3. People, Natural Resource Management, and Conservation of Ecosystems

3-1. Spirit Worship and Forest Conservation in the Mekong Basin

Spirit Worship and Natural Resources Management

In China's Yunnan Province, Laos, northeastern Thailand, and northwestern Vietnam's Mekong River Basin area, the Dai, Hani, Lao and other ethnic groups still practice ceremonies for spirits that live in the forests. There are also various taboos that are still respected today when using the forests. Spirit worship has functioned to deter excessive forest use and logging.

Ethnic group	Locations	Description of Forest Spirit Worship	Source
Hani (Akha in northern Burma,Laos, and Thailand)	Southern Yunnan, China and along the northern borders of Burma, Laos, and Vietnam	The Hani believe that each spirit has its own abode (such as a wetland, pond, rock, and special tree). Many of these spirits reside in the forests. In such forests, it is taboo for Hani villagers to take forest products, hunt animals, or cut down trees.	Xu et al. (2005)
Dai	Southern Yunnan, eastern Burma, the mountain regions of Laos, northern Thailand, and northwestern Vietnam	The Dai have traditionally believed that forests, animals, and plants have natural powers with spiritual and religious meanings. Inciting the wrath of spirits inhabiting various natural phenomena with inappropriate behavior brings disaster or great misfortune to the village. Among the Dai people, it is encouraged to live in harmony with the environment that surrounds them.	Xu et al. (2005)
	Dien Bien Dong District of Vietnam's Lai Chau Province	Dai villages have sacred forests where ancestral spirits live, and their protection is very important to the villagers. Those who violate the sacred forests will have their souls stolen by angry spirits, and it is believed that they either go insane or die. To atone for the sins, the imposter is punished according to village rules, and a water buffalo or other animals may be sacrificed. On the other hand, these sacred forests are also the common property of the village, so when forest resources are sold, the income is put into a common community fund and is managed in accordance with certain rules.	Tran et al. (2007)
Lao	Northeastern Thailand	Among the Lao ethnic group in northeastern Thailand, villagers respect forests called *Don Phu Ta* in which spirits are said to reside. Even in northeastern Thailand where much logging takes place, *Don Phu Ta* have been left in good condition, and some of them are now classified as conservation forests or village common property, and are the targets of modern conservation efforts.	interviews by Mekong Watch (2012)

Table: Examples of Forest Spirit Worship in the Mekong Basin

Spirit Forests of Savannakhet Province, Laos

A forest called *Don Nathat Nong Lom* in That Ing-han Village of Kaisorn (formally Kantaburi) District of Savannakhet Province in central Laos has been kept in good condition. According to village records, this forest has an area of about 4,300 hectares, and is also an important regional water source. It is now publicly designated as a conservation forest (*Pa Saguan*), but this forest has also traditionally been respected by villagers because they believed that strong spirits reside there. These beliefs are still upheld today, and in Savannakhet Province, these forests are known as *Mahasaek* forests.

In the village, there is a Buddhist temple with a tower called *That Ing-han*, which is deeply respected among villagers. The taboos of the forest are now explained in Buddhist terms. The forest borders a marsh called *Nong Lom*, but this marsh is also seen to belong to spirits, and it is prohibited to send boats out to fish or to hunt certain animals that the Buddha is said to have forbidden eating (e.g., snakes and monkeys).

Spirit houses in Sisaket Province, northeastern Thailand.

Every year in March of the lunar calendar, ceremonies for the spirits are conducted, and offerings excluding meat and alcohol are offered. Villagers today still believe that taking timber products from the forest without the permission of the spirits, cutting trees, and neglecting ceremonies is taboo. If someone violates these rules, it is greatly feared that villagers will either fall ill or die. It is said that several decades ago, because Buddhist ceremonies had become more important in a certain village, the village elders stopped conducting ceremonies for the spirits. Then, in the midst of a Buddhist ceremony, a large storm ravaged only this village, so they realized they had to continue the ceremonies for the spirits. Also, if someone in the village violates the taboos, strange phenomena are said to occur, such as an invisible horse running around the village through the night. Therefore, if it becomes known that someone has violated the taboos, villagers discuss the matter and a ceremony is done to appease the spirits in order to prevent disaster from befalling the village.

Sustainable Use of Spirit Forests

While villagers hold the forest in awe, they also use it on a daily basis. Cutting trees is possible if permission is received. According to village officials, about 100 of the 360 households of That Ing-han Village are using the resources of the forest, but many households from 13 other villages in surrounding areas also come to the forest to take what they need. When it is mushroom collecting season, people from even further away come to collect them.

In this forest, villagers collect edible mushrooms, wild grasses, honey, and resin used as fuel. Because it recently became a conservation forest, it is prohibited to collect firewood. The explanation given for this change was that there were increasing numbers of people collecting firewood not for their own use, but to sell, so it was a necessary measure to protect the forest.

Also, forest products are a means of gaining cash income. In the dry season, villagers collect tree resin called *nam man yang*. This is used as fuel for torches called *kabong*. Electrification is spreading

in Laos, so these torches are not used for light, but are sold in the markets as fire starters for charcoal stoves. Some are even exported to Thailand. To collect the resin, people first dig a hole in the trunk of a tree. Then a fire is lit in the hole to remove the resin, but the trees do not die in this process. Every few years, the villagers will dig a hole in a different place, and the old hole is no longer used, so it fills up and recovers. The process is thus managed so that the tree does not die.

Traditionally, a dry dipterocarp tree will belong to one household that has the right to take resin from it. One household may have 7 or 8 trees, and at most 10. While it is permitted to take resin, there is no right to log. The right to take resin is handed down from generation to generation.

Crisis of Spirit Forests

In central Laos, some venerated forests thus became conservation forests. Examples of the deep connection between people's lives and the forest—as seen in *Don Natha Nong Lam* where villagers limited firewood collection of their own initiative—show the potential for effective resource management by villagers themselves.

Now, however, forests which were once protected by people's awe of spirits are now being threatened by expanding plantation forests like rubber, pulp, and sugarcane plantations, because these commercial activities often involve logging of natural forests. Laos is also rapidly modernizing, so there is a high demand for non-timber forest products, and there is great interest in dry dipterocarp as timber. As a policy, Laos is aiming to increase forest cover with commercial forests, but in the past, there have been many reports of afforestation projects being used as an excuse to log natural forests.

Effective forest conservation in the Mekong River Basin requires not only taking biodiversity and food security into consideration, but calls for respecting the value of forests that have been protected by villagers and spirits. It is important to implement forest management that is appropriate to the region and not overly obsessed with numerical targets.

References

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