

## A Note on Terminology for Bamboo and its Use in the Mlabri, a Hunter-gatherer Group in Thailand

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本稿は、タイに住む狩猟採集民ムラブリにおける竹の分類と利活用について記述する。先行研究において竹の一種を意味する語彙は5種報告があったが、本稿では8種の語彙を確認し、それぞれの特徴と用法をインタビューと参与観察から記述した。また、ムラブリ語の動植物に関する語彙を、「総称を持つか否か」、及び「閉じた系か開いた系か」の2点によって、3タイプに分類した。その結果、「竹」のみが総称を持たない、閉じた系のタイプであることが判明した。この事実は、ムラブリ文化と竹が密接な関係にあることの傍証といえる。今後はムラブリ語と学名の照合と各々の特徴を科学的に記述し、その利活用との関連について分析を行う必要があるだろう。

Keyword : bamboo, Mlabri, terminology, hunter-gatherer, Thailand

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this note is to describe the bamboo usage in the Mlabri, a hunter-gatherer group in northern Thailand and northwestern Laos. *Mla* means "human (technically only the Mlabri)" and *bri* means "the forest", so *Mlabri* means literally "the forest people" in their language, which belongs to Khmuic branch of Austroasiatic language family. This tribe name, however, was hardly appeared in any area until quite recently especially because they have been called a different well-known name, *Phi Tong Luang* ('Spirits of Yellow Leaves'). The Mlabri used to be an mysterious group; as soon as they hear outsiders coming over, they would instantly leave their house, which was made of bamboo stems and banana leaves, and then escape into the forest. Only thing outsiders could see was the abandoned house, whose roof's leaves had turned yellow. That is why the Mabri is called '*Spirits of Yellow Leaves*'. (cf. Bernatzik 1951)

It is no need to say that bamboo is fundamental material of human society. For the Mlabri, of course, this resource is significantly essential and versatile: building houses to sleep in, cooking to eat, making tools for hunttin games and gather materials in the forest. Their traditional knowledge to utilize bamboo in various ways, however, is rapidly disappearing due to the radical change of the environment and economical situation among them. The separation of the Mlabri and the forest was induced by the national policy of the Thai government particularly at the end of 20th century and their sedentarization in Thailand has completely achieved now, which brings about great changes in their life but at the same time causes lots of unprecedented social problems in their life (Long, Long, Waters 2013, Nimonjiya 2017). The rupture of cultural knowledge inheritance in the Mlabri is also attributed to the separation from their former vital resource and severe deforestation.

Because of the uniqueness of them in this area, the Mlabri has been studied by relatively a large number of researchers. Still, even though it is deeply embedded in their culture, only a few scholars have turned their interest to their usage of bamboo. Therefore, our research is the first study to set out to describe the knowledge how to use bamboo by the Mlabri.

This paper is basically based on the survey conducted by us with two Mlabri men, Mr. Long and Mr. Chalochay, in December 2017 in the forest near Huay Yuak village, Maekaning district, Wiangsa city, Nan province, Thailand.

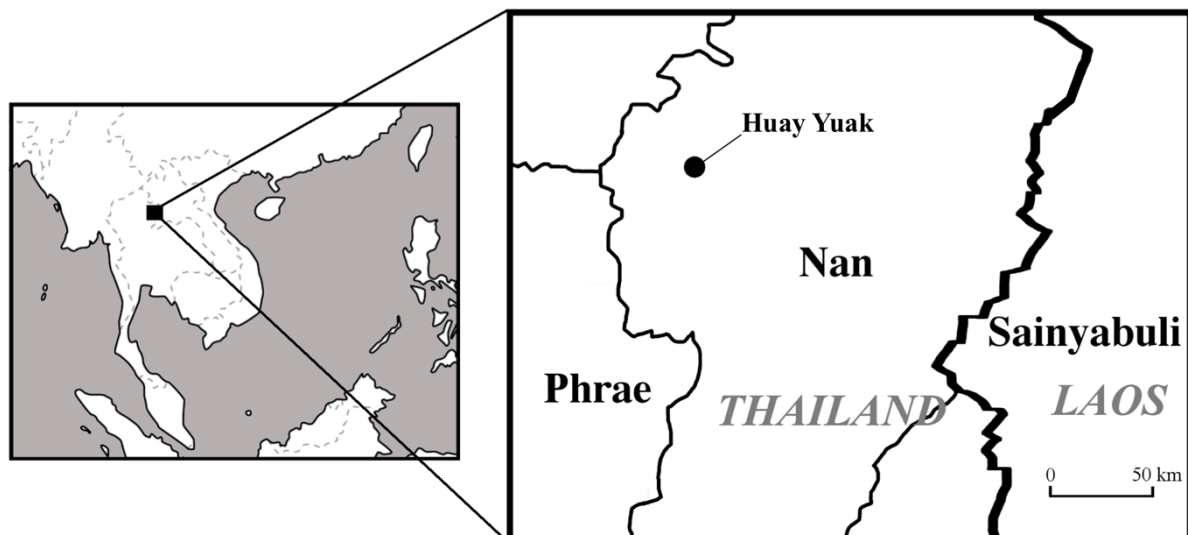


Figure 1: Huay Yuak villedge in Thailand

## 2. Previous researches

As far as we know, there are only two academic studies in terms of bamboo use in the Mlabri, that is, Pookajorn et al. (1992) and Trier (2008).

Pookajorn et al. (1992) is an interdisciplinary research on Mlabri, including anthropology, linguistics, biology, and so on. Even though the scope of this book is quite large, you can find only one sentence about bamboo as below;

*Mlabri makes extensive use of bamboos such as for water container, food storage, honey storage, and as cooking utensils.* (Pookajorn et al. 1992: 193)

Trier (2008) is the most comprehensive study on Mlabri culture so far, especially on their spiritual world. Even though the main purpose is to describe their spiritual culture, material culture is also well-described. As for bamboo, however, they just show a small incomplete list of them as table 1 shows:

Table 1: Bamboo names in Trier (2008)

Name in Mlabri	Characteristic	Usage
<b>tok</b>	- big bamboo	- support beams
<b>dəlaw</b>	(no statement)	- wind screen - poles - cooking pots
<b>tr.luu</b>	- big bamboo	- cooking
<b>lal traŋ</b>	- big bamboo	- container
<b>mol laŋ</b>	(no statement)	- cook rice

As we have seen, it could be concluded that no published study has shown sufficient information on the bamboo usage in the Mlabri. In order to fill the gap, we describe the characteristics and usage of bamboo in more comprehensive way in the following section.

### 3. Terminology for bamboo and its usage

Firstly, it should be noted that, as far as we have investigated, there is no generic term for bamboo, whereas other famous materials such as trees and wild yams have the cover terms for themselves. Additionally, tree terminology should be considered as an open class, that is, when you add some words after the general term for trees, *lam*, it will be a new tree name like *lam lmbo?*. On the other hand, yam and bamboo are closed classes: there are restricted sets of words for specific kinds and it is impossible to coin any new word to the set.

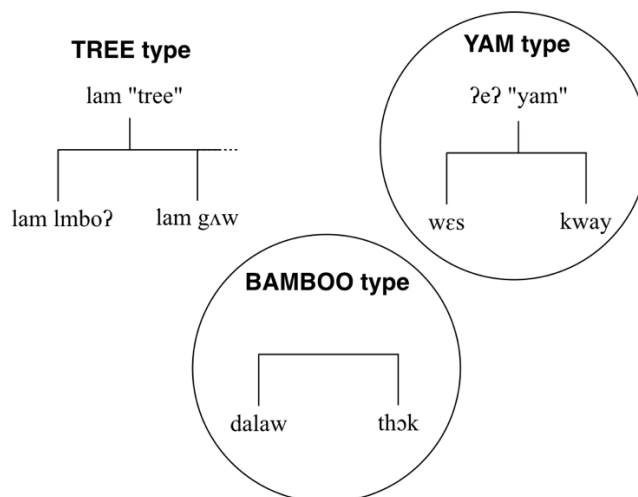


Figure 2: Three types of taxonomy in Mlabri

According to whether it has its generic term and open class, plant and animal names in Mlabri can be classified into three groups as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Criteria for taxonomy types

	Generic term	Closed
<b>TREE type</b>	YES	YES
<b>YAM type</b>	YES	NO
<b>BAMBOO type</b>	NO	NO

In this sense, bamboo is special because there is no other thing in BAMBOO type, whilst TREE type and YAM type appear in other materials for example stone (*kep*), vines (*mɔʔ*) and fruits (*pleʔ*) are TREE type and crabs (*gas*) and grass (*hɲiy.hɲiy*) are YAM type.

According to our survey, at least 8 names of bamboo exist in Mlabri language. Table 3 provides an account of their characteristics and usage.

Table 3: Bamboo names in Mlabri

	characteristic	usage
<b>dalaw</b>	long inter node, light weight, good smell, very thin	containers for cooking rice, poles of a shelter, baskets
<b>thək</b>	hard, many branches, almost no cavity in branches	smoking pipes,
<b>trruʔ</b>	light weight, thin	baskets, containers for water, poles of a shelter,
<b>drthəŋ</b>	long, thin	poles of a shelter
<b>mrrəŋ</b>	many leaves	containers for cooking, hats
<b>hlwɯp.jəŋ</b>	good smell	containers for cooking, eating bamboo shoots
<b>sukwək</b>	hard, short	smoking pipes
<b>micin/milay</b>	hard, good smell	poles of a shelter, smoking pipes, eating bamboo shoots

*Dalaw* is a bamboo which has long internodes, light weight, and good smell. Because of its good characteristics, it is the most common bamboo in the Mlabri: when we ask about bamboos, *dalaw* is frequently given as the first example of bamboo and actually used in most various ways, such as containers for cooking, baskets, and poles of a shelter. *Dalaw* should correspond to *dəlaw* in Trier (2008).

*Thək* is often used for mouthpieces of smoking pipes because it has a lot of thin branches (*juł.jəl* in Mlabri) which has only a small cavity inside. This is supposed to match with *tok* of Trier (2008).

*Trru?* has thin skin, so the Mlabri use *trru?* to make tools such as baskets (*pum*), containers (*hlek*). *Trru?* is also used for poles of shelters because it has so light that the Mlabri can carry them easily even though it is cut long. This type should be identified with *tr.luu* in Trier (2008).

*Drthay* is one of the most common kind among the Mlabri probably because it is easy to find it in the forest thanks to its length. It grows really high and fast so the Mlabri often use it to make their shelters.

*Mrray* has a distinctive character in their leaves: it is easily identified by its leaves. The Mlabri use their leaves to make hats. This bamboo also used for cooking containers. This is referred as *mol laŋ* in Trier (2008).

*Hluŋ.jaŋ* is always referred as having a good smell. Because of the scent, they are used for cooking containers. In addition, the Mlabri like to eat bamboo shoots and *hluŋ.jaŋ*'s bamboo is regarded as one of the most favorable types of bamboo to eat.

*Sukwak* has hard skin and grows not so big and thick, so this bamboo is fit to make smoking pipes (*wɔk kək*).

*Micin* (or *milay*) is hard and not big so it is used when the Mlabri make shelters or smoking pipes. Its smell is also good so the Mlabri like to eat its bamboo shoots.

#### 4. Further Goals

This paper set out to describe the terms for the different types of bamboos in Mlabri language and how to use the material in their society. It is also showed that there are at least 8 words for specific bamboo types and no generic term. The findings of this research support the idea that bamboo is vital in Mlabri society as previous researches have stated. Considerably more work, of course, will need to be done especially in order to determine correspondence between Mlabri lexicon and scientific names for bamboos.

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