PTLP (especially for its proportions and for its open-ended implementation) has appeared since the very beginning to be a strategic manifestation of the political influence

of the conservative establishment in this rural, remote, reformist area. The socio-environmental concern of PTLP, for these informants, was hiding an urgent political interest to stabilize and enlarge the conservative network in northern areas in the face of the prolonged political crisis.

Conclusion

In this article I analyzed the historical convergence between the territorialization strategies issued by the Thai monarchy between 2000 and 2010 and the process of localization and institutionalization of the so-called eco-Buddhist movement in the Northern Province of Nan. After presenting the past conditions for the emergence of an eco-Buddhist movement in Thailand, I described the rising of new singular environmental subjects, represented by the environmentalist monks. Exploring local articulations of eco-Buddhism, I have critically discussed the transformations of the rural landscape fostered by two ecology monks born in Nan Province. To show the present implications of eco-Buddhist practices and discourses I finally discussed the current collaborations between the ecology monks' network and the Royal Projects implemented along the upper Nan River Basin, unveiling their political meaning in the face of the political crisis which followed the ousting of Thaksin in 2006.

The environmental subjectivity and political imagination of Phra Khru Pithak, of Phra Somkit and of other lay leaders of the eco-Buddhist movement do not seem to mirror the interests of the peasantry. According to the general statement provided by the quotation from Stanley Tambiah's study on religion and power in Thailand and reported above, eco-Buddhist displays of an ideal ecological order in recent years tend to follow the royal mainstream, find a way to institutionalize and can no longer be perceived or studied by anthropologists as grassroots efforts or as forms of resistance. Today, displays of resistance are elsewhere and in some way they stand in opposition to the eco-Buddhist socio-environmental order. The main targets of eco-Buddhist projects (T'ai and ethnic farmers), indeed, silently and systematically resist the restrictive involvement in the moralized agricultural orthopraxis, proudly declare themselves Thaksin's supporters, and tend to complain about the anachronistic interference of eco-Buddhist NGOs and of conservative forces in the local political landscape.

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