



CHAPTER III THE ROLES OF THE EDUCATED YOUNG KAREN

As the ethnographic data illustrates, young Karen, particularly between the ages 15 and 24, have more education than older people, with some young Karen acquiring vocational and university education. This chapter, then, will focus on the sorts of roles played by the educated young Karen in Nong Tao village. I have categorized their roles into those of cultural preservers, cultural promoters, and mediators.

3.1 History of Nong Tao Youth Group

In 1982, a group of Nong Tao adults, led by Chokchai, Somchai, Kodi, Jawlae, and Pati Joni established a youth group with the aim to unite the Nong Tao youth. At that time, many villagers were addicted to opium, and their quality of life was low. Some young people, therefore, attended a meeting with the government and a village leader. After the meeting, the youth group agreed that each member should raise funds for low-interest loans to be used by members in case of sickness, marriage and so on. At that time, there were 50 members who collected 856 baht as the first fund for the group.

Early activities of the youth group included the following: whenever a member got married, the group used the fund to buy the necessities for the new house and gave the rest of money to the marriage couple on the wedding day. Since rice is the main staple for the villagers, the youth group took turns in helping each other to grow rice, and persuading villagers who grew opium poppies to turn their fields into agricultural fields or reserve forest instead. Twice a month, the youth group set a meeting to discuss village problems and solutions. These meetings were sometimes characterized by uneven attendance and participation, and on occasion by dissent.

After the group was established, the members started to choose their leader who was literate and had good communication skills. The primary task of the leader was to raise funds for the group. The leader and the members started to work with the government to raise money. For example, when the King's Royal Project had a project to clean the land, the youth members joined the project and earned money for the group fund. Their parents also recognized their children's efforts, and offered them some money. In addition, the members initiated activities for the village such as cleaning the

street, school, temple and church. At that time, all members had a close relationship due to the activities and the shared goal, which was to develop the village.

The youth members valued team work and placed great confidence in their leader, and yet factions formed within the group. As a consequence, when some members of a faction chose not to attend a meeting, other members of that faction might also absent themselves from the meeting. Because, in general, they respect self-discipline and the regulations, the group would punish members who missed more than three meetings by denying help for a wedding or a funeral.

Now there are around 106 members, but only about 30 per cent of them live in the village and the rest are outside the village. Conditions of membership require that the members be at least 15 years of age, and when new members join the group, they pay 50 baht for the fund. Members attend group activities, and membership ends with marriage.

The youth group has various activities: biweekly meetings, raising the youth group fund, building fire breaks, cleaning the temple and churches, and planning activities for young people such as sports events or youth camp.

Leaders of Nong Tao Youth Group

Pati Joni

Pati Joni's father is from Sa Merng district and his mother is from Mae Jam district in Chiang Mai province. When Pati Joni was 15 years old, he was converted to Christianity. With other 200 young Christian Karens from other villages, Joni left his village in 1964 at the age of 18 to learn Thai and English in the church in Chomthong district, a town at the foot of Doi Intanon Mountain. He became an official assistant village leader for 8 years and became an official village leader for 9 years. He is a member of the National Social and Economic Council, the Highest Planning Commission of Thailand and therefore he is able to influence the national plan. Pati Joni has also been selected as a professor at the Midnight University, whose classes have been covering community forestry and sustainable natural resource management through rotational cultivation and spiritual wellbeing, watershed management, human rights, cultural heritage and so forth. In 1996, he was honored by the prestigious *Khon Dee Sri Sangkom* Award for his work in forest preservation as well as the protection of the indigenous hill people's rights and culture. The Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) published a book on Karen folktales, which Pati Joni narrated and a northern

Thai teacher for hilltribes edited it.¹ He was a consultant when the youth group was established.

Chokchai

Chokchai is 41 years of age at present. His parents are from Nong Tao. He received primary and secondary education as a novice in the temple located in Chiang Mai province. He was a volunteer teacher for one year in Mae Sariang district before he was elected to be a governmental officer at Mae Win sub-district administration organization for 9 years in a row. His role is to be a representative of the villagers who contact the Government. He is one of the founders of the youth group.

Somchai

Somchai's parents are from Nong Tao. At present, he is the only Karen teacher in Nong Tao primary school. He is 48 years of age. He studied in Wat Srisoda located in Chiang Mai province from 15 to 20 years old. The highest degree is a certificate of teacher from Ratchapat Chiang Mai. As he has studied in adult-education department, after graduation he became a teacher in the village. When the primary school in Nong Tao village had a local curriculum to teach the students local wisdom, for instance Karen language, natural resource management, rituals, and local music, he coordinated the mainstream curriculum and local curriculum and arranged local men to be lecturers relevant to each subject.

Siwakorn

Siwakorn is a son of Pati Joni. He, at the age of 25, fills the role of consultant in the youth group. He completed the fourth grade in Nong Tao primary school, and the fifth and sixth grade in Huay Tong. He attended the lower secondary school in Mae Win sub-district and the upper secondary school in Ban Kard. Currently, he enrolls in the Faculty of Political Science of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. He is an eloquent speaker as his father.

¹ Apichart Sawaidee, *gampra khon nok (Orphant with Feather)*, (Bangkok: The Spirit in Education Movement, 2004).

Amnuay

Amnuay is a present president of the youth group. He is 22 years of age. He attended the primary school in Nong Tao, and the lower secondary school in Huay Tong. He received a high school diploma through Non-Formal Education. He now studies at the Faculty of Political Science of Ramkamhaeng University. He is skilled in agriculture.

Pichai

Pichai, 22 years of age, attended the primary school in Sanpa Tong and the lower secondary school in Huay Tong. The upper secondary school is a temple school in Wat Pasin in Chiang Mai. Pichai, who is one of the core members of the youth group and familiarizes himself with Karen language and Karen literature, is concerned about preservation of Karen inheritances. He does not pursue higher education. “If I pursue higher education after compulsory education, I have to be in debt for educational fees. After graduation, then, I have to engage in wage labor in Chiang Mai city to pay debts. How can I inherit our traditional wisdom and culture?”²

Niraparn

Niraparn, 22 years old, attended Nong Tao primary school, and the secondary school in Wat Srisoda as a novice. He, then, had part-time jobs in Chiang Mai city for two years and in total he was away from the village for eight years. “In Chiang Mai, I could earn money easily, but I spent it easily, too. I feel comfortable to live self-sufficient life in the village.” At present, he is also one of the core members of the youth group and plans to study psychology at Ramkamhaeng University by reason of psychological confliction between traditional and modernized life among the villagers.

² See also Figure 2.8.2. 5 of 10 who study in universities depend upon loans.

3.2 Cultural Preserver

The young women who do not pursue higher education preserve Karen tradition through acquiring weaving and cooking skills from their mothers, while the relatively highly educated women had little opportunity to acquire these skills. In other words, most of the young women preserve their tradition in the traditional way that their ancestors had as their life-style.

In the village, mothers teach their daughters by demonstration to cook and weave in a traditional way in their daily life. Usually, traditions are handed down orally and practically. This is so-called informal education.

Figure 3.2.1: Mother Instructing Her Daughter in Weaving³



Source: Author's photograph

The interviewees, Jadee, 23 years of age, La (20), Pu (20), and Mi (21), graduated from Nong Tao primary school. Jedee studies at the upper secondary level through Non Formal Education. La and Pu enrolled the secondary school in Huay Tong. Pu now studies at the upper secondary level through Non Formal Education. Mi attended a lower secondary school in Mae Win, an upper secondary school in Ban Kard, Mae Win sub-district. At present, she studies in Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, majoring in nursing. They have already acquired Karen weaving and cooking skills and preserve Karen tradition as their life-style in the village.

³ The design of the decorations varies from one locality to another, transmitted from mother to daughter or among peers. Peter Kunstadter, 1979, op. cit., p.121.

In contrast, Nuai, at the age of 25, enrolled in the primary and secondary school in Mae Rim district, Chiang Mai province. At that time, she returned to the village just twice a year. She, then, entered Ratchaphat Chiang Mai located in Chiang Mai city, majoring in home economics. She has not acquired Karen traditional skills yet, since she had little time to receive informal education in the village. It might indicate that in the future the relatively highly educated women cannot transmit Karen tradition and culture to their offspring in the same way as their ancestors.

3.3 Cultural Promoter

The educated young Karen also play an important role as cultural promoters in a way that they diffuse their inherited tradition to the younger generation and to outsiders with modernized knowledge and skills acquired by formal education. I, then, categorized the role of the educated young Karen as cultural promoters into two types of activities, firstly, the use of standard Thai language and secondly, the use of modern technology in transmitting Karen tradition and culture.

Concerning the use of standard Thai language in diffusing Karen culture, Pichai, one of the youth group members, is an example. He teaches Karen language, not only for the children of 10-15 years of age but also for other youth group members, every evening with the textbook that Pati Joni made. The textbook, modern means of cultural transmission, contains traditional Karen poems, *tha*, so that they can learn traditional literature at the same time. Pichai is a bridge between the older generation and the younger generation, handing down Karen language and literature.

In the Protestant church, the host of the Karen Baptist Hostel also teaches Karen language every evening for the children who stay at the hostel. She informed me that the children are willing to learn Karen language because they have fun in class.

Notably, the way of handing down Karen tradition is different from the way that their ancestor had in the past.

Figure 3.3.1: Karen Language Lesson in the Church



Source: Author's photograph

Figure 3.3.2: Sgaw Karen Grandmother⁴



Source: Author's photograph

⁴ Marital women wear two-piece dress, predominantly black and hip-length over-blouses called *chey su* and tubular skirts. Both skirts and blouses are elaborately decorated in a variety of colors. Men, on the other hand, do not change their dress when they change marital status. They wear homespun red and white blouses called *chey kor* with black long pants called *sa dor*. According to Kunstadter, in the past they wore only the blouse in a knee-length version. (Peter Kunstadter, 1979, op. cit., p.121.)

An 84 year-old woman told me that the villagers used to cultivate cotton for clothes and boiled cotton threads with tree bark to dye them, so they had fewer varieties of color, such as red, white and black colors. Nowadays the villagers purchase cotton threads of various colors from a market, and weave more colorful clothes.

On another occasion, this year from 1st to 3rd April, there was an exhibition for community colleges in Kasetsart University. The Karen exhibited their traditional wisdom and culture to outsiders. At the exhibition, Pichai taught Karen language to the outsiders, who mostly speak standard Thai. The educated young Karen can thus make use of their standard Thai language skill as a communication tool and make outsiders understand Karen tradition and culture. Actually, teaching Karen language in the village or in Kasetsart University can be perceived as the role of mediators as well as culture promoters.

Figure 3.3.3: Karen Language Lesson at Kasetsart University



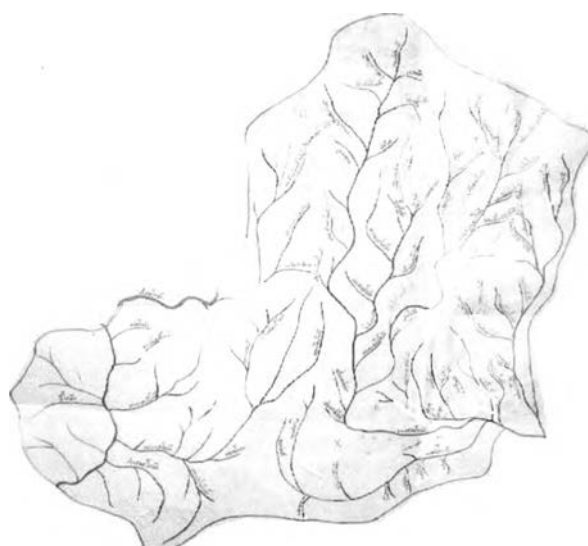
Source Author's photograph

Regarding the use of modern technology in keeping Karen culture, on the celebration of New Year's Day, the youth group members used a video camera to record the animist rituals on film.⁵ They use modern devices to keep their culture with the aim of recording and expressing their tradition and culture to the world outside.

⁵ Although the youth are aware of animist rituals as a cultural object to be preserved, it is an unavoidable fact that the younger generation is less acquainted with animism than the older generations, partly because of new religions (Buddhism and Christianity). Some Christian villagers did not participate in the ritual of New Year's celebration (see Chapter 2.6 Religion), though Buddhist monks performed the wrist-tying ritual in the village (see Figure 2.6.5).

In the past, Pati Joni acquired mapping skills from a missionary and an American soldier who was stationed to construct a radar system in Doi Inthanon. Pati Joni drew maps 10 years ago, when the Government accused the Karen of deforestation. Pati Joni informed me that the elders have difficulties communicating with government officers or outsiders because of their lack of facility with standard Thai. Making maps is, then, a means of communicating and assuring mutual understanding between the elders and the Government.

Figure 3.3.4: Handwritten Map

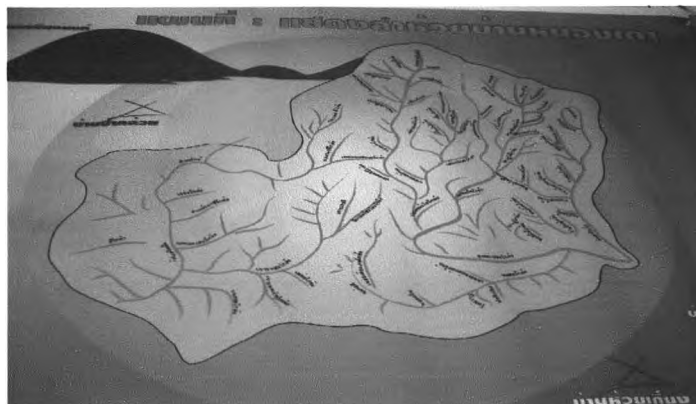


Source: Drawn by Pati Joni

The map above shows the locations of rivers and mountain within the village, and their names as they are called by the villagers, written in Thai. Certain rituals show a ritual interest in preserving sections of forest. Some areas are sacred forest, in which there are prohibitions against deforestation. These, along with the intimate familiarity with their territory as revealed by the maps, show a close relationship between Nong Tao village society and their natural surroundings.

Figure 3.3.5 is the map modified by Pati Joni's son, using a computer. This, then, shows that to young Karen who received modern education can make use of the acquired modern skills to strengthen their tradition and culture. It also can be said that the modern way of cultural preservation is more effective and more functional.

Figure 3.3.5: Computer-processed Map



Source: Drawn by Siwakorn, a son of Pati Joni

Pati Joni's son showed me a document regarding Nong Tao history. He asked the elders to tell him the history of Nong Tao village and then, documented the history in Thai by using a computer. This would allow outsiders understand the history of the village. This also shows that the educated young play a role as mediators between the villagers and the world outside and also act as cultural promoters.

Figure 3.3.6: Textbook of Karen Traditional Songs in Thai



Source: Author's photograph

There is also an interesting case combining the use of standard Thai language and the use of modern devices in recording and promoting Karen culture. The book in Figure 3.3.6 contains Karen songs written in Thai. On the eve of a wedding ceremony,

the youth present Karen songs for brides or grooms, because married people cannot have membership in the youth group. The book can also be a means to propagate Karen tradition to outsiders or Thais.

Figure 3.3.7: Friends of the Bride⁶



Source: Author's photograph

Another case is that Chi, a Karen composer and singer, sings of Karen lifestyle, ancestors, an importance of nature among other things.⁷ He released his own CD in 2002, which contains Thai translation of the lyrics. When he joined a seminar on Sgaw Karen folktales, life style, culture, tribes, and music organized by the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) on 27 November, 2004 with Pati Joni, he performed his songs and narrated a Karen folktale in Thai.⁸ He also participated in the exhibition for community colleges in Kasetsart University and gave a live performance. He strengthens Karen culture through modern methods like his CD, which familiarizes outsiders with Karen cultures, and enhances Karen pride.

⁶ A bride still dresses in white clothes for single women, which is called *chey wa*.

⁷ "His songs were inspired by the elder." Translated from website, <http://www.mthai.com/webboard/7/83951.html>

⁸ "In the old days, men bore children and had bosom on a hand. One day, a man bathed in a waterfall, leaving his baby and bosom at his house. The sound of water was so loud that he could not hear the baby crying. A woman, then, put his bosom on her chest and feed the baby. Since then, women give birth to children."

Figure 3.3.8: Karen Singer with *thana*⁹



Source: Author's photograph

⁹ “In the olden days every youth loved his harp and carried it with him constantly. On such instruments as these they played the accompaniments to their old epic ‘htas,’ which have been preserved for generations.” Harry Ignatius Marshall, op. cit., frontispiece.

“In the Pegu Hills the harps have seven strings, the upper one serving only as a stay; but farther north five strings seem to be the rule, all being tuned and played.” Ibid., p.162.

Thana in the picture has eight strings.

3.4 Mediation: Elders, Government, Children

In spite of the fact that Nong Tao is a changing Karen village, the existence of the youth group since 1982 has helped to transmit traditions and an active role for young people within the community. Observing the activities of the educated young Karen, I have witnessed their important roles as mediators between, on one hand, the older generation and the world outside and, on the other hand, the younger and older generations in the village. I found that the role as mediators can be divided by its aims into the two sub-categories. In the first case, they represent the elders' opinions and interests to the Government, and in the second case, they demonstrate Karen tradition to the world outside and to younger children.

The King's Royal Project

The Government periodically evaluates the achievement of the King's Royal Project in Nong Tao village, asking the village leader to distribute the check sheets to the villagers. The village leader, then, asked the youth group members to distribute the sheets to every household, instead of distributing them by himself in the meeting, this is because the older generation has difficulties reading and writing standard Thai. The youth, therefore, has the role of explaining the contents, asking for the elders' opinions and writing down the answers in the sheets for them. The Government pays for the check sheets, so the young people can get money from the village leader.¹⁰

Figure 3.4.1: Royal Project Evaluation Sheet

Source: Author's photograph

¹⁰ 40 baht for a set of two evaluation sheets

February 6th General Election of Member of Parliaments

At the time of the General Election of Member of Parliaments, February 6, 2005, the youth group members helped the voters at the polling station, to register and they also distributed ballot papers as assistants of the election administration committees. The government officers and village leader acted as monitors. The role of the youth group was to help the villagers vote for the parties and candidates they preferred without complications.

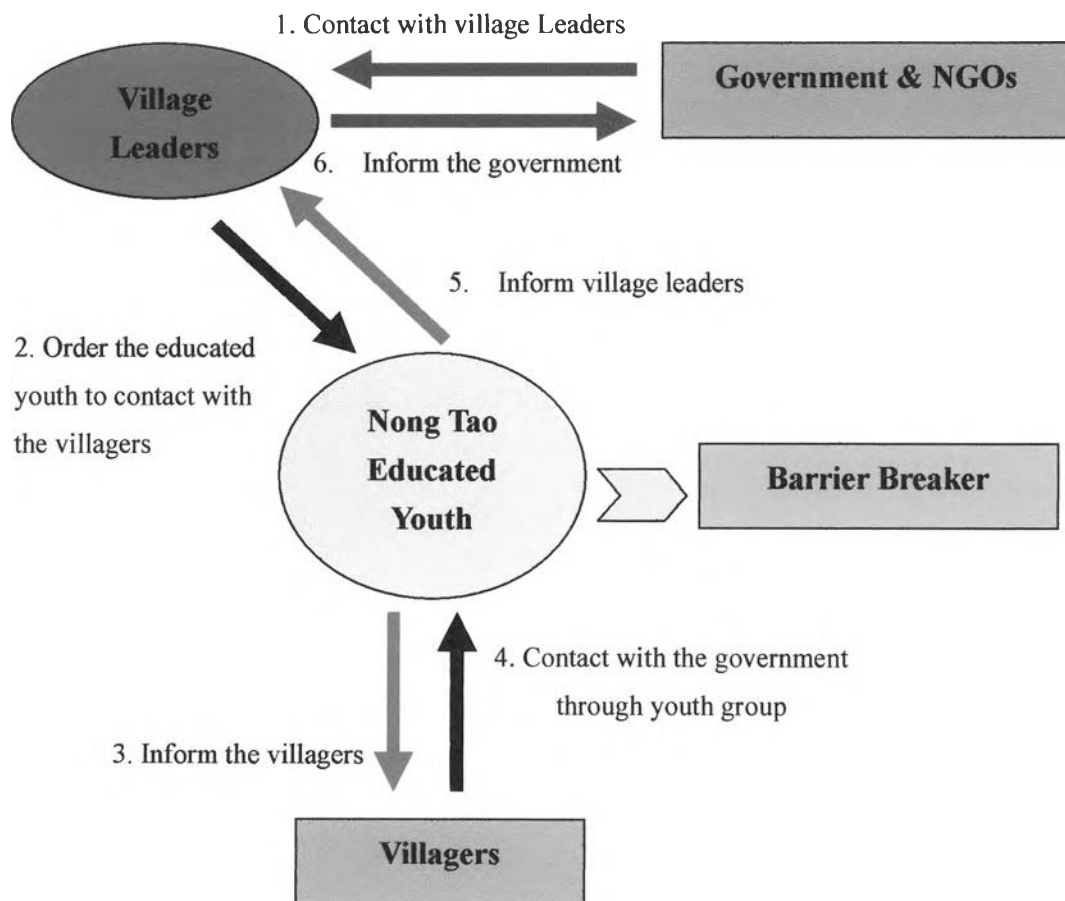
Figure 3.4.2: Polling Station



Source: Author's photograph

The youth group is not entirely autonomous. Leaders within the village, like Pati Joni, Chokchai, Jaedee, and Somchai, who have played the role as mediators between within the village and the world outside, may ask the youth group to do certain activities.

Figure 3.4.3: Model of the Role of the Nong Tao Educated Youth



Source: Author

In conclusion, the role of mediators between the older generation and the world outside and the older and younger generation, and the role of cultural promoters are played predominantly by educated young men, whereas the role of cultural preservers is played largely by young women who stay in the village for the most part.