

The Alternative Agriculture Network Isan and Its Struggle for Food Sovereignty – a Food Regime Perspective of Agricultural Relations of Production in Northeast Thailand

Alexandra Heis

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This paper uses the food regime analysis to visualize relations of domination and exploitation within the realm of food production and supply. Starting with an outlook on how the food regime plays out in the Thai context, the author goes on to elaborate its critical aspects fundamental for a food sovereignty critique: growing concentration of power on the side of transnational corporations, exploitative relations of production in agro-industry, and devastating effects for nature, small-scale producers, and increasingly also for consumers. In Northeast Thailand, the *Alternative Agriculture Network Isan* (AAN Isan) is struggling to secure income and subsistence agriculture for its members. This is achieved through a number of activities, some of which are introduced here in detail. Producer cooperatives, organic farming, green markets, or a local herb medicine center all aim at empowerment within the present market situation by using aspects of the health discourse to support their arguments and at the same time reinforcing a specific local politics of identity, rooted in notions of culture and religion.

Keywords: Alternative Agriculture; Food Regime; Food Sovereignty; Peasant Identity Politics; Northeast Thailand

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Mittels einer entlang des *food regime*-Ansatzes inspirierten Analyse zeigt die Untersuchung vorherrschende Macht- und Ausbeutungsverhältnisse landwirtschaftlicher Produktion. Mit einem Einblick in die Manifestation des globalen *food regimes* in Thailand konzentriert sich der Artikel auf jene Elemente, die zentral für die Kritik der *Food Sovereignty*-Bewegung sind: Monopolisierung der Produktion und Verteilung bei transnationalen Unternehmen und negative Folgen der agroindustriellen Produktion für kleinbäuerliche Produzent_innen, die Umwelt sowie Konsument_innen. Das *Alternative Agriculture Network Isan* (AAN Isan) in Nordostthailand setzt sich in diesem Kontext für seine Mitglieder ein. Eine Reihe diesbezüglicher Aktivitäten werden hier detailliert beschrieben: Produktionskooperativen, ökologische Landwirtschaft, Bauernmärkte sowie das örtliche Kräuterzentrum. Diese alle zielen darauf ab, die Kleinbäuer_innen innerhalb der vorherrschenden Marktverhältnisse zu stärken und greifen dabei sowohl auf Aspekte von Gesundheitsdiskursen als auch die Frage der kulturell und religiös determinierten Identität zurück.

Schlagworte: Food Regime; Food Sovereignty; kleinbäuerliche Identität; Nordostthailand; öko-soziale Landwirtschaft

INTRODUCTION

Using the example of the *Alternative Agriculture Network Isan*¹ (AAN Isan), this paper explores food sovereignty activities of a group of farmers in Yasothon province, Northeast Thailand. The network is part of the international peasant organization *La Vía Campesina*, and its individual members and member groups have a long tradition as grass-roots activists and campaigners on ecological issues and issues of social and economic inequality. As a nation-wide organization, AAN Isan oversees government agricultural policies and provides a networking platform for its member groups. As a food sovereignty movement, it emphasizes peasant subsistence and empowerment. Although it presents itself as a nation-wide network, its center certainly is the north-eastern region of Thailand. Similar to other alternative development concepts of the Global South, food sovereignty draws on local categories and non-Western ontology. The concept of agrarian citizenship, for example, accentuates the cultural meaning of land and the understanding of agriculture not as a business, but as a way of being and is reflected in the politics of peasant identity. Thereby, the peasants understand themselves as stewards of the earth and the land (Wittman, 2010, p. 169; Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010, p. 2). Apart from the struggle for socio-economic equality, this is the beating heart of the AAN Isan.

In the following, the paper shows how the AAN Isan embraces strategies of resistance in order to maintain and, when possible, enlarge their income and means of subsistence. The field of action of AAN Isan member groups is predetermined by the global food regime manifesting in the Thai context – a set of food production and supply relations. Hereby three major spheres were detected: organic agriculture, alternative marketing, and healthy diets. The paper shows how these are related to the food regime and where the scope of action for AAN Isan lies, and illustrates examples of all relevant strategies. One major theme figuring in the data is the specific notion of peasant identity as reflected in the agrarian citizenship concept mentioned above. The struggle over definition of healthy foods and diets has been noticed as crucial for legitimating a given food regime. It is shown how AAN Isan agents actively engage in such struggles by successfully addressing drawbacks of the corporate food regime and pointing to the beneficial effects of close consumer and producer relations, triggering solidarity and a locally rooted identity.

The article is based on data collected during fieldwork in October 2011 through open, semi-structured interviews as well as informal talks. The sample of interviewees included representatives of the AAN Isan as well as the *Sustainable Agriculture Foundation*,² and leading figures of the AAN Isan interest groups. According to their specific interest, members of the AAN Isan are involved in such initiatives as the herbal group, the alternative marketing group, and the green market group. All of

1 On the English version of the AAN Isan website, Isan has been transcribed into English as *Esan*. This does not correspond to the general rules of transcription of Thai language and is therefore not adopted in this paper.

2 Sustainable Agriculture Foundation was established as a fund-managing organization in 1997 when larger amounts of funds were made available to alternative development social movements in the aftermath of the 99-day protest of the *Assembly of the Poor* (Expert A & B, personal communication, October 2011).

them are full-time farmers and only secondarily involved with the AAN Isan. Furthermore, two scientists from the Faculty of Agriculture at the Ubon Ratchathani University were interviewed.

The geographical focus of the study was the province of Yasothon, which is some 500 km northeast of Bangkok. It is one of the poorest of the 76 Thai provinces, with a very low level of road infrastructure. However, the scope of AAN Isan covers several provinces of the Northeast. This is the region with the highest share of agricultural holdings in numbers as well as in terms of area coverage in Thailand (National Statistical Office & Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, 2003). The most important cash crop of the region is jasmine rice – a high-yield breed – and the most important industrial activity in Yasothon is rice milling (Kaufmann, 2012, p. 161).

Overall, eight semi-structured interviews and several informal talks were conducted mainly in English and local Lao dialect. The interviews were conducted with the support of a native interpreter and transcribed with the support of a native translator fluent in German and English. Analysis of data was based on Grounded Theory. This implies a hermeneutical, empirically grounded induction of theory, whereby collection of data and its analysis are at least partly interconnected processes making it a well-structured methodology (Hildebrand, 2007, p. 33; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 58).

The paper starts with an explanation of the food regime framework and how it plays out in Thailand. The second section places AAN Isan within a conceptual and historic context and points out its main food sovereignty aspects – its members' peasant identity politics as well as its local strategies of resistance. The last section demonstrates the empirical findings and concludes with a discussion on the relevance of the network's attempts to re-establish local farmers' and consumers' social and economic position and capacity to challenge the dominant food regime relations in Thailand.

THE GLOBAL FOOD REGIME FRAMEWORK WITHIN THE THAI CONTEXT

The concept of food regime defines global food production and consumption patterns as related to a specific accumulation regime, global value chains, and resulting power relations. The analytical concept developed by Friedmann and McMichael (as cited in McMichael, 2009) is a combination of regulation and world-systems theory, which allows for a nuanced examination of how unequal global relations of production in agriculture are spatially and socially localized. Transformation and consolidation processes of food regimes are integrated within general, political, and economic transformations of power relations and require new cultural legitimization. Herein a food regime is understood as a dynamic concept with uneven phases of transformation and consolidation and the focus is on its historical and procedural aspects. According to Friedmann, a food regime in general is a "rule governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale" (as cited in McMichael, 2009, p. 142). The more implicit such rules are the more binding they are, appearing as something natural. Nevertheless, a food regime is not simply a top-down exercise of power or expression of interest, but an outcome of "political struggles among con-

tending social groups” over power within dominant discourses and of “what works” (McMichael, 2009, p. 143). Ethical and moral perceptions provide cultural legitimation to a food regime, securing its stability. According to Friedmann, it is especially the conflicts that indicate “newly delegitimized – i.e. previously naturalized – aspects of the old food regime and offer competing *frames* for resolving them” (Friedmann, 2005, p. 335). In our case, it is mainly issues of health impact, the ecological effect, and the social relations of food production that carry conflictual potential or where renegotiation is most visible. Such transformations are opened up by, and at the same time open up spaces for, social movements, which “act as engines of food regime crisis and transformation” (Friedmann, 2005, p. 229) with the “power to legitimate or challenge regime cultures” (McMichael, 2009, p. 160).

One of such socio-ecological social movements that try to counter the tendencies of the current food regime is the food sovereignty movement. Its critique of social relations of production and ecological effects as well as its programmatic orientation rests on food regime analysis (Bernstein, 2014; Wittman, 2011, pp. 89–90). On a global scale, food sovereignty aims at establishing a global moral economy (McMichael, 2005, 2009, p. 148), reworking the metabolic connection between society and nature (Wittman, 2011, p. 820) and thus establishing agro-ecology as a new agricultural paradigm. As will be shown in this paper, AAN Isan (and the food sovereignty concept itself) is far from being a counter-hegemonic project in Thailand; it is yet able to exert resistance and to hold its ground against very powerful – corporate – players. It has detected major contested features of the current food regime, which it uses in order to challenge these power relations.

According to McMichael (2009, 2012) the current food regime is structured in compliance with rules of neoliberal political economy that favor the private as opposed to the public. This is equally valid for agricultural development and goes hand in hand with an increasing monopolization of power in the sphere of food supply and production. It also implies a bias regarding agricultural research and development activities where funding has shifted from public to private, too (Pistorius & van Wyk as cited in McMichael, 2009, p. 150). In addition, a major geo-political shift towards the Global South appeared in as much as ‘newly agricultural countries’ (Friedmann, 1993) open up access to cheap means of production – land, water, and workforce – and help satisfying changing consumption patterns in favor of fresh, non-seasonal fruits and vegetables in the Global North. The formation of these new economic structures has resulted in a new accumulation pattern oriented towards southern transnational corporations (McMichael, 2009, pp. 150–151; McMichael, 2013, p. 684). In consequence, there is a growing vertical integration of food production and supply chains shown in the growing dominance of subcontracting of southern peasants for the cultivation of specialty crops, animal husbandry or broiler, and shrimp production, as opposed to formerly independent cash cropping (Goss, Burch, & Rickson, 2000; Heft-Neal et al., 2008) on the one hand and, on the other hand, in the increasing crowding-out of fresh markets by super- and hypermarkets on the side of food distribution and rising control of supply of means of production (seeds, mills, technology, etc.) on the side of agricultural contractors. All of these are often one and the same company (Goss et al., 2000). This process is also driven by deep changes of consumption patterns, whereby it is not really clear if it is demand that determines the supply or vice versa

(Campbell, 2009, p. 311). Clearly, the increasing monopoly of corporate food supply with individual supermarket chains controlling up to 80 percent of national retail markets (Burch, Dixon, & Lawrence, 2013, p. 215) does have a good deal of regulatory power as to the products on offer and the shaping of consumer choices.

Regarding the manifestation of the corporate food regime in Thailand, three central aspects of legitimation appear: the benefits of supermarkets versus fresh markets (Banwell et al., 2013), the issue of contaminated and unsafe foods versus healthy, organic products (Sangkumchaliang & Huang, 2012), and the question of just social relations of production and especially the situation of farmers and small-scale producers. All issues are interrelated as they are based on discourses about environmental production and the question of health and healthy, socially and locally embedded foods (Campbell, 2009; Dixon, 2009). These are also crucial to the struggle over cultural legitimation and thus the power to set up rules, and as such are contested by all social groups.

A Thai multinational enterprise, the Charoen Pokphang Group (CP Group), can serve as an example here (Goss et al., 2000, p. 514). In their survey, Goss et al. (2000, pp. 516–517) show how the originally Thai agro-industrial company has grown into a transnational corporation in only two decades, mainly through inter-sectorial diversification and a high degree of vertical integration of elements of production within the production chains (Goss et al., 2000, pp. 516–517). It now controls the entire production and supply chain for products of animal husbandry as well as shrimp farming on a global scale. It produces feeds, owns feed mills, contracts out broiler production, and even provides loans for contracting farmers, who otherwise could not enter into the contract (Heft-Neal et al., 2010, p. 47). According to the Heft-Neal et al. (2010) study of poultry production in Khon Kaen, Northeast Thailand, credits provided by brokers cover more than 45 percent of the farmers' financial means (p. 47). Contract farming basically involves a subcontracting large-scale supplier, the retail sector, the intermediary broker, and the producing farmer (Shankar, Posri, & Srivong, 2010). The expensive agricultural input is provided to the farmers by the large-scale supplier via a broker and it is often acquired on credit, with no contract, or even specified rates of interest (Delforge, 2007, p. 5; Shankar et al., 2010, p. 144). Not only does contract farming draw producers into extensive dependency relations that very much resemble former client-patron relations and informal credit markets where vulnerability of debtors is increased through lack of transparency and a missing legal status. The rigid coordination which is needed to keep up a constant quality and quantity level renders farmers *de facto* tenants and wage laborers on farms who, nevertheless, bear the entire risk of their enterprise (Goss et al., 2000, p. 521; Shankar et al., 2010, p. 144). This rigorous control over the processes of food production goes hand in hand with retail corporations increasing their monopoly power over the retail sector within national markets (Burch et al., 2013, p. 215). In Thailand, major multinational supermarket chains have increased their market shares constantly since the 1960s. The CP Group is strongly involved in this trend. Although it started with four major retail chains, after the financial crisis of 1997 it now holds the national franchise of the Seven-Eleven's convenient stores (Boonying & Shannon, 2015, p. 10; Shankar et al., 2010, p. 140; Shannon, 2009). In Thailand, fresh markets still provide the major share of fresh fruit and vegetable supply. But the increasing monopolization of the retail market

leads to a gradually declining number of independent fresh-market retailers, mainly due to customer distrust over safety of foods and hygiene in some market areas (Banwell et al., 2013, p. 610; Konsulwat, 2002). Consumers feel attracted by the bright, clean, and well-stocked locations, which is equally true for small convenient shops as for huge hypermarkets (Shannon, 2009, pp. 81, 83; Banwell et al., 2013, p. 609). The corporate food regime, which brought about the so-called supermarket revolution, is based upon marketing strategies of clean and hygienic packing fostering especially healthy, safe, and affluent fresh foods. This changing retail situation in Thailand and the expensive pricing of those products may negatively influence consumer food choices and subsequently their options for healthy diets. As the low-income population might lose access to fresh foods, which are now generally available at fresh markets for relatively low prices, it might force them to become dependent on cheap convenient foods with high energy density and low nutrient value (Banwell et al., 2013, p. 609). This development already implies certain inequality in food supply according to customers' purchasing power in Thailand and will further lead to a growing number of people suffering from malnutrition, especially among the low-income populace (Dixon, 2014, p. 202).

According to Dixon (2009), the question of healthy and adequate nutrition has always been part of the legitimation process of a given food regime. In her analysis of health and dietary aspects of a given food regime, she describes in detail the emergence of the *nutricentric citizen* whose dietary choices are steered by questions of technical functionality rather than cultural and social aspects (Dixon, 2009, p. 329). This is supported by the so-called "diet making complex", in which the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations (UN), and other health and nutrition related institutions supported by scientific research and financed by corporations with stakes in agriculture–food business make recommendations as to which nutrients are especially health-enhancing (Dixon, 2014, p. 202). Within the current food regime, the recommendations favor fresh but also processed and functional health foods or wellness foodstuffs, designed for self-optimization and self-improvement. Such dietary recommendations, substantiated with health and medical discourses, not only dictate what is on offer in supermarkets, and at what price, but, to a great extent, they also shape consumer perception about what healthy food is and where to get it.

Last but not least, the issue of environmental protection is also very much used to legitimate the current food regime. Although this is certainly more relevant in the Global North, this topic is on the upswing in the Global South, too. The environmental aspects of food marketing came to the fore after broad critique of the former food regimes, demanding environmentally friendly production as well as clean foods. The calls of social movements of consumers and producers for locally, ecologically, and socially produced foods (Campbell, 2009, p. 313) have at least partly been picked up and co-opted by the retail and food producing sectors, however, according to their needs and in a way which would not hinder profits (Friedmann, 2005, p. 254). The complex and costly certification procedures do bring about a certain degree of security for the conscious consumer; however, they particularly serve the needs of the retail companies, such as foregoing public control or to justify higher prices for organic foods. Within this struggle, social movements such as food sovereignty movements are caught up in a dialectic relation with the corporate regime, which is constantly co-

opting and appropriating their health, social justice, and environment related claims (Campbell, 2009; Dixon, 2009, p. 323). The following chapter will introduce the food sovereignty movement AAN Isan and the practices of its members. It will especially look at how the group reacts to and deals with such drawbacks of the current food regime. Concerning the small-scale farmers in Yasothon, these include the increasing monopolization within agricultural production and supply chains, the ecological and social effects of intensive agricultural-industrial production, as well as the question of who can best feed the world. In all these cases – health, environmental protection, and the retail situation – they are trying to establish their own definition and rules, thus aiming at destabilizing or at least gaining power within the corporate food regime.

AAN ISAN – LOCAL FOOD SOVEREIGNTY INITIATIVES IN NORTHEAST THAILAND

AAN Isan is a loosely structured network of organic small-scale producers with its early beginnings in the 1970s, starting out from informal initiatives of Yasothon and Surin province peasants (Expert A, personal communication, October 2011). At the end of the 1990s, AAN Isan became a nationwide organization and the Sustainable Agriculture Foundation was founded to organize and administer its funds. With the massive protests of the *Assembly of the Poor*³ and the new constitution in 1997, there was some upswing of alternative development concepts in Thailand and sustainable agriculture became part of the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan in 1997. Later, in 2006, the *Sufficiency Economy Philosophy*⁴ became constitutional and funds were made available for relevant projects. At the time the study was carried out, the network was financed also by the government organizations CODI (Community Organisation Development Initiative), the Agricultural Land Reform Office, and the National Thai Health Foundation (Alternative Agriculture Network Esan, n.d.). This is especially interesting with regard to the intersection of the food regime and the health discourse legitimating it. Some projects, especially in the realms of seed variety breeding and alternative economy, are at least partly conceptualized and sustained as research projects (Alternative Agriculture Network Esan, n.d.; Expert D, personal communication, October 2011). The AAN Isan is active in the Northeast of Thailand, but its main focus is within the provinces of Roi Et, Ubon Ratchathani, Yasothon, Maharakam, Khon Kaen, Kalasin, Petchabun, and Surin. The network structure is very dynamic; groups are mobile and inter-connected across provincial borders; meetings are held in different sites. Interviews were conducted mainly with

3 Assembly of the Poor (AOP) was the first nationwide closing of ranks of rural and ethnic minority NGOs and social movements mounting a 99-day protest in front of the government offices in Bangkok. The founding of the AOP was also fueled by political activists who already were involved in opposition to the Pak Mun dam in Ubon Ratchathani province, among others the later spokeswomen of AOP Wanida Tantawitthayapitak (Glassman, 2001, p. 520). The AOP protests were especially remarkable for their strategic and dramaturgical performance. Nevertheless, the achievement was very limited and agreements were not renewed by the subsequent government (Baker, 2000; Missingham, 2003).

4 Sufficiency economy philosophy was introduced by the King in his birthday speech after the outbreak of the crisis in 1997. It is an alternative approach opposing negative effects of capitalism with moderation and sufficiency. It consists of Buddhist moral and ethical concepts, such as the middle path (Piboolsravut, 2004).

representatives of the AAN Isan, the Sustainable Agriculture Foundation as well as key members of the AAN Isan interest groups. While AAN Isan and the Sustainable Agriculture Foundations are NGOs and thus have a formal representational body, the interest groups do not. Such groups have spokesmen and spokeswomanes and indeed committees which take some organizational responsibility, but they are not autonomous or independent organizations. For example, the green market committee takes decisions about certain group activities, or just takes care of tasks which need to be done, such as ordering a car to pick up the right vendors on time (Expert G, personal communication, October 2011). Among the interviewees there were a person engaged in the establishment of Community Supported Agriculture and the seed selection activities in Kut Chum district, the representative of the Thai medical center at the temple *Wat Tha Lad*, and one initiating member of the green markets in Yasothon.

After a short historical outline of AAN Isan farmers' engagement in the struggle for food sovereignty and alternatives to development in general, special attention is given to its cultural and identity politics which are crucial for the legitimation of the peasants' claims within the food sovereignty approach. The section concludes by pointing out some of the central food sovereignty strategies by which the AAN Isan offers an alternative to the current food regime. Especially the focus of AAN Isan on environmental and health issues forms the legitimating backbone of the movement's agricultural activities and self-representation attracting diverse local consumers.

Since the 1980s, after the successful repression of communist and socialist uprisings during the 1970s, Thai alternative development has been dominated by a localism discourse articulated through the *Community Culture School*⁵ (Parnwell, 2006). Within this concept, disseminated above all by a group of socially motivated academics, often physicians, and rebellious monks, the pre-capitalist village and community culture perceived as a genuine Thai lifestyle can lead the way out of the crisis-prone capitalist system. Localism is often characterized as a somehow backward looking imagination of the past based on local religion, beliefs, moral, and ethics and avoiding involvement with general political and economic problems and ideologies (Parnwell, 2006, p. 185). The Thai King's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy is a variety of the Community Culture School in that it seeks endogeneous solutions for socio-economic problems, caused mainly through exogenous factors, i.e. the deprivation of world-market prices for staples and primary goods, or the increasing out-migration of rural population into better-paid industrial occupation. It also largely draws on Buddhist principles of moderation and the middle path. Because it was formulated by the King, it has become leading in national policy making and even made it into the national constitution in 2006. It is central to a number of national and rural development policies and is recognized by the UN Development Report on Thailand in 2007 (Kasem & Thapa, 2012, p. 100). In parallel, there has also been a perceivable trend towards more radical tactics of resistance against capitalist development since the late 1980s (Somchai, 2002, pp. 23–24). Massive action of resistance in the Northeast grew

5 Community Culture School has emerged at the end of the 1970s and grew in importance throughout the 1980s and 1990s as opposition to the negative effects of capitalist development. Buddhism and the village culture are seen as its starting points for the achievement of a moral and ethical socio-economic system. The ideas have re-emerged as a neo-localism discourse in the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy of the King (Parnwell, 2006, p. 185).

against projects of public–private partnership, which represented early forms of land-grabbing⁶ and threatened the livelihoods of thousands of villagers. Amongst the issues of public concern were the large-scale ‘reforestation’ endeavors with heavily emaciating eucalyptus (Lohmann, 1991; Pye, 2008) or the construction of the prestigious Pak Mun dam in Ubon Ratchathani (Tegbaru, 1998) which would have destroyed the livelihoods of villagers dependent on fishing in the Mekong river. This protest finally spurred a nationwide protest movement, which cumulated in the foundation of the Assembly of the Poor (Missingham, 2003). The forerunner organization of AAN Isan, the *Small-Scale Farmers’ Association of Northeast Thailand*, was one of the founding members of the Assembly of the Poor that successfully pushed for the integration of sustainable agriculture into national policies and assured funding and political support for alternative development projects, among others the AAN Isan (Somchai, 2002, p. 24; Supa, 2005; Expert D, personal communication, October 2011).

Being a member of the food sovereignty movement *La Vía Campesina*, AAN Isan also embraces the concept of agrarian citizenship, reflected in its identity politics as well as strategies of resistance. The notion of agrarian citizenship is a response to the bias of social and political rights towards property and class relations inscribed in the concept of national citizenship (Wittman, 2009, p. 807). Agrarian citizenship emphasizes the cultural and ecological aspects as parts of political economy. At its center are the culturally and socially established relations of small-scale and subsistence farmers to land and food production. While in mainstream economy land is regarded as an asset or means of production, the agrarian citizenship concept stresses the importance of land for social reproduction of its people and their identity. To identify oneself as peasant implies a reciprocal relation of caring and protection between the land and its people (Desmarais, 2008; Wittman, 2009). This is especially relevant regarding the ecological crisis and global warming, where peasants and food sovereignty movements claim to be able to avert or sooth the ecological crisis. This established relation to land and nature provides a fundamental challenge to capitalist agricultural production.

The following section shows in detail the specific politics of identity of the AAN Isan members and how they relate to the agrarian citizenship concept articulated through the food sovereignty movement. Their economic strategies of resistance are based on their self-understanding as peasants and people of the land and will be elaborated hereafter. The described activities with regard to alternative – moral – forms of production and marketing of rice, herbs, and traditional medicine as well as local agricultural products illustrate the linkages between identity, political and economic struggle and their cultural legitimation.

Identity Politics

Identity and cultural politics within the AAN Isan are a result of a conjunction of Buddhist and vernacular concepts and identification as peasants (or people of the

6 Regarding its manifestation within the current food regime, McMichael (2012) defines land grabbing as a symptom “of a crisis of accumulation in the neoliberal globalization project” (p. 681). Reflecting “changing conditions of accumulation” (McMichael, 2012, p. 681) the land grab as an analytical category is far more than a simple acquisition of land under capitalism.

land; Wiebe as cited in Desmarais, 2008, pp. 139–140) and the emphasis on community. These are based on mutual legitimation. The concepts of community and solidarity economy are understood as deeply rooted within the cultural and religious traditions of the Isan people (Parnwell, 2006; Experts F & D, personal communication, October 2011). Equally, rituals around seed selection and preservation are embedded within Buddhist festivities and are often celebrated on temple or temple premises. The specific peasant relationship to the land and agricultural production is also supported by Buddhist concepts, especially its holistic perception of nature and humanity. Society and human deeds are thus seen as part of nature, not as separated from it (Kaufman, 2012, p. 157; Expert A & B, personal communication, October 2011). In addition, Buddhist philosophy basically defines all phenomena as interwoven and interdependent, reflected in the principle of dependent origination – of cause and effect (Ratankul, 2004). This worldview is widespread in Thailand and forms part of the politics of identity of Northeastern peasants. The aspect of this specific relationship to nature and natural resources is the major characteristic of a peasant and a distinction towards, say, a farmer or an agrarian entrepreneur (Desmarais, 2008, p. 140). The politics of identity therefore play a major role within the food sovereignty discourse and the self-designation as peasant is in itself regarded as a specific act of resistance (Desmarais, 2008, p. 139). In Thailand, the terms *chao na* or *chao ban*⁷ are commonly used when referring to farmers or peasants respectively (Walker, 2012, p. 9). These terms are also explicitly used by AAN Isan members in order to underline the social and cultural implications of being a peasant, for example in connection to the *hed yu hed gin* concept (as explicated below). Also, when speaking English the term peasant is used (Expert A, personal communication, October 2011). The agent's re-identification as peasant is closely related to the concept of agrarian citizenship as defined above and carries strong political implications.

Local Strategies of Resistance

The local strategies of resistance employed by members of AAN Isan mainly address the three contested realms within the present food regime: organic farming, social relations of food production, and health. In all of these, AAN Isan members have found strategies to oppose and at times even challenge the dominant power relations. Subdivided into numerous specialized groups, with personal cross-linkages and multiple memberships, AAN Isan members above all continue to consolidate their socio-economic position as independent peasants and food producers. They explicitly evade any deeper integration into the corporate sector using the instruments of producer cooperatives and alternative marketing strategies. Both are legitimized, at least partly, through the agent's capacity to define what is healthy for human and nature, especially within the realm of organic agriculture, seed breeding and vari-

7 *Chao na* means farmer in Thai, while *chao ban* literally means villager. During the interviews both were used as self-designation, especially in the context of differentiation. However, there is no equivalent discussion regarding the meaning of the term *peasant* and its historical context as in English-language literature (cf. Bernstein, 2006). There is however some political implication to the term *chao na/chao ban* (Walker, 2012). From my own experience, these terms strongly emphasize the self-identification of the people with the locality and their profession, specifically stressing the actors' agency and expertise.

eties, rice milling and production of organic fertilizers, or the producer–consumer relations for increased transparency and trust (Expert A, B, & E, personal communication, October 2011).

Their aspiration to earn a living as small-holders figures most prominently in the data – expressed as a vernacular concept of peasant livelihoods. What they call *hed yu hed gin*⁸ (literally “produce to live, produce to eat”) implies more than subsistence farming; it also includes empowerment and participation in the market, mainly through fair trade and alternative or direct marketing of their products (Expert B, personal communication, October 2011; for the notion of *hed yu hed gin*, see also Parnwell, 2006). This vernacular concept is substantially, i.e. in the way it is perceived by the agents, tied to perceptions of peasant identity and agrarian citizenship and mirrors food sovereignty’s central critique of capitalist agricultural production. Especially in its current regime, agriculture is increasingly unable to provide for livelihood even to the farmers themselves (Desmarais, 2008; Jarosz, 2014; McMichael, 2009). The *hed yu hed gin* concept is the most potent concept of the Isan peasants’ resistance as it specifically points towards the ability of the peasants to fend for themselves. As small-scale and independent farmers cannot compete on the market dominated by large corporate companies and based on social and economic inequality (Shankar et al., 2010, p. 141), their only chance lies in the establishment of alternative marketing circuits where they regain power over the definition of agricultural and food practices (Desmarais, 2008, p. 140). The specific strategies pointed out below are all included within the *hed yu hed gin* concept.

ORGANIC FARMING AND PRODUCER COOPERATIVES

The main strategy of the AAN Isan is the promotion of alternative agriculture, i.e. agricultural practices independent of the mainstream corporate food regime – as far as possible. The issues of safe and clean food were already articulated by Isan peasants in the late 1980s, mainly in consequence of serious health effects caused by untrained and heavy application of chemicals in agriculture (Kaufmann, 2012, p. 175; Panuvet et al., 2012). As a result, organic agriculture opened up as an option for concerned farmers and became a focal point of interest, especially for the early activists. For them, production without chemical input is not only a matter of marketing and sales increase; it is much more an act of resistance, as heavy use of chemicals and high-yield seeds was responsible for growing indebtedness and ecological destruction (Robinson, 2010, p. 8; Somchai, 2008, p. 109). Although organic production has been picked up and heavily co-opted by the corporate sector, mainly for exports to the Global North, only 0.02 percent of total agricultural land in Thailand was farmed organically in 2012 (Sangkumchaliang & Huang, 2012, p. 88). Members of AAN Isan are mainly active in further developing organic farming practices and marketing of their products, however outside the corporate sector. One major instrument of independent production is the establishment of producer cooperatives, such as organic and inorganic rice mills. The Nature Care Club⁹ cooperative rice mill in Na So village, located

8 This is a vernacular expression in the Isan Lao-dialect and does not exist as such in Thai language.

9 The Nature Care Club is one of the autonomous members of the AAN Isan. Some of these groups are

in the Kut Chum district in Yasothon, was one of the first of the AAN Isan and was founded in the late 1980s as a joint initiative of consumers and producers. This early form of collective community supported agriculture is still a very successful model of direct producer and consumer relations and the mill even participates in international trade (Expert A & B, personal communication, October 2011). Certifications and labeling of organic, safe, and healthy food clearly is a corporate strategy (Friedmann, 2005, pp. 230–231) and it is not possible to bypass these (costly) certification procedures on conventional markets. In Thailand, the main organic certification body is the Organic Agricultural Certification Thailand (ACT) which is a private organization accredited by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). ACT is also supported by the Earth Net Foundation, the major promoter of organic production in Thailand (Sangkumchaliang & Huang, 2012, p. 88). The rice mill and its members must apply for a membership with the ACT, however, in order to emphasize the community aspect, the mill has obtained a group guarantee. This social control system is based on the members' mutual controls as to compliance with ACT standards (Od-ompanich, Kittisiri, & Thongnoi, 2007, p. 32). Regarding the club's exports to Europe, representatives of European certification bodies have visited and consulted the mill's board on the subject of their requirements (Od-ompanich et al., 2007, p. 32; Expert H, personal communication, October 2011) The rice mill sets its prices based on principles of fair trade and thus helps its members to avoid the unfavorable dependency relation with rice brokers and keep a bigger share of the rice price for themselves (Expert A & B, personal communication, October 2011), thus addressing one of the main food sovereignty claims. The remnants of the milling process are sold to farmers for the production of organic fertilizers and offer assistance to farmers who want to switch from conventional to organic agriculture (Expert A & C, personal communication, October 2011).

In Thailand, farmers are strongly encouraged by the authorities to use seed varieties developed and distributed by state institutions (Expert B, personal communication, October 2011). This has not only had an adverse effect upon the biodiversity, but also narrows local knowledge about seed selection, farmers' self-determination, and local dietary preferences. In order to elude the necessity to purchase organic seeds from government or other suppliers, the club's members are encouraged to select and preserve their own seed, and organic seeds are also supplied by the club. AAN Isan seed sovereignty groups organize seed fairs, socio-cultural seed exchange events as part of religious rituals, and cooperate with the agricultural department of the University of Ubon Ratchathani (Kaufmann, 2012, p. 169; Robinson, 2010; Expert A & B, personal communication, October 2011). For example, black and red sticky rice, which were supplanted by high-yield and long-grain rice varieties are now being pushed by some AAN Isan members. Peasants are involved in ongoing research about cultivation methods and processing of these rice varieties, which are then successfully marketed in green markets and through the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme. Seed cultivation is partly facilitated as a research project by the Ubon Ratchathani agricultural institute (Expert A & D, personal communication, Octo-

more formal than others. As founder of the cooperative rice mill in NaSo, the Nature Care Club is one of the more formal groups of the AAN Isan. The group existed before the AAN Isan was founded.

ber 2011). By using and breeding their own seeds and elaborating local knowledge through educational workshops, peasants are actively re-establishing agency over their means of production, thus diminishing dependency from state agencies and the agro-industrial sector.

Related to the question of organic production is the more general concern over health. Indeed, strategies of empowerment in food production and supply employed by AAN Isan are closely related to and embedded in the health discourse. Supported by a dedicated medical doctor and the abbot of Kud Chum village, they got involved in activities aimed at the revival of traditional herb and healing practices. Foregoing the establishment of the Nature Care Club, the “healing neighbor” group was founded in 1983. At the same time, traditional herb medicine and healing practices were established at the Kud Chum hospital, which still functions as a center for traditional medicine. The herbal medicine group is still active, and a small village health center has been established at the local temple, where villagers can sell or exchange herbs for ready-made medicines and where planting of herbs, or collection of herbs in the forests, is promoted (Od-ompanich et al., 2007, p. 27; Expert C & F, personal communication, October 2011). Currently, members of the “healing neighbor” group are also engaged in establishing and maintaining relationships with urban consumers and patients. These can call the center and order medicines or herbs, which will then be delivered to the green market in Yasothon province, thus fostering producer–consumer relations and empowering both herb growers and patients. Although this initiative started rather as a self-help activity within the nascent localism discourse, it now exerts impact upon provincial law and distribution of means from health care funds (Expert A, personal communication, October 2011). According to the informants, there is a fixed budget on traditional medicine and therapy in the provincial health care budget and Yasothon province is among the forerunners in combining alternative and mainstream treatment.

ALTERNATIVE MARKETING STRATEGIES

As mentioned above, individual AAN Isan members have recently picked up the community supported agriculture scheme, which is still in an experimental phase. Milling, packaging, and transport are all carried out by the same person, who delivers his rice to a group of friendly consumers in Bangkok (Expert B & D, personal communication, October 2011). Still another form of collective and alternative marketing is the weekly green markets. Selling fresh, local products directly to consumers is one of the most basic strategies of food sovereignty with positive effects for both parties. These markets assure the producers the entire freedom of action as to their choice of offer, the pricing, and marketing. There are no discriminating or unequal relations in the process of distribution and according to the farmers’ experiences, their profit exceeds by far their expectations (Expert B, C, & G, personal communication, October 2011). This is opposed to the widespread income situation of other farmers who are required to advance investments only to later depend on heteronomous market prices, which almost never cover the costs of production (Heft-Neal et al., 2008, p. 47; Shankar et al., 2010). For consumers, it assures a direct and reciprocal relation with the producers and knowledge about the origin and production of their foods.

By selling their own products directly to the consumer, peasants at weekly markets are indirectly but importantly contributing to the education on local biodiversity, especially for urban consumers and city dwellers, which, due to the all-year supply of fresh products, have lost knowledge about the seasonality of foods (Campbell, 2009; Expert C, personal communication, October 2011). Old varieties are promoted and re-introduced at the green markets, such as the already mentioned red and black sticky rice varieties. Some vendors manufacture prepared dishes, especially sweets and desserts, and sell them at the market, thus increasing the promotion of these varieties. Also frogs, insects, and other specifically local foods are fostered. In line with the food sovereignty program, AAN Isan tries to oppose this trend of losing the knowledge about locality and seasonality of foods by emphasizing the relevance and advantages of local and seasonal foods for the consumers and producers alike. Foods produced within the local cultural and ethical embedment is thus ascribed special value and quality (Campbell, 2009).

As was pointed out above, the AAN Isan is actively involved in legitimating its actions through health related discourses and with the help of health relevant actors, e.g. through funding. In Yasothon province many activities have been supported by the district health office – among others the establishment of the green markets. It is here in particular that AAN Isan members can capitalize on health issues because the “diet-related health inequities and environmental externalities generated by the current food system have been contributing to a crisis of legitimacy for the major proponents of such as system” (Dixon, 2009, p. 322). By presenting their products as healthy and cheap (or at least cheaper than average), class-based divergence and the increased inequality in access to high quality foods is challenged (Dixon, 2014, p. 202). Each food regime was based on the social legitimation of specific diets (Dixon, 2009, pp. 324–327), and discourses regarding healthy foods and diets have been part of transformation and consolidation processes of food regimes ever since. One major player here is the Codex Alimentarius, an international organization leading the definition of food and dietary standards. However, according to consumer critique, representatives of agro-food industries and other food-related businesses are often included in the delegacies. The increasing blending of private and public interest in research and development casts further shadows on the decision making within the commission (Bühte & Harris, 2011, pp. 219, 224). Until now, the debate over health effects of food was based in life sciences and dominated by discussions about nutrients, vitamins, and the advantages of animal proteins. But recently food related social movements, increasingly supported by ecologically oriented public health and life science research (Dixon, 2014) were successful in forwarding claims that healthy food should also be socially, ecologically, and culturally sound (Campbell, 2009, p. 313; Dixon, 2014, p. 201; Friedmann & McNair, 2008). As was mentioned earlier, quality certifications and labels are one major characteristic of, and are driven by the corporate food regime, and there is, also in Thailand, a large number of labels for environmentally friendly, healthy, and safe foods (Sangkumchaliang & Huang, 2012, p. 88; Scott, Vandergest, & Young 2009, p. 71). Nevertheless, as Sangkumchaliang & Huang (2012) point out, all those certifications do not really show consumers’ increased trust in organic and socially just relations of production. Apart from ecological effects, most buyers of organic products also attach importance to the support of

and contact with local farmers – needs which are only insufficiently addressed by corporate or national certification bodies (Sangkumchaliang & Huang, 2012, p. 95). From the producers' perspective, organizing peasant markets and building relationships with consumers thus offers a valuable strategy to tackle this crucial discrepancy. Knowing the producer increases consumers' trust in production processes and makes food provenience and quality transparent and communicable.

At this point, the AAN Isan peasants' pricing policy also needs to receive attention, not only as means of marketing but also, and especially, as means of accessibility and affordability of healthy foods. The prices are chosen to be competitive to those at the other fresh market. Selling peasants would go to the fresh market and find out what prices were demanded for specific products only to offer their products at a cheaper price. Own input – mainly the labor necessary to mend the garden and collect the fruits and vegetables, or the time spent at the market – was not calculated (Expert G, personal communication, October 2011).

CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced food sovereignty activities in Yasothon province, Northeast Thailand, using the example of the Alternative Agriculture Network Isan as set against the analysis of the Thai context of the global food regime. Food regime is not understood here as a static concept but rather as fluent, dynamic, and relational. As its participants are not static objects without agency, so the regime too is in a constant process of transformation and consolidation. The paper's objective was to identify characteristics of the current food regime along which the AAN Isan activities could be analyzed with respect to their food sovereignty relevance. The global food regime as a set of exclusive and dominant relationships around food production and supply has very diverse local manifestations with at times severe effects especially for small-scale and independent farmers but also for consumers. The article has shown how small-scale producers in Northeast Thailand attain and maintain independence through a set of specific local strategies of resistance. Aiming primarily at evading the corporate sector and hence its manifold dependence relations, these strategies have mainly local effects; they are however also globally embedded. Such embedment is given in part through the global structure of its opponents and partly through its linkages to the transnational or global struggle of the food sovereignty movement.

The paper has examined AAN Isan strategies of producer cooperatives, organic farming and seed sovereignty, and alternative marketing. Each of these provides the peasants with possibilities to refrain from the corporate sector and its often exploitative relations, but at the same time to take part in the market, thus being able to earn a living. There is a clear linkage between the practices, the peasants' self-identification, and their cultural and religious embedment. The center of social activities, such as seed exchange fairs or moral economy is often the local religious center – the temple and local activities are often supported by involved monks. All AAN Isan strategies are interdependent as the members' focus on food and seed sovereignty covers the entire production and supply chain – from organization of means of production, over production processes, up to marketing strategies. Although organic certifica-

tions and labeling cannot be bypassed when offering their products at conventional markets (Scott et al., 2009, p. 71), it is the framework of agrarian citizenship which provides ethical and moral standards of production rather than official certification bodies. The specific politics of identity – the self-designation as people of the land and people of the village – and therewith associated social and ecological responsibility stressed by the food sovereignty movement are central to the AAN Isan members' self-understanding. Apart from the moral and ethical implications of the agrarian citizenship concept which call for a holistic understanding of nature and natural resources (Desmarais, 2008, p. 140), health discourse has shown to function prominently as a means of social legitimation of the peasants' struggle. Here, the actors especially pick up the mismatch between the certification and labeling constraints on the part of producers and the lacking trust and transparency of production processes perceived by consumers (Sangkumchaliang & Huang, 2012). Producers therefore stress their cultural relation to land, as generalized in the agrarian citizenship concept, but which is deeply ingrained in their Buddhist beliefs and the principle of interdependence of all phenomena (Ratanakul, 2004). By pointing out their very own specific competence herein, the peasants are building relationships with consumers and by directly marketing their products they are able to bypass the certifications and meet the demands for more transparency. Their claim that the peasants' social relations of production are best suited to produce healthy and socially and ecologically responsible food is increasingly supported by ecologically oriented public health research.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexandra Heis finished her MA in International Development Studies at the University of Vienna in 2013. The article is based on research for her diploma thesis examining the peasant activities from the solidarity economy angle. Her focus is on alternative development paradigms, social movements, and political economy analysis.

► Contact: alexandraheis@hotmail.com