

Modes of Production and Food Security in Cultural Dimensions Ban Thiphuye, Thailand

Nobparat Chaichana

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kanchanaburi Rajabhat University, Thailand

E-mail: Chimmanee2531@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this area study was to investigate modes of production and food security in cultural dimensions on local resources diversity, a case study of the Pwo Karen Community of Ban Thiphuye, Chalae Sub-district, Thong Phaphum District, Kanchanaburi Province. This qualitative research employed applied anthropological research method. Data were gathered from related literature, and field data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews, and participant and non-participant observations. The data were validated at every step. The study found that “Thiphuye” is a Karen word meaning a small creek with a lot of “Ye” trees, a tree similar to Tao Rang, a kind of palm tree, along the banks. The majority of the population of this community is Pwo Karen whose main occupation is agriculture. In the past their modes of production was subsistence agriculture and production for sale. Factors influencing the changes were (1) state development, and (2) capitalist market mechanisms. These factors resulted in changes in the economic system of the community. Nevertheless, people’s roles in their families were still based on their traditional culture where everyone in the family participates in the activities, particularly, the activities of subsistence agriculture. This provides them with food security that corresponds with the concept of sustainable agriculture or alternative agriculture that has long been inherited in the community that provides them with flexibility that enables them to adapt to the changing situation. This is the answer to why this community can maintain the sustainable way of life on local resources diversity.

Keywords: Mode of Production, Food Security, Ethnicity

Introduction

The meaning of food security covers sufficient amount of food for consumption with diverse types of food, food safety and nutrition that everyone can have access to at all times physically and economically as a result of thorough and equal distribution. Apparently, obvious problems of food security include insufficient amount of food for consumption, no access to food for consumption, a gap in food consumption caused by food distribution, health and nutritious problems, etc. The concept of food security was developed since the decade of 1970s and began to be well known after the World Food Summit in Rome, Italy in 1996. The summit gave importance to access to food for all people at all times physically and economically with sufficient amount, safety, nutrition, and preferences for good life and good health. Furthermore, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations or FAO, there are four dimensions to food security: 1) Availability, 2) Access, 3) Utilization, and 4) Stability (Chaichana & Wutthiprachak, 2017: 46).

The aim of this study was to investigate modes of production and food security in the cultural dimension on local resource diversity, a case study of a Pwo Karen community in Ban Thiphuye, Village No 3, Chalae Sub-district, Thong Phaphum District, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand in the current social context. The data collected were on the way of life among Karen people, especially the upland rice farming that affects food security in a cultural dimension. Ban Thiphuye is a village with Pwo Karen as the main ethnic group and it

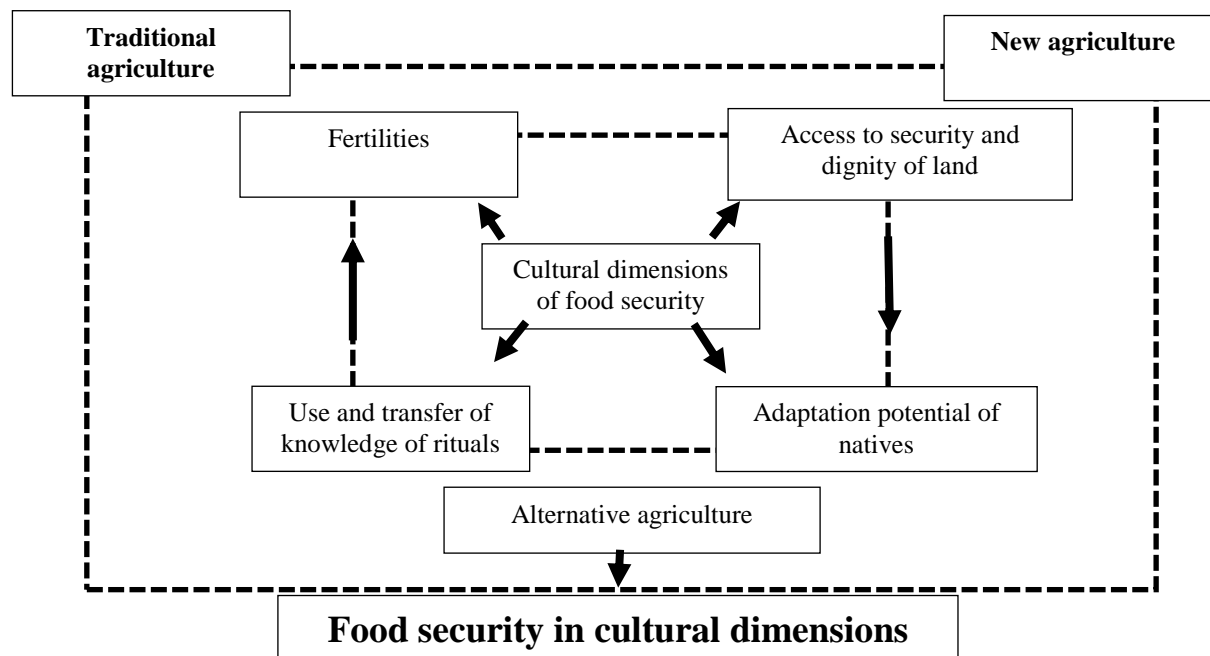
is an agrarian society where people hunt for forest products and lead simple lives peacefully. They love freedom, enjoy living in solitude and are satisfied with what they have, and adhere to kin relationship as rules of living together. This type of relationship leads to power relations that depend on state power and mechanisms as well as economic power. Power is person-centered rather than rules and regulations of living together in the community. Thus, traditional mechanisms cannot control people's conduct and confine them in the traditional framework which result in a new type of power relations which tends to widen the gap between people and their vertical relationships. Therefore, the changing circumstances and uncertainty in the way of living of the local community of Ban Thiphuye, Chalae Sub-district, Thong Pha Phum District, Kanchanaburi Province are significant and the modes of production and food security of the community from the past to the present require investigation to determine how much potential in food security management it has. In the past, the community way of life was production for survival which later was changed to two production systems: (1) Development by the state; and (2) capitalist market mechanisms. These factors have affected the community's economic system in a risk for food security. In order to know different situations related to the food security risk and to be able to analyze it to prevent and solve problems arising in the future, the researcher was interested in investigating the modes of production and food security in a cultural dimension of Ban Thiphuye Community in Chalae Sub-district, Thong Pha Phum District, Kanchanaburi Province.

Literature Review

Chaichana & Udomsap (2016), Sisuentaeng (2007), Prasertsak (2015), and Phuengpracha, Phothipalat & Thaeo-uthum (2012) studied agricultural systems for food security and found that transitional processes of agriculture from one to another take a considerable time and each transition is designated by the community with internal and external factors. Thus, all agricultural systems directly affect changes of the agricultural systems in each transitional period. Community participation is considered a major factor of community development through cooperation between people and state officials for unity in developing their own community for sustainable development to have food security.

According to Ericksen (2008), Bala & Joseph (2007), Munke, et al. (2012), and Sakda & Tillmann (2006) food security is at risk. However, most of the studies place emphasis on rural areas as they are important food production sources at the household as well as the community levels. It is, thus, important for this present study to focus on food security of the marginalized ethnic group in the border area because the group is close to the community resource base.

From the review of related literature and research reports, the following research framework was synthesized.



Research Methodology

This qualitative research applied anthropological research methods. The researcher planned detailed as follows.

1) Population and the sample group: The population providing important data was selected through purposive sampling for collection of related data consisting of (1) Five experts in Karen history, (2) Six local Pwo Karen people, (3) Three governmental and non-governmental officers, (4) Community leaders, Buddhist monks, and community wise men totaling 5 informants.

2) Data collection methods: (1) Participant observation and non-participant observation to collect primary data on various life aspects of people in the community; (2) In-depth interviews with primary key informants consisting of the abbot of Wat Thiphoye Kowitthayaram, village headman, 6 Pwo Karen people; and with 3 secondary key informants who were government officials in the area; and (3) Focus group discussion with Pwo Karen, government officials and non-governmental officers (NGOs) totaling 8 informants.

3) Data analysis: In-depth data analysis began when saturation of data was reached. Triangulation techniques were used to verify the researcher, time and procedure. Importance was given to data classification based on similarities and differences of the data. The data resulting from the analysis were synthesized and presented to the community through discussions for exchanging information, validating the data and supporting the participation so that after the data analysis, a body of knowledge was resulted with the same understanding of all parties concerned. Then the report writing process began.

Research Results

“Thiphuye” is a Karen word; “Thi” means a small creek or stream; “Phu” is water coming out from the ground; and “Ye” is a kind of palm tree growing near a stream in a fertile forest. In the past, there were many “Ye” trees growing around the area of “Thiphuye” creek. The Karen name a place according to its geographical characteristics and outstanding plants or the ecological system of the community. Geographically, Ban Thiphuye community is situated on Khao Phra Ruesi Bo Rae mountain range. Most of its population is Pwo Karen who have

houses in small kin groups consisting of 2-4 households each. They are Buddhists and believe in ancestral spirits and sacred things in their community that have relationships between humans and humans, humans and nature, and humans and super nature. This is in line with the concept of cultural ecology; that is an adaptation process to social environment with emphasis on study of evolution or changes as a result of social adaptations. This concept looks at society as dynamic or changing all the time as a result of adaptation to the environment based on production technology, social structure and natural environment as important conditions (Wansiri, 2007: 111). Thiphuye is a village located in Khao Laem National Park, the boundary of which was officially announced in 1991, and presently there is still a dispute between the community and the park on farming areas and residential areas because the ethnic Karen groups have been turned into invaders who have violated the National Park Act.

Focus group discussions revealed that this community has been here for more than 60 years. It is supported by a study by Wongtaw, Chaichana & Chanritthisen (2017). The studies state that Thiphuye village has been permanently settled here for around 60 years. At the beginning, there were only four households belonging to the father of the liaison of Wat Thuphuye and his relatives. Later, other Karen people moved in to live and to farm; until now there are 114 households of 586 people consisting of 298 males and 288 females (Tambon Chalae Administrative Organization, 2018: 114). The information was confirmed by the interviews conducted by the researcher and found that this group of ethnic Karen has settled down in the forest in Chalae Sub-district and Thung Yai Naresuan for many generations. A former village headman said that in the past ancestors of Karen in this village offered a white elephant to King Rama IV when he visited Sai Yok. The then Chalae Sub-district headman and the then permanent secretary of Thong Pha Phum District were representatives of the Karen people to make the offer. In return for their offer, King Rama IV granted conscription exemptions to male Karen living in Chalae Sub-district at that time.

From settlement to crop rotations

Traditionally, Pwo Karen of Ban Thiphuye did upland rice farming in rotation with other crops which was a subsistence production system for the community. They farmed upland and in forest areas using swidden agriculture or shifting cultivation. Upland rice farming in Thiphuye is mixture of varieties of seeds and plant diversity that helps keep soil fertility that brings in food security making the community self-reliant. The Pwo Karen grow varieties of plants for food enough for a year round consumption and these plants also have traditional and cultural importance to them as reflected in the following statements.

“Rice is our staple food. If you do not know how to do upland rice farming, then you are not ethnic Karen. Another way of our life is that between humans and forests, farms and humans, spirits and humans, all these are at the upland rice farm. We are Thais of Karen descent. Our ancestors have accumulated experience, knowledge, and beliefs in our culture of upland rice farming.” (Taemsikhram, 2018)

“Rice is life for Karen people. In the past, our ancestors did crop rotation farming, and nowadays even though we cannot rotate crops the same way as it was in the past, we still do on our own land and we still use the traditional wisdom that our ancestors used.” (Roeksaksi, 2018)

In the ethnic Pwo Karen’s traditional way of life, crop rotation farming and rice were the economic heart and existence of their culture. They did rice farming only enough for family consumption for one year, not for sale because their farming depended on labor of family members and the amount of farmland depended on the number of family members of each family. They consider knowledge of upland rice farming as important to their lives as ethnic Karen. Knowledge of upland rice farming is more important than money. To grow enough rice for consumption is not only having knowledge about farming but also about ecology,

especially knowledge about the forest where rice is grown, and knowledge about the weather, especially about rain which is an important factor in upland rice farming.

Upland rice farming for food security

In the culture of upland rice farming of the ethnic Karen in Ban Thiphuye, important labor is from people in the family both men and women. Responsibilities are distributed as appropriate to age, gender and physical conditions or skills and abilities inherited of each family member. Work distribution is very flexible and they can work to substitute for each other. Most women are responsible for seed selection and production planning in the family to decide what to grow and how much to grow while men are responsible mainly for work in the farm as can be seen from the following statements.

“In the past, as I remember, rotation rice farming was done using labor in the family. If we had small children, we took them along. Men provided important labor in slashing and burning while women collected, looked after and dropping rice seeds in the holes and we helped taking care of the farm.” (Phitsanu, 2018)

The length of each job depends on its nature. For example, in upland rice production, the culture of area selection begins with surveying which usually takes place in the last part of December and January. The areas selected must be near a creek, wetland, or ponds, and the land must be wetland. In doing upland rice farming, the area needs to be cleared by slashing and burning. If there are trees, those with soft texture are cut down near the ground, the same way as bamboo trees are cut for safety when being burned. Usually this preparation is done in February. Before growing rice in June and before dropping rice seeds, “Bue Si Bo” ceremony is performed to explain to the guardian spirit to look after the farm for good rice yield without pests. The ritual consists of digging nine holes for rice seed dropping. Rice is harvested around October to December. When the rice field turns yellow, rice harvest begins. Before harvesting, a ritual to ask rain not to fall is performed. Because rice of various varieties is grown, they do not ripen at the same time. Therefore, harvest begins from the one that ripens first. People gather to help cutting rice and winnowing rice.

It can be said that the crop rotations system of the ethnic Pwo Karen of Ban Thiphuye is a native agricultural system for subsistence giving most importance to upland rice rotations. They use labor in the household as the main labor with women playing a major role in subsistence productions in the family. Production links homes with farms and becomes a network of product circulation in the same ecology system which is an important principle resulting in stability, sustainability and effectiveness of production that creates food security that enables the community to be self-reliant in terms of production factors.

From a traditional mode of production to the present alternative agriculture of the ethnic Pwo Karen

The production mode and way of life of the community have changed. Capitalist expansion, the state's development, and production that involves marketing conditions makes the community unable to carry on the traditional way of crop rotations which has changed production relationships. Particularly, the changes are clearly seen in family economy that forces families to adapt and develop a new type of relationship based on traditional culture. The modern development structure has brought about a new type of leaders in the community encouraging it to adapt to the changes. This is clearly seen, for example in promotion for people to receive education from the school system so that they are literate and promotion for people to be interested in development and cooperate with the government sector. At the same time, the community economic system is developed to increasingly enter the market mechanisms. As a result, the community's ability to be self-reliant in the aspect of basic economy becomes lower whether in terms of sufficiency or indicator of state development as seen in the following statements.

“Nowadays, we still do upland rice farming but not with crop rotations as we did in the past. We do it on our land; we don’t grow much rice; we grow only enough for family consumption, not for sale.” (Phaphumchalathan, 2018)

Presently, Ban Thiphuye community still gives much importance to subsistence production as can be seen that every family in the community still grows rice for its own consumption but in the limited area of less than 10 rai each. Women still play an important role in the subsistence production system in the community as it is said in the statement below.

“We grow only 6 rai of rice. How much each family grows depends on how much land it has. The rest of the area we grow cassava also for our own family consumption and sharing with our relatives.” (Phaphumchalathan, 2018)

Presently, the community has production plans for their upland rice farming by allocating their growing areas. They grow rice in the area between rows of rubber trees that are less than 4 years old. Some families grow rice alternately with other kinds of plants such as sour melon, pumpkin, turmeric, etc. An example of this is the farm of Phitsanu, the family that the researcher stayed with. They grew rice in an area of 5 rai and cassava in another 5 rai which could be considered growing for commercial reason or doing modern agriculture that needs high investment as it is said below.

“Some families grow rice and other plants between rows of young rubber trees that are younger than 5 years old. Other families rotate their crops. For example, if they have 10 rai of land, they grow rice in 5 rai and grow cassava or turmeric in the other 5 rai, and they rotate these crops.” (Thongphaphumworakit, 2018)

Even though production for sale has become part of the way of life of this community, they limit it in the scope of their investment. That is to say in making production, they emphasize more on sufficiency and production power of their families than on the income. This may be because their production area of the family is appropriate for the family labor to cope with which is suitable for their production potential. It corresponds with the exchanges in the focus group discussion.

“Nowadays the community still do upland rice farming but in limited areas because we cannot rotate to do it in the forest as we did in the past. Talking about labor, we still use the same agricultural system for upland rice farming by mainly using labor in the family, men, women, and children that are old enough to do it; we all help on the farm.”

Nevertheless, the trend of commercial farming will gradually increase as can be seen from investments of people who have a good economic status in the community. They take out loans to buy a tractor and modern appliances plays an important role in their daily life. Traditional relationships among people who depend on each other have changed and the importance of their belief in their ancestral spirits has been reduced. However, the kinship system is still important in the aspect of cooperation in helping each other providing needed labor including help in investment and technology and production tools. The trend of going to the market becomes higher.

Conclusion and Discussion

Ban Thiphuye community, Mu 3 or Village No. 3, Chalae Sub-district, Thong Pha Phum District, Kanchanaburi Province has food security. Agriculture in the community began from a traditional agricultural system or subsistence production or subsistence agriculture and then as the way of life changed it was changed to two production systems: subsistence production and production for sale. Factors of change are developmental mechanisms and the capitalist market mechanisms. The Karen people were found to have self-sufficiency, give importance to the value and the culture of rice as the ideology that must be inherited, especially the social relationship structure based on the kinship system and give importance to the virtue system which is in agreement with a study conducted by Sisuphan et al. (2006). According to

Woodley, et al. (2009) and Chaichana (2016) people in the community preserve their local living culture, the Karen's way of life, knowledge transfer from generation to generation which is wisdoms of many things, particularly, "Lue Ka Wo", the way of life that teaches people to live life in moderation, know how to use resources reasonably and know the value of resources. As a result of living life in moderation, there is food security in Ban Thiphuye, Chalaе Sub-district, Thong Phaphum District, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand. Ban Thiphuye is in the border area of Kanchanaburi Province that is a fertile land complete with natural heritage called a "New land of the west". In addition, the findings correspond with the concept of sustainable agriculture, alternative agriculture, permanent agriculture or permaculture. These are agricultural systems with similar principles, even though there are many definitions given to them. However, for all of them, importance is given to balanced ecological system, production, good quality, sufficiency for farmers and consumers, and self-reliance; importance is also given to the local community. The most significant principle of alternative or sustainable agriculture is to produce food and factors essential to living rather than to produce for export (thus, farmers do not have to run after market trends). This agricultural system utilizes natural resources for highest benefits without affecting the environment but with balanced production, consumption and utilization of local natural resources. Foods produced by this system must be with good quality, safety, without toxic and harmful residues. The system also opens opportunity for family members to work together happily and live in harmony with nature resulting in continuity of the system without negative effects on the ecological system and without health, social and economic problems. The changes of production modes and way of life of Ban Thiphuye community have brought about new authoritative power that is different from the social rule that adheres to beliefs in spirits to living together under law and modern social norms based on democracy and personal freedom. Thus, importance is given to rights and satisfaction of individuals rather than social requirements that are not certain but change with the value system and social trend in each period with more differences, and they can no longer be controlled with the traditional social mechanisms. Consequently, a new type of leaders has emerged and there have been differences in economic statuses and classes of people that widen the vertical gap between them. This correspond with studies by De Haan et al. (2001), Lueang-aramsri (1996) and Vyas (2005) that state that the way of life among the marginalized groups is to produce enough rice for family consumption for the whole year using wisdom inherited from their ancestors. This gives the community food security with participation of people in joint management of the community resource bases. In addition, people in the community see value of their community resources even though they have learned to adapt themselves to society that has changed in its internal and external factors. Ban Thiphuye, Chalaе Sub-district, Thong Phaphum District, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand, grows rice for family consumption enough for the whole year. They grow plants around their residential area; inherit their ethnic culture and wisdom.

Recommendations

The findings suggest human and social development in Ban Thiphuye community, Chalaе Sub-district, Thong Pha Phum District, Kanchanaburi Province as this community can estimate its own food security based on the thought about community rights concerning food and food security. This can lead to a process of defining meanings of food security of the community, a process of forming indicators that are in line with the context of the area that shows changes of the way of life in the community that provide locals with choices of future activities for their community development.

Recommendations for further studies are that there should be research on types of activities that build food security in the community by promoting processes that involve participation

in the community, interactions between the “Bowon” or homes, the temple and the school network. The interactions happening during the research project will have long-term effects on the community in terms of learning and realizing the importance of positive interactions that mobilize activities to benefit the community.

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