



Cultural based natural resources management

Case study: Ban Thapene, Luang Prabang
district, Luang Prabang province, Laos



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This document includes knowledge and stories from elders, prestigious peoples and representatives of community based organizations in Ban Thapene village. The study was conducted from 2014 to 2016 through on-going field research of SPERI's staffs in collaboration with CHESH Lao program, Luang Prabang Provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), and Agriculture and Forestry Offices of Xiang Nguen, Luang Prabang and Muong Nan districts,

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Introduction

As told by the elders of Thapene village, about 130 years ago, 3-4 families of the Kha Hok, one of the Khmu ethnic sub-groups whose dialect is slightly different from the rest of the Khmu ethnic group, moved from Huoi Nhay village, around 15 km northwest from Thapene, to settle in the current Thapene village. When they arrived, these families saw several scattered wooden boards next to the stream, which they rearranged into a wooden bridge for their daily washing. A wooden bridge is named in Lao language as *Thapene*. Thapene village was later established when more families of other ethnic groups joined them. Thapene was the name given at that time to the village, which marks the first steps of the first families to settle on this land.

Before 1975, many people from the Yuan, one of the tributaries to the Lao or Lao Loum ethnic group from Tat village married and set up their families in Thapene. In 1987, Luang Prabang provincial government decided to make the Kuang Si waterfall, a landmark in Thapene, a tourism area. Along with the Lao government policy of merging small villages into the larger ones, in order to protect the watershed areas of the Kuang Si Waterfall, Luang Prabang provincial government decided in 1994 to relocate families of four villages, including Tat, Nam Uok, Huoi Quan and Buon Phuc to live in lower lands next to the Mekong River. The entire forestland area of these villages was then transferred to Thapene and Yang villages for them to co-manage. Since the establishment of the Kuang Si tourism area, some families of Hmong and Yao ethnic groups from Na Luang village in Luang Prabang province have left their communities to do trading, get married and settle in Thapene.

Since mid 2016, Luang Prabang district and provincial authorities, in consultation with Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI), and with support from CCFD-Terre Solidaire, have conducted participatory community based forest and land allocation for Thapene. This aims to support viable usage and management of community forest and land resources, as well as preserving the cultural identity of the ethnic groups, not only in Thapene but also in the whole Kuang Si watershed region covering parts of Luang Prabang and Saiyabuli provinces.

Ethnicity and demography

Thapene is home to several ethnic groups, such as Kha Hok, Yuan, Hmong and Yao, of which, Kha Hok and Yuan are the majority. In 2014, Thapene had 112 households with 551 peoples (261 females), in which, Kha Hok group has 72 households (64%); the Lao Loum group has 36 households (32%); the rest are Hmong and Yao groups.

Before 1994, when villages located in the Kuang Si watershed region were not yet relocated to settle next to the Mekong River, and tourism has not been developed, the livelihood of the households in Thapene was largely based on traditional shifting cultivation, planting wet rice, and raising cows and buffalos. Because of the Lao policy of banning shifting cultivation, establishing protected areas to preserve the Kuang Si watershed and establishing the tourism area at the same time, the majority of families in Thapene had to reduce shifting cultivation and engage in small scale tourism services near the Kuang Si waterfall. By 2014, the entire village had only 20 families who still maintained traditional shifting cultivation. Yet, the agricultural areas of those families who have moved completely or partly to tourism services still belonged to them. Currently, Thapene still preserves these plots in the area of agricultural production. After a long period of non-cultivation, these areas have regenerated as rich forests.

Geography

Totally, there are 1,775.59 hectares of different sorts of forest and land within Thapene's traditional territory. This includes 1,060.75 ha of strictly preserved spirit forest and land, 436.45 hectares of community use forest and land, 199.65 hectares of family fallow forest and land, and 3.12 hectares of cemetery forest and land, 34.52 ha of agricultural land (wet rice and crop), 22.32 hectares of housing and infrastructure land including primary school, hospital center and Wat, 16.97 hectares of tourism land of the Luang Prabang District Office of Tourism and 4.92 hectares of military land. Furthermore, forest and land resources in Thapene are planned and managed through inter-institutional regulations (community, army, tourism company, and local authority departments), local and indigenous knowledge, community customary law and statutory law.

Thapene is characterized by an inter-connected system of diverse streams and waterfall. The Kuang Si waterfall is part of the Huoi Si stream, which has its source in the Phu Nam Uok Mountain. It is a unique heritage of nature in its wild beauty, grandeur and poetry. The Phu Nam Uok Mountain is a part of the Luang Prabang Range, which is home to different wild bee species. Huoi Si flows through several villages such as Nam Uok and Thapene before joining the Mekong River. Before that, Huoi Si flows for around about 2 kilometers within the forest and suddenly pours down about 60 meters to make the Kuang Si Waterfall. Villagers recounted that long ago, near the foot of the Waterfall, they saw a big deer, which is named in Lao as *To Kuang*. This deer came to the Waterfall every afternoon to drink, so s, the villagers called the Waterfall *Tad Kuang Huoi Si*, meaning a deer in the Huoi Si stream. Later, this name was shortening to *Tad Kuang Si*, "Deer Waterfall".

Culture and religion

Thapene is home to a diversity of ethnic groups, such as Yuan, Hmong, Khmu and Yao. The cultural practices, traditional beliefs and religious values of each of these ethnic groups in Thapene are still well maintained. Besides worshipping the Nature's Spirit, the Yuan and Kha Hok have for a long time followed Buddhism. Presently, Thapene has a Buddhist pagoda, called in Lao a "Wat", where the Yuan and Kha Hok practice their religious norms and values^l toward the Buddha through annual traditional ritual ceremonies.

Believing in the power of protection or punishment of the Nature's Spirit, these ethnic groups have also set up spirit places like *Phu Nam Uok* and *Phu Huat Tat* where the Spirit of the Dragon resides. Annually, all villagers together organize rituals in these spirit places for thanksgiving and praying for the protection of the Spirit. Meanwhile, in addition to worshipping their forefathers, the Hmong also worship the Spirit of the Big Tree named in Hmong dialect as *Tong Xenh*. Although there is a number of different practices and rules in the ritual festivals of different ethnic groups, they all have a common value standard that is their traditional belief in the power of the Nature's Spirit and Buddha over all aspects of the community cultural life, livelihood and production. Prosperity or poverty, peace or insecurity, strength or weakness, are directed by the Nature's Spirit and Buddha. Therefore, Thapene has formed its customary law to regulate the daily actions of villagers

towards the Spirit of the Land, the Spirit of the Forest, the Spirit of the Stream, etc. where the Nature's Spirit resides.

Ritual ceremonies

Given the close relationships of the villagers' daily lives to nature, forest, water and agricultural production, as well as the power of the Nature's Spirit, Buddha and worshipping the ancestor, ethnic groups in Thapene today still organize eleven different traditional cultural festivals and rituals every year. On average, one month marks one event.

In January is the *Boun Khao Lan* festival - thanksgiving for the *Nang Tani*, the Spirit who protects seeds, crops and plants. During this event, the community makes a threshing floor in the Thapene Wat. Then, each family in the village brings the first rice sheaves from their farms to beat and make rice. They then cook it in order to offer to the Spirit. One of the monks in the Wat represents the entire community to worship and pray to the Spirit.

In February is the *Boun Khoun Khao* festival - thanksgiving to the Spirit of the Forest after a year of having good weather and harvest, and health of humans and animals.

March is the time in which Thapene celebrates the *Boun Khao Chi* festival. This is the biggest event of Thapene. It involves making sticky rice cakes to offer to the monks in the Wat in the morning. In addition, villagers during this event offer firewood to the monks for use in cooking all year long, as it is prescribed by Buddhism that monks are not allowed to cut trees and collect firewood.

April is time for the *Boun Pha Vet* ceremony. Lao people learnt from Buddhist philosophy that if more gifts are given they feel happier.

May (i.e. April according to the Buddhist calendar) is the *Boun Pi Mai* festival - New Year's celebration.

June is the *Boun Bang Fai* festival – the rocket festival to pray for rain to water crops and plants in farms of villagers.

August is the *Boun Khao Pansa* festival. This is the time that the monks enter the Wat for studying the Buddhist texts.

September is the *Boun Haw Khao Padap Din* ceremony. This is organized in order to offer food for wandering souls.

October is the *Boun Khao Salak* celebration, in which villagers bring offerings such as candles, wax flowers, books, etc. to the monks in the Wat.

November is the *Boun Ok Phansa* festival, which allows the monk to leave the Wat after the duration of fast and retreat during rainy season. It is often called *Boun Khao Pansa*. This is a big celebration, and is organized by the entire Thapene community.

December is the *Boun Kathin* ceremony, which begins immediately after the last day of Buddhist Lent in Luang Prabang and lasts until the next full moon.

Spirit / Sacred sites

The territory of Thapene village is marked by numerous sacred sites.

Phu Nam Ork

In Lao language, 'Phu' means mountain; 'Nam' means water, and 'Ork' means out. Therefore, 'Phu Nam Ork' refers to a mountain where water comes out. This is the sacred / spirit mountain of Thapene. The altitude of Phu Nam Ork is approximately 1,040 meters above sea level. This mountain is a favorite habitat for different types of plants such as May kha, Bamboo, May ten, May mac hat, May sa phung, May mac ho, May sa hom, etc.

According to the legend of Thapene, a long time ago, there was a man named Lu Sy who lived in a cave. Lu Sy usually wrapped a tiger skin coat around his body. One day, another man went hunting in the area near the cave where Lu Sy lived. After the man hunted a wild animal, both men challenged each other how to get water to cook the hunted animal meat. Lu Sy said that he was capable of doing a lot of magical things, so that they could get water from the above. The other man also believed that he had the ability to get water from the bottom. When Lu Sy was successful after poking a hole, water poured down to become a stream. The other man was also

successful in getting water from the bottom. But as Lu Sy could direct water pouring down to become a stream, both of them agreed to take name of Lu Sy to name the stream as Huoi Sy.

In 1987, the district administration advocated opening Luang Prabang resorts in the Kuangsi waterfall area. In 1996, during the operation of the tourist areas, in order to maintain water sources for the Kuangsi waterfall, the district government set up a strict protection zone covering the entire upstream of the waterfall. The government then relocated all families living in four villages in the newly designated strict water protection zone to settle in downstream areas next to the Mekong River. Some households of Nam Uok village, one of the forcibly relocated villages, were not satisfied with this policy. They wondered why, when their life was still good where they were, they must be relocated to live in other places! Then, the villagers destroyed the water source pouring into the Huoi Sy with explosives which later on caused the death of many fish. After a while, the water source of the Huoi Sy stream was suddenly depleted. Villagers felt fear and invited a spiritual leader to ask the reason. The spiritual leader said that the mines had killed mother of the Dragon; so that, her child cried every tear that caused the shallow of the Huoi Sy water sources. To get back the water, villagers had to organize a ritual to apologize to the Dragon. The offerings included one black buffalo, one white buffalo 2 jars of wine, flowers, candles and different types of cakes. After the ritual, the villagers heard the big sound, then, the rock started opening, accompanied by water spraying out. At first, the water was cloudy, then gradually became clearer. At first, many people in the region did not believe in this event. They also suspected the sacredness of the Dragon Spirit. They still come to the area to destruct and disturb. Then, these people suddenly died without anyone knowing why. Later, villagers believed that the Dragon Spirit had rebuked them.

Every year, on the fifteenth day of June (Lao Lunar calendar), villagers in Thapene together celebrated the 'Vi Thi Phon' traditional festival to pray to the Dragon Spirit for good weather, lush vegetation, abundant crops and the health of humans and animals. This religious ceremony has been maintained since the 'Phu Nam Uok' mountain was managed by Nam Uok village. Taking part in this ritual is not only Thapene villagers, but also peoples from neighbouring downstream villages such as Pasi, Muong Khay, Tho Keo and Nong Xa At.

Within the above event, villagers in Thapene are divided into two groups. Each group is lead by one monk and one prestigious elder, with the participation of family representatives. Each group prepares offerings to worship the Dragon Spirit in the 'Phu Nam Uok' and 'Phu Hua Tat' mountains. The offerings include 1 tray which has 1 tower of flowers, incense, candles and different types of cakes made from the farms and gardens of families. Once ready, the monk presides over the ritual. When the worship is completed, the monk takes down the offerings and eats before sharing with the villagers.

With the sacredness of these mountains, villagers in Thapene and people living both upstream and downstream of the Kuangsi waterfall do not dare to cut trees, burn forests for farming and disturb the Dragon Spirit. Villagers are allowed to collect bamboo shoots and medicines for use by their families as needed. If someone violates and affects the Spirit Dragon, one will be reprimanded. This will be handled by two ways: a) customary laws, so that they must purchase the prescribed offerings to worship and apologise to the Spirit Dragon, b) formal regulations and law.

Phu Vieng Nhay

'Phu Vieng' means large mountain. The altitude of Phu Vieng Nhay is approximately 930 meters above sea level. This mountain is a favorite habitat for different types of plants such as May kha, May du, May phau, May tiu, Oc nang dam, etc.

This is the sacred / spirit mountain of Thapene. At the time of the American War there was a Lao military garirson in Phu Vieng Nhay with systematic trenches and bunkers. During this time, some soldiers died and were buried there. After the war ended, villagers often heard the conversation of soldiers in this mountain when they went to the forest or worked on their farms. They believed that it was the souls of the dead soldiers. Normally, Thapene does not organize worshipping for the souls of the dead soldiers in this mountain. However, when villagers or the community has got problems such as illness or, disease, or wild animals destroying crops, if the spiritual leader tells them the problem is caused by the souls of the dead soldiers, the whole community must offer an apology with offerings and worshipping procedures as described by the spiritual leader.

Phu Vien Noy

As this mountain is small compared to others nearby, villagers called it as Phu Noy ('Phu' refers to mountain; 'Noy' is small). In the past, some families from Vientiane had moved there for living and farming, so villagers combined 'Noy' with 'Vien' to name the mountain 'Phu Vien Noy'. The altitude of the mountain is 600 meters above sea level. This mountain is a favorite habitat for different types of plants such as May phau, May co and bamboo.

Previously, 'Phu Vien Noy' was zoned as a water protected forest, but since 1995, this mountain has been planned by the Lao government and Thapene community as 'community strictly preserved forest.'

Pa Xam Peo

In Lao language, 'Pa' refers to forest, 'Xam' is three, and 'Peo' means stream; so, 'Pa Xam Peo' is understood as the forest has three streams. As this forest has three small streams joined together into into larger one, villagers named this setting with the name of 'Pa Xam Peo'. The altitude of this forest area is 940 meters above sea level. Under the Thapene provisions, this is usage forest ('Pa Flit') of the whole community including different types of plants e.g. May du, May tiu, bamboo, May khe lao, May sa khe, etc. Villagers in Thapene and neighboring villages could collect products in this forest like vegetables, firewood, herbs, bamboo shoots, etc. in order to serve their daily necessities. However, the regulations do not allow the clearing and burning in the area for farming.

Phu Mi

In Lao language, 'Phu' refers to mountain; 'Mi' is bear; so that, 'Phu Mi' is 'the forest of the bear'. The altitude of the mountain is 770 meters above sea level. This mountain is habitat for different types of plants such as bambbo, May tiu, May nang dam, May ket lin and May xen kham. According to the villagers' story, previously there was a big bear in this mountain. The bear often ate and damaged corn, rice and other crops in the farms of families. After eating, the bear remained there without going anywhere. Since then, nobody in the region dared to walk or cultivate in this forest. Therefore, villagers have named this mountain 'Phu Mi'. Formerly, villagers used to do farming in this area. However, during this period of fear, with burning and cultivation, the mountain's forest has regenerated and is now

designated community usage forest. Villagers are allowed to collect forest products such as bamboo shoots, vegetables, herbs, etc for their own uses, but not for selling.

Phu Xang

As an ecological habitat with soil and climate conditions suitable for development and growth of Xang - one type of big bamboo, villagers have named this mountain as 'Phu Xang'. Besides, some other sorts of plants including May tiu and May nang dam are found in this mountain. The altitude of the mountain is 870 meters above sea level. Currently, after a period of no slash-burnt cultivation due to villagers moving to undertake tourism services near the Kuangsi waterfall, in addition to production forest function, this mountain is planned by Thapene as usage forest for the whole community. The village regulation prohibits any activity regarding shifting cultivation in this area. Villagers are allowed to collect forest products such as bamboo shoots, vegetables, herbs, etc for their own uses, but not for selling.

Phu Nong Kop

In Lao language, 'Phu' refers to mountain, 'Nong' is pond, and 'Kop' is frog; therefore, 'Phu Nong Kop' means a mountain which has a pond of frogs. The altitude of the mountain is 640 meters above sea level. This pond is all year around wet; so it is a suitable habitat for frogs. Especially in the rainy season and breeding time, the population of frogs in the pond is very great. At this time, the sound of frogs makes it noisy all over the mountain. So villagers have named this mountain as 'Nong Kop'. Currently, after a period of not having slash-burnt cultivation due to villagers moving to tourism services near the Kuangsi waterfall, in addition to production forest function, this mountain is planned by Thapene as usage forest of the whole community. The main plants in this mountain are May phau, May tiu, May puoi, May Kho som, May kha and May Poong. Like the regulations of Thapene applying to community usage forest, slash-burnt cultivation is prohibited on this mountain. Villagers are allowed to collect forest products such as bamboo shoots, vegetables, herbs, etc for their own uses, but not for selling.

Phu Pha Deng / Pa Xa

'Phu Pha Deng' mountain is planned as a cemetery for Thapene to bury young bodies of the Lao Lum and Nhuan, and all dead bodies from other groups like H'mong, Yao and Kho Mu. Phu Pha Deng is covered by various types of plants such

as May kha, May bong, May puoi, May du and May tiu. The altitude of this area is 1,020 meters above sea level. For the Lao Lum and Nhuan ethnic groups, under the provisions of Buddhism, the dead are cremated at the Pagoda or specific place in the community cemetery forest, namely 'Pa Xa'; then combustion ash will be placed in the 'Pa Xa' or Pagoda in order to let the souls reach the serenity of nirvana. As they believe that the 'Pa Xa' is the abode of the souls of the dead and devil, nobody in the village dares to disturb, cultivate or harvest forest products in the 'Phu Pha Deng' mountain. If someone in the community violates, one will be rebuked by the souls and devil to become sick or unrestful. At this time, representatives of the family which has violated 'Pa Xa' need to ask the spiritual leader in the village to conduct religious ceremonies to please the souls and devil in the 'Phu Pha Deng' mountain.

Phu Huot

Huot is a word in the Lao language for a container for steaming sticky rice. Long ago, people who set foot on Thapene land discovered a mountain which looks like the the Huot. Then, villagers called this mountain Phu Huot. The altitude of this area is about 1,050 meters above sea level. Phu Huot is suitable for trees such as May Xang, May Bang and May Nay. Because Phu Huot is a watershed of the Huoi Si stream, Ban Thapene has planned this area as strictly protected forest.

Phu Sot

On the top of this mountain villagers have discovered many May Sot trees, which are naturally grown into 3 clusters. Moreover, in this area, only this mountain has May Sot trees, so people have named this mountain as Phu Sot - the mountain of May Sot. Besides May Sot, this area also has some other plants such as May Xang, May Phau, May Co and many other types of bamboo. The mountain is shared with Khokmanh, a neighbouring village of Ban Thapene, so Khokmanh also follows Ban Thapene in calling this mountain as Phu Sot. This mountain has many small groundwaters flowing into the Huoi Si stream and then crossing Khokmanh. Both villages have agreed to plan this area to become strictly protected forest.

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