

**A Mixed Social Structure of Tribal Community in Modern Socioeconomic Context:  
A Participatory Rural Appraisal of Mlabri Community, after Settlement at Bokluea,  
Nan Province, Thailand**

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**Abstract**

Equilibrium of social structure and socioeconomic context is a sign of community well-being, which, in turn, the community must keep adapting through the changes to sustain it. This article presents a study of the adapted socioeconomic structure of Mlabri-Phufa, a nomadic tribe who settled down in Phufa sub-district for about a decade under the care of Phufa Development Center. Mixed methods were used to collect data from the majority of the tribe. During 2015 – 2018, around a decade since the first settlement. Mlabri-Phufa adapted to the modern socioeconomic system by combining the nomadic patriarchy system with an agrarian matriarchy community structure to obtain the well-being of their community in the Thai social context. With agriculture skills and modern education, Mlabri is above the poverty line. Mlabri-Phufa elected community committees to deal with conflicts from within and outside the community; the concept of land and territory; oblige to the agreements with a neighboring community. Consumption behavior changed considerably due to more sources of income. However, hunting and gathering remain integral activities supporting the household economy and sustaining identity. Mlabri's mixed structure of the senior and committee in the current socioeconomic system exemplify the possibility of cultural adaptation that leaps from primitive tribes to citizenship in a few generations.

**Keywords:** Mlabri tribe, socioeconomic context, settlement

## **1. Introduction**

The Mlabri tribe is a nomadic people who live in the forest, in the north of Thailand. They were found to live around Nan and Phrae province. In the past, Mlabri built shelters with leaves and stayed for 5-10 days before moving on. Each group consisted of 2-3 families which were around 10-15 members. They moved along with the abundance of food sources (Pookajorn et al., 1988). Mlabri are a group of hunter-gatherers who are still distributed worldwide, both in the tropics and cold. They lived in areas unsuitable for agriculture nor to settle a large community. Some tribes are isolated from society, therefore, they could sustain their way of hunting and gathering (Santasombat et al., 2004). The global population is estimated at 5,219,500, and approximately 606,000 are in Southeast Asia. There are 6,000 in Thailand; 5,000 people are of Moken, Moglen, Urak Lawoi; 550 people of Manni, and 450 people of Mlabri. (Wattanapoom, 2012). In 2018, a demographic survey of the Mlabri shows that there were 2 separated communities, living in Phrae province (Huaihom community, 90 people, and Thawa community, 30 people). In Nan province, three communities were of 1) Huaiyuak community of 200 people; 2) Phufa community of 71 people, and 3) Don Praiwan community of 5 people. (Wongwandee, 2018).

The Mlabri-Phufa community is an intriguing group. They originally lived at Ban Huai Hom, Phrae Province, from which they decided to leave in order to maintain the identity of their specific group, as well as, to learn more about the outside world. In 2008, they settled down at Phufa, hence, Mlabri-Phufa community was formed. The new settlement had impacts on their household economy. In addition to hunting-gathering, Mlabri-Phufa also served as agricultural labours. They have social interactions with many other people outside their tribe. After a decade of settlement, Mlabri-Phufa community has obviously changed in terms of socioeconomic, however, significant traits of hunter-gatherers can still be noticed. This article report on the participatory rural appraisal of adapted social and economic structure of the tribe that enable them to survive in the present society.

## **2. Sociocultural Background of Mlabri-Phufa Community**

Reflecting upon the journey of the Mlabri-Phufa, there are 3 important periods of their community.

### **The first period: Before the Huaihom community, Phrae Province (Before 1987)**

The characteristics of Mlabri were distributed into groups of 3 - 4 small families (10 - 15 persons) living in the forest near the agricultural area of the Hmong people. At the same time, some of them were hired to do agriculture for Hmongs.

Mlabri independent way of life was threatened by the problem of insufficient food that led them to settle down with the Hmong tribe in Phrae and Nan provinces. The cause of insufficient food comes from government policy on land use change. Large area of the forest were turned into a monoculture area, resulting in, scarcity of food sources and wild forest products. Mlabri people had to find ways to sustain their household, thus, they began to do labour works for supplies, food, or money.

Mlabri food shortage was a cause of their dependency on other ethnic groups that is a starting point of Mlabri's transition from a closed to an open society. They had more communication and interactions with other ethnic groups. The needs of the forest were reduced because some Mlabri learnt to earned money to support their families. Mlabri community structure began to change as well as therefore the roles of the tribe members became more complicated.

**The second period: The Huaihom community, Phrae Province (1988 - 2007)**

Another Mlabri village was established by the New Tribes Mission Project, known as the Boonyuen Community, reflecting the name of the American missionary who started the community (Ikeya, 2009). In the new village, the first group of Mlabri settled down (30 people). Mlabri's hunting yielded small rewards because they had less free time and large area of the forest were converted to agriculture land. Mlabri, most often, could only find moles and rats which were of no trade value. At this time, Mlabri men began to use weapons, including firearms, spears, and knives. They were also employed by the Hmong to work in the fields. For women, the New Tribes Mission program encouraged the development of wicker products and handicrafts. They also promoted cultural tourism. Therefore, women stopped gathering in the forest, made handicrafts at home, and welcomed tourists (Bhuramith, 2003). The population at Boonyuen Community were of 170 Mlabri in 2005 (Na Nan, 2012). This is the time when the first group of Mlabri (9 people) felt uneasy with the new way of living and decided to move to Phufa.

**The Third period: Mlabri-Phufa Community, Nan Province (2008 - 2018)**

In 2008, the Phufa Development Center under Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn HRH patronage was established to study sustainable agriculture in highlands areas, livelihood, and culture of ethnic people. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn (H.R.H) has worked with rural communities in remote areas for over three decades to improve their living conditions. H.R.H. pays attention to helping Mlabri with equal opportunities and good quality of life. HRH first visited Mlabri at Baan Huay Yuak ten years ago and initiated assistance. One of the center's objectives is a demonstration area that allows Mlabri to choose their way of life. In the beginning, nine youth Mlabri from Huaihom came to settle at the Phufa Development Center. There are 71 people of Mlabri at Phufa, in 2018.

Mlabri-Phufa has the freedom to live their lives, however, some activities must oblige to the rules of neighboring communities. A series of conflicts with neighbours, eventually, led to changes in the social structure of the community. Mlabri-Phufa have combined their tribal structure (a social institutions that adhere to local wisdom) with Thai social structure (a new institution that is founded by a new generation of leaders who have been educated outside). Therefore, the roles and responsibilities of community members are governed with mixed structure that is to preserve their ethnic identity, hunting as a tribal culture and simultaneously, take other occupations to keep their families and the community. It was found that Mlabri also had relationships with outside communities to design activities together. Later on, Phufa Culture Center was set up. Mlabri-Phufa have changed to survive as a community.

Historically, it was found that each change in Mlabri was related to the insufficiency of food for primary consumption in the household. The fertile forest, that used to be food storage area, was transformed into an agricultural area by the state policy. All forest areas are owned by the state or other groups of villagers. This allowed rural and suburb areas to gain sociopolitical stability, nonetheless, the nomadic culture of hunting-gathering was deprived. It is evident to state that Mlabri forest-hunting lifestyle ended during their living in the Huaihom community or around 1988.

**3. Research Objectives**

To study the adapted socioeconomic structure of Mlabri-Phufa, a nomadic tribe who settled down in Phufa sub-district, by participatory rural appraisal of their community from 2015-2018, that is a decade after their settlement.

#### 4. Research Question and Framework

The research looks into the way in which the Mlabri-Phufa adapted both economically and socially in order to maintain, sustain and survive as a tribal community in today's society. The research framework is set to explain the community context of Mlabri in Phufa. The contexts are complicated but could be explained when divided into three parts.

First, General Community Context, this is to understand Mlabri from demographic viewpoint. A study (by author) gives overview of Mlabri changes. Historical development is from *Mlabri Tribe on Development Road* (Na Nan, 2012), and household economy data from *Annual report 2018 in Nan project*. (Wongwandee, 2018).

Second framework is to define a politico-economic context and changes to the household economy structure. The work of Sriwisan (1994) *Economic system and cultural change of Phi Tong Luang tribe in Thai Society*, Ponsri (2003) *sociology*, Na Nan (2012), *Mlabri Tribe on Development Road*, Harari, 2019. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Ikeya and Nishiaki's (2021) *Introduction: Cultural Diversity among Asian Hunter-gatherers from Prehistory to the Present* and Durkheim (1893): *The Division of Labour in Society*. The theoretical guideline are used with actual political structure in the area which are, Traditional Social structure for internal affairs, the Social structure for Thai society, and the Community structure and state agency and royal patronage.

Third part of framework is Socioeconomic context and changes to the sociocultural structure. The framework of Economic and Community Business Research Unit (2012) *Community Economic Guide book for Villagers*, Sriwichailumpun (2013) *Community economic development*, National Human Rights Commission (2018) *Thailand Human Rights Situation Assessment Report 2018* and Define to Cultural-Economic activity and Mlabri Economic activity of the agrarian Mlabri-Phufa. Details are shown in Figure 1.

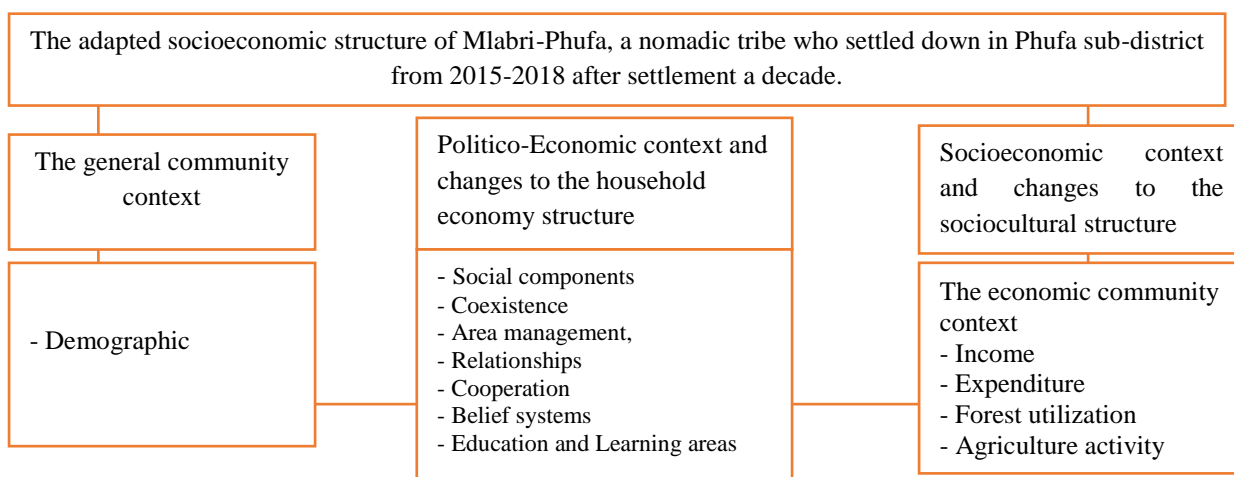


Figure 1 Research Framework (Wongwandee, 2022)

#### 5. Research Method

This is an interdisciplinary study using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It aims to shed light into theory and concepts of human adaptation from sociology and anthropology fields. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Borisutdhi, 2015) is employed a vehicle to obtain and analyze data. The study's sample group is the Mlabri in Phufa sub-district, Bokluea district, Nan province. The key informants are community leaders, family leaders, housewives, and elders. There were a total of 32 village informants. The author worked with community

volunteers, who also helped in translations, collecting information, interpreting the data and verifying its accuracy. This study aims to provide a framework which would help apprehension of community structure and system in the changing context through the story of the Mlabri, which will help us better understand “others and us”.

### **5.1 Information and Resource**

#### **Primary data**

Primary data is collected from 71 villagers in Mlabri-Phufa community, Bokluea district, and Nan province. The sample was chosen by purposive sampling. They were divided into groups of community leaders, butlers, housewives, elders, and youth, a sample group totaling 32 people. Details are in Table 1.

**Table 1** Population and sampling in this study (Wongwandee, 2022)

<b>Sampling</b>	<b>Quantity (people)</b>	<b>Study issues</b>
Community leaders	4	The general community context, social context, and community rules.
Family leaders	17	economic data (2015 - 2018) and forest utilization (2018)
Housewives	3	agriculture activity (2015 - 2018)
Elders	5	Social context, community history, knowledge of herbs, rituals, concepts about supernatural things, and community rules.
youths	3	learning Activity
<b>total</b>	<b>32</b>	

#### **Secondary data**

From books, textbooks, photographs, and academic documents. The study issues are as follows:

- 1) Community background information, past lifestyle, a study from books, textbooks, and related academic documents.
- 2) The context of the socioeconomic community of Mlabri in Phufa. The study from the annual report data prepared by King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (the Year 2018) and related academic documents.

### **5.2 Research Instrument and Data Collection**

- 1) Interview forms; participatory data collected by community volunteers, including the economic data, utilization of forest resources, and agriculture activity.
- 2) Focus group discussion; with community leaders and elders. Collect data on Learning activity, social components, supernatural concepts, and the community rules.
- 3) The community maps, trails and land use in the village area. The researcher carry out surveys with the Mlabri.
- 4) Snowball techniques Interviews is used to investigate history from textbooks, published papers, and discussions with Mlabri elders. The researcher employed community volunteers as translators.
- 5) Focus groups with community leaders will be organized two times in order to verify the data. The researcher translated the data into Mlabri language for discussions.

### 5.3 Data Analysis

1) Descriptive statistics and write-ups of information on the economic data, utilization of forest resources, and agriculture activity.

2) Inductive content analysis to interpret information and explain economic data, forest resource management, social components, supernatural concepts, and community rules and learning activities.

### 5.4 Study Area

Mlabri-Phufa community is located in Phukha-Phadang National Park which also accommodate many other peoples. The park is around 155.2 square kilometers. The area is in the Phufa sub-district, Bokluea district, Nan province, Thailand. As shown in Figure 2.

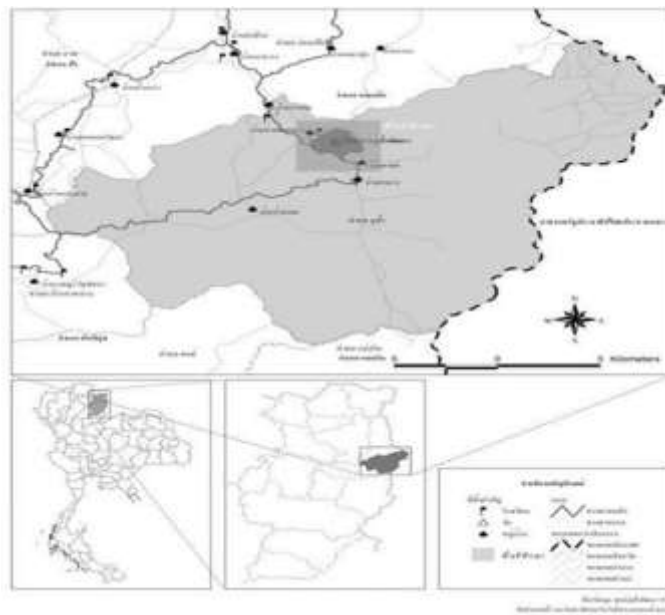


Figure 2 Study Area (Source: Wongwandee, 2022)

## 6. Research Results

The results of the study is presented in 3 parts so that it answers to the questions in the research framework. The community contexts are to be explained as follows;

### 6.1 The general community context

#### Demographics

Mlabri have lived in Phufa Development Center, Nan Province, since 2008. Initially, there were only 9 youth who came from the Huaihom community. However, later they persuaded others to join in. Currently, there are 17 family, 71 people, of whom 33 are males and 39 are females (December 2018). All of them are Christians.

In the beginning, a migration of Mlabri from the Huaihom community to the Phufa Development Center resulting in exploding increase of the population from 9 to 67 people. From 2008 to 2018, the population increase and decrease were still caused by migration. There were only 11 children born in the community. Regarding the factors of migration, the subsistence of food sources and forest resources played influential role. as shown in Figure 3.



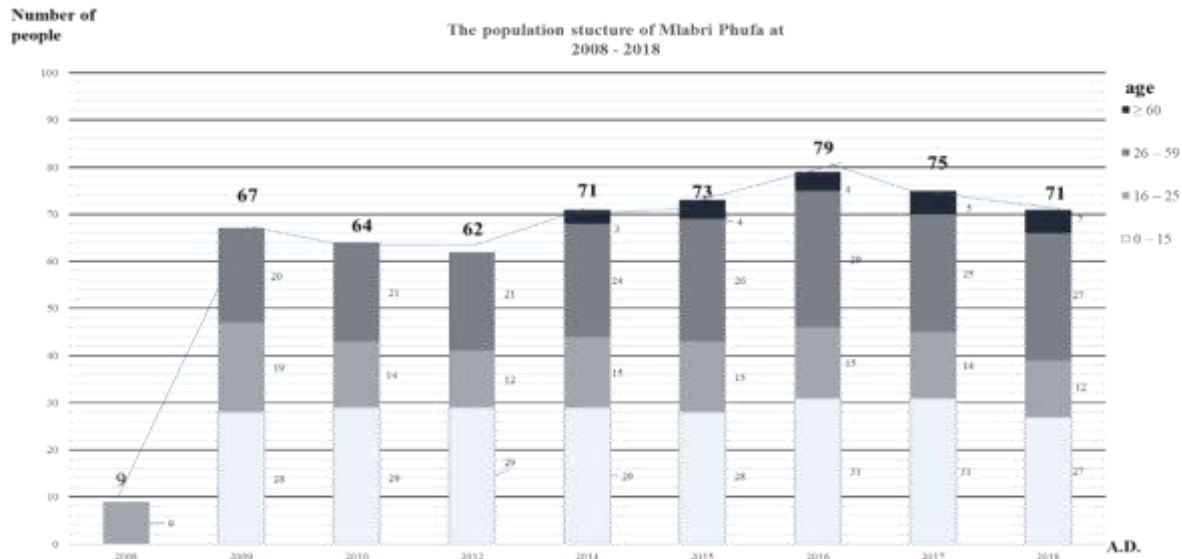


Figure 3 Mlabri population structure in 2008 – 2018 A.D. (Wongwandee, 2022)

A unique event of migration was the move from Huaihom that was caused by a dispute between Mlabri and Boonyuen. Mlabri felt sad, so they moved to the Phufa Development Center. This incidence reflects a characters of Mlabri tribe. It would appear that Mlabri is a peaceful tribe. If Mlabri feels insecure. They will be migrating and fleeing immediately, as in the past. Currently, the Huaihom community found an abandoned house, originally the home of the Mlabri people who moved to the Phufa Development Center.

### 6.2 Politico-Economic context and changes to the household economy structure

The researcher applied the concept of the social component to explain 3 issues. 1) *Traditional Social structure* for internal affairs includes: the relationship in the community, community members are grouped. The belief system, division of duties and cooperation, and education and learning areas. 2). *Social structure for Thai society* includes Territories and The relationship with the neighboring communities. And 3) the relationship between the community with a state agency and royal patronage.

#### Traditional Social structure for internal affairs

##### The relationship in the community

Mlabri-Phufa community can be described as cohesive unit and rural. The community is tightly knitted by two systems of relationship: Seniority and Kinship system.

**Senior system.** Mlabri elders are highly respected by the community members because of their tacit knowledge such as forest utility, handicrafts, and house-building skills. Oral tradition and nomadic culture placed the elder in a critically important to their survival as well as continuity of their group. The only source of knowledge is the elder experiences. Therefore, all community activities are consulted with the elders before actions are granted. In 2018, there are five Mlabri elders in the community.

**Kinship system.** Mlabri believe that all members are relatives, despite there are a few surnames in the community. The perception of kinship amongst the Mlabri people may motivate them to share generously, and to help each other. There is a belief that the descendants of Mlabri are precious treasures. Therefore, every member must take care of all children. Elders and young children are considered common assets of the community, and the community must take care of both groups of people.

### **Family as a group of sub community**

Mlabri-Phufa has 17 families who are single-family (father, mother, and child) but live together among relatives. They will move out to build a new house nearby because they are married. The Mlabri-Phufa lives as a group with relatives in the same area. Family members usually built their home close to the family so that they can taking care of one another. Houses arrangement in Phufa was replicated the same pattern at Huaihom. Elderly could look after children. It is evident that elder Mlabri often told story to young children.

Mlabri is highly aware of their territory. They would keep their community private and well protected from outsiders. A bridge is usually built as a sole entrance to the village. Outsiders are prohibited to use the bridge without permissions.

### **Belief system**

Mlabri is animism and believe that the forest and all natural environments are owned by the spirit or ghosts. There are many ghosts such as Sinre jubo is a wild ghost, Sinre vork is water ghost, Sinre gran is sky ghost and Sinre lam is a tree ghost. Mlabri believe that one should not take or consume anything from the forest without sharing with their community. Such self-indulgence would provoke the ghost to harm the person. Mlabri belief in give-and-take. They would offer something to the spirit in return when they take something from the forest. When Mlabri want to hunt a large animal, some wild animal must be offered to the ghost.

Based on this system of thinking and beliefs, Mlabri create a culture of common property, and in turn, community joint efforts should be made to hunt, to gather and to produce food and supplies i.e. rice and vegetables, bush meat.

### **Education and learning areas**

Mlabri-Phufa has access to education systems, both in formal and informal. There is also an apprentice system to teach other necessary skills for the villagers, which build on the previous knowledge, details as follows.

*The regular education system* of Mlabri, there were 29 formal education students divided into 20 formal education and nine informal education, and 26 graduates with qualifications. There are five graduates with bachelor's degrees.

*Learning skill systems* Mlabri have many skills that are necessary to maintain and develop their community as well as can earn them incomes, such as, making wild vines as a bag and a hat. A group of honey producers could make 200,000 baht/year. Mlabri community established enterprise group to manage and share benefits from selling products.

### ***Learning through Socialization***

*Socialization with the rules and regulations of the community*, Mlabri must learn to respect and obey the community's rules and rule of the neighboring community, so as to establish and maintain credibility of Mlabri's community.

Mlabri's three learning areas, including formal education, skill-based learning, and socialization, have created the characteristics of Mlabri-Phufa. Keeping up with the outside world enhance their literacy level and communication skills. This benefit adult Mlabri to do more skilled-jobs and gain more incomes. In addition, social persuasion has resulted in Mlabri's self-review. The forest survival skill set is perceived to be the tribal heritage to the next generation. Mlabri-Phufa have adapted to be able to coexist with other communities, at the same time, to find ways to maintain their ethnic identity as well. Managing sociocultural assets and relationship with outsiders require Mlabri-Phufa to set systems that serve the purposes. There is a system from original tribal culture existing simultaneously with new systems set by Mlabri elders.



### Social structure for Thai society

#### The external relationship

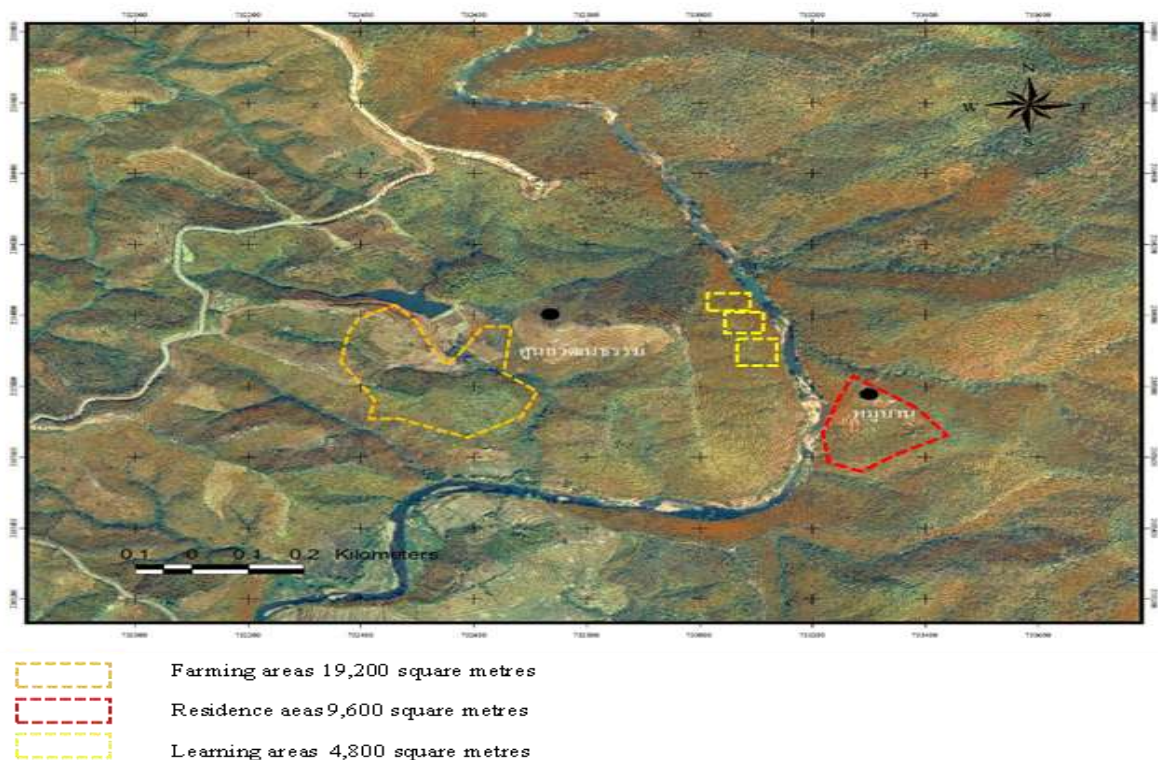
Mlabri-Phufa has two systems to deal with external relationship: The community committee system and the housewives group.

**Community committee system.** Mlabri-Phufa set up a community committee in 2010 to coordinate with communities and with network agencies. The community committee is led by a chairman and two vice chairmen, who are elected by the family representatives. A family has a representative to sit in the committee. In 2018, Don Chawpanapai is the community chairman.

**The housewives' group** was established in 2015 with six members responsible for managing the community's products. They worked on packaging and selling product to people inside and outside the community.. The housewives group were coached by KMUTT.

#### Territories

The Phufa Culture center has 1,280,000 square meters divided into four parts. a) Forest area 1,246,400 square meters 97.3%. It is a national park area, thus, is under the national park laws. b) Farming areas around 19,200 square meters or 1.5%. There are rules that users must obtain permission from the village committee first. Most of activities are group or community projects. c) Residence with community forest, around 9,600 square meters or 0.8%. e) Learning areas of 4,800 square meters, such as Non-Formal Education schools, Phufa Cultural Center, and nature trails, are areas of the community working with network agencies, such as Phufa Development Center. The area is shown in Figure 4.



**Note:** The forest area is the rest of the total 1,246,400 square meters

**Figure 4** Territories of Phufa Culture Center in 2018 (Wongwandee, 2022)

Mlabri-Phufa Community is new to the area in which other communities have been established long before. So Mlabri must follow the rules for the communities to live in the area

Additionally, all areas of the Phufa cultural center are under common property system. No one owns the area. But everyone can benefit from the area under agreed community-rules. Therefore, they share mutual benefits within and among the communities.

**The relationship with the neighboring communities**

**Mlabri with Phasuk community and Hangtanglounng community**

When this group of Mlabri came to live in Phufa Cultural Center's area, they caused dissatisfaction to the Phasuk community and Hangtanglounng community who have lived in this area before establishment of the Center. Phasuk and Hangtanglounng communities agreed to give land to the Phufa Development Center for the purpose of forest conservation. To alleviate the conflicts, Department National Park office 13 (Phrae) and the staff from the Phufa Development Center, took mediator role. All parties set up agreements and rules, with which Mlabri must comply. Especially attending the village meeting with Phasuk Village that is also center for demographic registry.

**Mlabri with Nakok community**

Mlabri-Phufa rented a farming area of 32,000 square meters to grow rice of which 30% will be taxed by the landowner. They expanded the farming area to Huaikwaiyan, Nakok community. They have 196,800 square meters for agricultural activities.

The relationship between the Nakok communities was similar to that of the Phasuk and Hangtanglounng communities. Mlabri-Phufa has to follow the rules of the Nakok community. At this point, there is an area where all four communities agree to share. Therefore, the use of the area must be planned together. The areas of the four communities are shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5** Map of Phufa Cultural Center and neighboring communities (Wongwandee, 2022)

An analysis of Mlabri-Phufa's relationship with their neighboring community's shows that Mlabri-Phufa hold a status of tenant because they are newcomers who own no land. Mlabri-Phufa now have to comply with 4 sets of neighboring community rules and manage multiple agreements. They have to achieve this complex negotiation to gain acceptance. From a viewpoint of Mlabri-Phufa, it is better to have a mediator to assist their negotiation and to reach acceptable consensus.

**The relationship between Mlabri-Phufa with a private organization, a state agency and royal patronage**

**Mlabri-Phufa with Christianity (a private organization)**

Mlabri had a good relationship with a German missionary, Mr. Friedhard Lipsius, whom Mlabri calls “*Uncle Kham.*” It was found that Mlabri attended religious ceremonies on Sunday. It is a simple ceremony. There is a meal together and thanksgiving prayers. Participation is not only religious. It means a time to meet Uncle Kham, who is like an elder of the family. They held good relationship for more than 30 years since Mlabri-Phufa still lived in the Huaihom community.

At the beginning of the Mlabri-Phufa settlement in Phufa Development Center, Uncle Kham was a consultant on the settlement. He provided helps to the Mlabri-Phufa community to deal with modern society such as financial advice, school, work practice, and health care. He took care of them during sickness. He is trusted by the Mlabri. In addition, he provides accommodation in the downtown area of Nan province, including being a modern life consultant.

**Mlabri-Phufa with the state agency and royal patronage**

Phufa Cultural Center was established project by state agencies and royal patronage. Mlabri-Phufa has always been in a relationship with state agencies during the past period. Since moving from the Huaihom community to Phufa Cultural Center. State agencies and royal patronage help them build houses, provide vocational training, and most of the income comes from the employment of state agencies. Details are as follows.

**Phufa Development Center**

The Phufa Development Center has been working with Mlabri since the beginning and in 2007 it provided professional training. In 2008, the establishment of *Phufa Cultural Center* allows more development activities for building communities, creating occupations. Creation of the Phufa Cultural Center encourage Mlabri to develop and learn. It provides opportunities for scholars who are interested to work with Mlabri. Moreover, it is a tourist attraction that shows the exhibition of Mlabri.

It has been said that staff of Phufa Development Center are the principal agency that has taken care of Mlabri in the past ten years, so they are immediate help to Mlabri. They facilitate the convenience of living. They provide the primary source of income. They are an agency that creates various coordinate departments working for the Mlabri-Phufa to achieve food security, occupation, income, health and sanitation, education, natural resource utilization, and cultural conservation.

**Department National Park office 13 (Phrae)**

Department National Park Office-13 (Phrae) is working closely with the Phufa Development Center and Mlabri since 2009 in order to help plan the establishment of the community. The Office help the community migration from the Huaihom community to Phufa Development Center. Initially, head of the DNP Office helped adjust the area to build a temporary shelter. Then, the community had to move across the river to build a community. The Office helped in selection of housing location and provided site contour grading for easy construction.

In 2009, Mlabri-Phufa still carry out hunting-gathering activity in the forest areas that are shared with other communities. Similarly, this incidence caused dissatisfaction and potentially conflicts with the neighboring community. With the help of DNP office-13, Mlabri have access to the forest for sustaining their hunting culture. It can be said that this agency has been working with the Mlabri-Phufa continuously and for a long time. It is the principal agency working in the area. Moreover, DNP Office-13 is an essential agent which enable Mlabri-Phufa to keep the wisdom and ethnic identity of their group.



**King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT)**

KMUTT work with Mlabri-Phufa during the year 2013. KMUTT started working with Mlabri communities by collecting community data. KMUTT employed community research assistants to collect information, to analyze the economic condition. KMUTT team also help Mlabri make the master plan for the community.

From the data, after 2015, there were many activities and experimenting with new skills in agriculture such as rice planting, vegetable cultivation, animal husbandry, food preservation and handicrafts. These and activities increased their income and reduced expenditures.

It can be said that KMUTT has played a driving force in development of the Mlabri-Phufa since 2013. KMUTT took participatory approach in working with Mlabri. Key success is to develop individuals to have confidence and competency. Trust must be gained and consultation in critical matters must be made.

Regarding external relations, Mlabri would only work with people or agencies that the community accepted and trusted. To gain trust, any agency must; a) Understanding the lifestyle of the Mlabri-Phufa; b) treating Mlabri with good hospitality and generosity like an equal person; and c) Conversations with Mlabri must be respectful, polite, without insults, and oppression; d) a trusted person or entity must guarantee the newcomers. Borisudhi (2015) said that *“The worker must understand the social context of that community. Therefore, the development work must first understand the community to work successfully.”*

**6.3 Mlabri Household Economic activities in dual socioeconomic context**

Mlabri-Phufa maintain their household economy with 4 activities, however, analysis of the economic activities have to take in their own specific contexts. Mlabri-Phufa social and economic system composes of 4 activities which are a) Income, b) Expenditure, c) Forest utilization and d) Agriculture activity. Each activity emerged from special circumstances and was accepted by Mlabri-Phufa because it fit with their ideology.

Analysis of the economic activities are considered against 1) the sociocultural context from the tribal tradition and 2) sociopolitical context of agrarian Mlabri in modern Thai society. This would shed light into the ways in which Mlabri-Phufa community adapted themselves and construct a complicated community structure. The followings are results of analysis of each of the four economic activity.

**Income in the economic community context**

During the year 2015 – 2018, the record shows that Mlabri gained higher income in each year. Mlabri-Phufa exposed themselves to modern jobs employment, and farming. They were still forest-harvesting which gained them quite a large sum of money. From all these activity, it was evident that their gains increase from 800,000 baht in 2015 to 1,400,652 baht in 2018. They gained 600,652 baht, or more in 3 years. The income was highest in 2018, around 1,403,452 baht, or 75% of the total income as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Sources of income for the years 2015 – 2018. (Wongwandee, 2022)

Sources of Income	Details	year (A.D.)							
		2015		2016		2017		2018	
		Baht	%	Baht	%	Baht	%	Baht	%
Employment	Employment	500,000	59.9	800,000	72.8	747,774	61.9	1,033,000	73.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>500,000</b>	<b>59.9</b>	<b>800,000</b>	<b>72.8</b>	<b>747,774</b>	<b>61.9</b>	<b>1,033,000</b>	<b>73.6</b>

Sources of Income	Details	year (A.D.)							
		2015		2016		2017		2018	
		Baht	%	Baht	%	Baht	%	Baht	%
<b>Gathering forest product</b>	Wind honey	200,000	23.9	200,000	18.2	300,000	24.8	211,360	15.1
	Forest product	40,000	4.7	0	0	41,730	3.5	25,375	1.7
	Handcraft	30,000	3.7	80,000	7.3	23,470	1.9	84,490	6.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>270,000</b>	<b>32.3</b>	<b>280,000</b>	<b>25.5</b>	<b>365,200</b>	<b>30.2</b>	<b>321,225</b>	<b>22.9</b>
<b>Agriculture</b>	Vegetable	30,000	3.6	17,000	1.5	26,000	2.2	42,000	2.9
	Livestock and pisciculture	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,427	0.3
	Vender	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,000	0.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30,000</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>17,000</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>26,000</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>46,427</b>	<b>3.3</b>
<b>Income from earning a livelihood</b>		<b>800,000</b>	<b>95.8</b>	<b>1,097,000</b>	<b>99.8</b>	<b>1,138,974</b>	<b>94.3</b>	<b>1,400,652</b>	<b>99.8</b>
<b>Donation for education</b>	Donation for education	35,000	4.2	2,000	0.2	68,058	5.7	2,800	0.2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35,000</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>2,000</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>68,058</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>2,800</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>835,000</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,099,000</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,207,032</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,403,452</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>average in households per mount</b>		<b>4,093.14</b>		<b>5,387.25</b>		<b>5,916.82</b>		<b>6,879.67</b>	

From Table 2, the first point is that the income pattern from 2015 to 2018 is very similar. The largest proportion of income was from employment, followed by gathering forest products and agriculture. Mlabri income from employment is more than 50% every year. The main employers were Phufa Development Center office and Department National Park office. Therefore, it can be said that if the state agency's policy changes, the Mlabri-Phufa will have income problems.

Secondly, gathering forest products is also main source of income. The product is mainly wild honey. Mlabri gathers wild honey around March to May only because the honey is of its best quality. They have a sustainable method for gathering the wild honey, as a result, bees are not dead and can revive their hive. It can be said that the Mlabri-Phufa uses the wisdom about gathering to generate income

Thirdly, the newest source of income is farming, which they learned agricultural skills to sustain their household economy as well as to generate income for the community. Mlabri-Phufa began to raise chickens and fish in 2015. It is available for distribution in 2018.

Mlabri-Phufa also learned a systematic vegetable production planning so that they had vegetables for sale weekly. Although poultry and fish takes three years to yield the produce, Mlabri gained income from vegetable farming which take a shorter crop cycle. The vegetables, in 2018, generated 42,000 baht.

**Expenses of Mlabri-Phufa**

The Mlabri tribe's expenses increased from 791,800 baht in 2015 to 940,238 baht in 2018. The increase is of 148,438 baht (18.7%). The cause of increased expense is debt payments which rose from 5,000 baht in 2015 to 287,426 baht in 2018. The increased amount of 282,426 baht, or 57 times of debt in 2015.as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** Sources of expenditures for the years 2015 - 2018. (Wongwandee, 2022)

Sources of expenditures	Details	year (A.D.)							
		2015		2016		2017		2018	
		Baht	%	Baht	%	Baht	%	Baht	%
<b>Consumer goods</b>	food/beverage/ tobacco	657,850	83.1	366,849	71.1	393,565	46.2	260,053	27.7
	personal effects/clothing/shoes	19,050	2.4	67,457	13.1	88,671	10.4	117,558	12.4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>676,900</b>	<b>85.5</b>	<b>434,306</b>	<b>84.2</b>	<b>482,236</b>	<b>56.6</b>	<b>377,611</b>	<b>40.1</b>
<b>Debt</b>	debt payment	5,000	0.6	0	0	116,960	13.7	287,426	30.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>5,000</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>116,960</b>	<b>13.7</b>	<b>287,426</b>	<b>30.6</b>
<b>Communication and travel</b>	vehicles/travel	10,500	1.3	20,000	3.9	127,420	14.9	144,621	15.4
	Communication	2,400	0.3	6,000	1.2	19,357	2.3	36,800	3.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>12,900</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>26,000</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>146,777</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>181,421</b>	<b>19.3</b>
<b>Investment</b>	educational expenses	0	0	0	0	25,340	3	37,360	4
	material a house building/ appliance	37,000	4.7	10,000	1.9	5,647	0.6	2,000	0.2
	Agricultural input	25,000	3.2	45,360	8.8	16,242	1.9	20,000	2.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>62,000</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>55,360</b>	<b>10.7</b>	<b>47,229</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>59,360</b>	<b>6.3</b>
<b>Activity</b>	recreational activities	0	0	0	0	43,130	5.1	24,420	2.6
	religious activities	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>43,130</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>24,420</b>	<b>2.6</b>
<b>Public health</b>	medical supplies/ medical fee	35,000	4.4	0	0	15,870	1.9	10,000	1.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35,000</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>15,870</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>10,000</b>	<b>1.1</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>791,800</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>515,666</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>852,202</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>940,238</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Average in households per mount</b>		<b>3,881.37</b>		<b>2,527.77</b>		<b>4,177.46</b>		<b>4,609.01</b>	



Table 3 shows that In 2020, Mlabri planned to relocate some families to Nakok community, about 10 kilometers from the Phufa Cultural Center, because they could access to a larger agricultural area. However, Mlabri-Phufa must pay off their debt before leaving. So they agreed to liquidate the amount of money needed to pay their debt. The deal was mutually agreed by Mlabri and the creditor.

Most expenses are formulated with a good relationship with the outside community. The expense from communication, travel and personal belonging, that is, clothes, shoes, etc., is evident in the adaption of Mlabri-Phufa to the current way of living. The adaptation makes the Mlabri-Phufa community more acceptable to the neighborhood community.

On the other hand, Table 4 shows that Mlabri-Phufa spent less for food, beverage, and tobacco due to their new agricultural skills. They reduced food expense from 676,900 baht in 2015 to 260,053 baht in 2018, reducing 397,797 baht, representing 60 %. The reduction was a result of farm production management learned from KMUTT, which enabling the production of rice, vegetables, and meat, thereby reducing food expenditures in the community

In terms of income and expenditure, it clearly shows the change in the Nomadic communities of Mlabri. Hunting and gathering societies change into sedentary societies with agriculture. The lifestyle is moving towards an urbanized community.

### **Forest utility**

Mlabri exploited the forest area of 155.2 square kilometers. In 2018, Mlabri gathered 13 forest products and hunted 92 species, with a total value of 490,233 baht. The highest value of the forest is honey, 204,000 baht or 41.6%, followed by terrestrial animals 102,000 baht or 20.9%, and Insect at 46,427 baht or 3.3%, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4** Forest utility of Mlabri-Phufa (Wongwandee, 2018)

Group	Species	Quantity (Kilogram)	Value	
			Baht	%
1. Honey	1	1,020	204,000	41.6
2. Terrestrial animal	17	702	102,660	20.9
3. Insect	6	309	53,795	11.0
4. Seedling	7	9,855	50,475	10.3
5. Timber	7	1,780	37,300	7.6
6. Wicker	5	410	13,705	2.8
7. Freshwater animal	7	94	8,497	1.7
8. Mushroom	5	87	7,137	1.5
9. Tuber	6	218	5,118	1.0
10. Fruit	11	267	3,556	0.7
11. Forage plants	4	584	2,325	0.5
12. Vegetable	12	90	1,594	0.3
13. Herb	4	3	71	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>15,419</b>	<b>490,233</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 4 shows that the Mlabri honey sold, mostly, to the outside community, which gained around 200,000 baht/year. Furthermore, the income information shows that revenue from the sale of honey has increased. Mlabri learned how to clean honey and reduce humidity.

Such quality wild honey reached new market, resulting in increased revenues. (income 200,000 baht in 2015 to 211,360 baht in 2018) In 2018, Mlabri started planning honey production because Mlabri gathering bees was difficult. They shared space with other communities. Beekeeping is an option to achieve income sustainability. In addition to bringing forest products to sell, Mlabri is also used in the household by around 40%.

**Agriculture Activity**

From 2015 to 2018, Mlabri has developed agriculture products to sell in the area of Bokluea District, Nan province. In 2018, the community had the highest yield, 286,173 baht, with rice being the most valuable at 118,170 baht or 41.3%, followed by chicken at 61,664 baht, 21.5%, and tilapia fish. 51,750 baht or 18.1 %. details as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5** Agricultural products yield of Mlabri-Phufa in 2015 – 2018 (Wongwandee, 2022)

Productivity	2015			2016			2017			2018		
	yield	value	%	yield	value	%	yield	value	%	yield	value	%
Rice (13 baht/kg.)	6,000	78,000	37.9	7,400	96,200	60.6	10,200	132,600	67	9,090	118,170	41.3
Vegetable (15 baht/kg.)	3,466.7	52,000	25.5	400	6,000	3.9	1,280	19,200	9.8	937	14,055	4.9
Mushroom (70 baht/kg.)	57.2	4,000	1.9	171.4	12,000	7.6	200	14,000	7.1	89	6,230	2.2
Strawberry (200 baht/kg.)	-	25,000	12.2	10.6	2,125	1.3	5	1,000	0.5	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chicken meat (120 baht/kg.)	71.3	8,560	4.2	34.3	4,112	2.6	42	5,040	2.5	513.8	61,664	21.5
Egg (4 baht/egg)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2,636	10,544	3.7
Tilapia Fish (70 baht/kg.)	543	38,000	18.5	543	38,000	24	371.4	26,000	13.1	739.3	51,750	18.1
Catfish (60/kg.)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	396	23,760	8.3
<b>total</b>	<b>205,560</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>158,437</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>197,840</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>286,173</b>	<b>100</b>	

Table 5 show that communities gained more income through agricultural production. The income increased from 205,560 baht in 2015 to 286,173 baht in 2018, increasing 80,613 Baht or 39.2%. The increase came from effective production which Mlabri gain more experience through the years. This gave them tacit knowledge and confidence in production.

The decision to farm in 2015 resulted from community leaders’ discussions with KMUTT, who agreed that the community should have an agricultural activity to reduce expenses, increase income, and create money circulation in the community.

**7. Discussions on Adaption of the sociocultural structures**

**7.1 Tribal Social structure for internal affairs**

This research found animistic behavior is fundamental to Mlabri sociocultural system According to Na Nan (2012) supervise natural resources is guarded and cared by supernatural beings or ghosts. Mlabri-Phufa perceives their existence to be closely intertwined with the forest, that belong to no one, and everyone have right to what the forest provides. Thus, the community must not provoke the ghosts and to keep the ‘correct’ way of living. To do so, Mlabri-Phufa trust and respect elders who have more experiences in forest living. Family and relatives are utmost important as collective being who benefit from resources in the forest but not individual. Seniors or Mlabri elders play an essential role in shaping ways of doing things

within the community. For example, punishment for those who break the agreement, Judging disputes between people in the community. However, all are family. Mlabri takes care each and everybody in the community. Therefore, the community internal management system is governed by senior system and kinship system. Authority of seniority and kinship systems is limited to the community internal affairs. The dual systems is sociocultural structure of Mlabri-Phufa in modern Thai society.

### **7.2 Social structure for Thai society**

Mlabri-Phufa exposed themselves to the outside world in which rule and regulations are far more complex than the way of the forest guardian. To manage inter-community relationship, Mlabri-Phufa learn to deal with peoples of different cultures. The community members who hold this new knowledge are appointed to the community committee system in order to manage conflicts and benefits with non-community people. The community committee system acting on politics and governance must coordinate with the neighborhood community and take care of the Mlabri-Phufa to comply with the agreed rules.

Influences of the outside world also penetrate into the community. New household economy system needs new management to deal with new sources of income and provisions. The housewives group is formed to plays a role in the economy and acts as the community's middlemen. The group will manage trade of the produce and products from and to the community. They also manage the sharing of resources within the community. However, decision making authority of both systems is focused on issues outside the community.

### **7.3 Community structure with state agency and royal patronage**

The community committee system plays a role in coordination between the state agency and royal patronage. The community committee is responsible for delivering information to various departments for project decision-making. In addition, the agency will serve as pastor of Mlabri-Phufa following the agency's mission community committee and acts as the community's middlemen on community management issues with the state agency.

The information in 7.1 – 7.3 found that Mlabri-Phufa has changed from the past. The Community mix both traditional and modern systems, resulting in the community still having community rules in the form of beliefs. At the same time, compliance with the neighborhood community's rules makes Mlabri a part of society. In order to enjoy fundamental rights as a citizen, with equal rights, health care, and education, that is in line with the concept of Harari (2019), which outlines the three basic requirements of immigration: a) the landlord must allow immigrants to enter the city. b) Immigrants must accept the original community rules, even sometimes having to cancel their community. c) If the immigrants meet the requirements enough and, over time, will be given as part of the community that has moved in with such characteristics.

### **7.4 Cultural-Economic activity as Mlabri**

In the past, the only tribal economic activity is animal hunting and food gathering in the forest. Hunting is also a cultural activity. It could be said that cultural economic activity of Mlabri is hunting gathering, in other words, it is a daily management of household economy as well as culture of the society because the activities need a combination of wisdom and labour to earn their living. In the present day, daily incomes come from labor works employed by state agencies and Hmong people. Mlabri-Phufa accepted their new gathering environment.

Mlabri-Phufa tribal and modern cultural-economic activities cause conflicts. Labour employment bring in steady income but deprive their spiritual connections to the forest. Hunting-gathering in to common forest area, however, made neighboring community discontent. The present way of gathering forest products is no longer spontaneous but is driven by a well-functioning community committee system. Agreement must be made before actions. Mlabri cultural economic system is a physical work in two different environment. The system

also allow Mlabri-Phufa to sustain their tribal wisdom and to maintain relationships with state agencies.

### **7.5 Economic activity of agrarian Mlabri community**

In 2020, it is evident to claim that Mlabri-Phufa is now an agrarian community. They have adapted to modern Thai society by producing agricultural products for sale and consumption instead of relying on unstable nature. There are studies of another hunter-gather tribe who had changed for survival. In the social structure of nomadic tribe, the members of the same natural characteristics perform similar functions. Male member would provide for food for the family, and female would be housewives and take care of the habitat. All that have changed all over the world. Ikeya and Nishiaki (2021) found that the way of social maintenance of the hunter-gather tribes is to adapt to the neighborhood community as both adapting to the urban society. Agricultural society changes according to the nature of the economy of a neighbor community. This result in *the division of labour in the society* as stated by Durkheim (1893), that the Mlabri community has changed from Mechanical Solidarity to a more Organic Solidarity society

When Mlabri-Phufa Community adopt agriculture activity to be part of their lives i.e. rice cultivation, fishery, livestock, it is the dawn of agrarian Mlabri community. Agricultural activities arise from a group housewives who learn to do agriculture with the support of the state agencies. The housewives took the roles of both producers and distributors. They produce food with new skills to sustain the community with the tribe sharing culture. It can be said that the housewife group is becoming a socioeconomic institution that raise the quality of Mlabri lives. While the male members were learning to appreciate the efforts, the housewives learn to generate new sources of incomes from tourists in Phufa by providing tour-guides and to welcome tourists with tribal hospitality. Another sources of income emerged.

Consequently, significant changes occurs to Mlabri-Phufa social system. Role and responsibility of the community members become more complex and do not comply to the traditional heirarchy. Each Mlabri has many roles and duties. There are various careers and some are specific to single task. The role of men, as the provider, finds more ways of raising the family. Apart form hunting for forest products, Mlabri male can do labour work, general employee, and a carpenter, for examples. A women used to take a role of a housewife to take care of the community, now, she could play a role in welcoming tourists, farming, handicrafts, and earning money in the community. Some women can drive a car, act as liaisons with the agency. Gender equality in opportunity is gaining the balance. Mlabri-Phufa show complex characteristics. Role and responsibility is obtained through their aptitudes and personal interests.

The comparison of Mlabri-Phufa's income with the poverty line of Thai people show tha, Mlabri-Phufa gained more than averag, in 2018. Based on National Human Rights Commission, (2018), avarage income of Thai is 2,710 baht/person/month or 90.3 baht/person/day. The Mlabri-Phufa gains average income of 3,440 baht/ person/month or 156 baht/person/day, which is also higher than the poverty line. Mlabri-Phufa is not a poor group or disadvantaged people in their way of living. The community can earn to meet their needs. Money, in a notion of currency, is gaining its powerful role. The community's rules have also changed from punishment to financial penalty, similar to the neighborhood communities.

### **8. Conclusions**

From Mlabri nomadic tribe, Mlabri community to Mlabri-Phufa, the people have undergone a series of adaptation to new sociocultural and economic context in such a short period of time, when compared to the human civilization. They did well to survive and prosper. A sudden leap to the new context and their resilience to overcome changes allows us to observe this transitional period that may occur in any society's evolution but is too subtle to detect. Mlabri-

Phufa, as a collective entity, is not completely changed. A mixed socioeconomic structure is formulated to deal with both contexts of hunting tribe culture and of Thai society. Mlabri gained social acceptance and aware of their fundamental rights, like other Thais.

Currently, Mlabri-Phufa is not a nomadic tribe but has the character of a sedentary society. Mlabri's way of life is an integration of hunting-gathering with agrarian society. The community accepted the changes. Structure of their society has shifted from pure cultural economic base to combine with socioeconomic base. The 4 components of the mixed sociocultural structure of Mlabri-Phufa are 1) Seniority, 2) Kinship, 3) community committee system, and 4) a group of housewives.

These components in the mixed socioeconomic structures allow Mlabri-Phufa to adapt to politico-economic context of Thai society and to sustain cultural context of the forest life. Mlabri can conserve the wisdom of hunter-gather as well as to learn new scientific knowledge. The Community Committee and the housewives group is a modern literated agent that bridge the politicocultural gap between Mlabri and the others. Even though the Mlabri tribe has evolved through difficult community situations, somehow, they show us that it is possible to find a way for an ethnic group to live in the present society. This research learns that the dynamic interplay of the four components is the strength of their adaptability.

Identity of ethnic people stemmed from their way of living and belief system. When changes threaten food security, health and habitat, adaptation must be embraced to sustain the identity. Education and empathic assistances are the driving force for the continuity of the next generation, as in the case of Mlabri-Phufa.

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