

**BEING LAHU IN A THAI SCHOOL:
AN INQUIRY INTO ETHNICITY, NATIONALISM, AND SCHOOLING**

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Dedication

To Natcharat and Damiaan,

May this project serve to make your lives more fulfilling.

Acknowledgements

This journey was possible because of the guidance and contributions of other people. To begin, I thank Dr. Gay Garland Reed, my Chairperson and advisor. From our first encounter five years ago, Dr. Reed has encouraged me to pursue my interests in Lahu people, Thailand, and education. When I thought the geographical distance between Hawaii and Thailand was too great, she guided me to the necessary bridges. Her readings and comments on the initial drafts of this dissertation allowed for a significantly better product. Much more than a guide on the road to scholarship, Dr. Reed has shared her wisdom of teaching and, more importantly, being human. Thank you for being my mentor.

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Abstract

At the heart of the transformation of Thailand from a Buddhist Kingdom into a modern nation state was the “invention” of a Thai national identity, which was spread throughout the country using a state-run education system. Some groups of people, however, were considered so distinct that they were unable to adopt the national heritage; as a result, they were regarded as ‘non-Thai’ ethnic minorities and occupied marginal positions within the nation.

In northern Thailand, the Lahu are one such ethnic minority group. During the past 60 years, many Lahu have attended Thai schools. While scholars have noted that the primary aim of Thai schools has been the national integration of a diverse population, little research has been conducted on the experiences of ethnic minorities within this context.

The primary purpose of this study was to give voice to Lahu individuals by inquiring into and describing their lived experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. Specific attention was given to participants’ interpretation of the significance of their ethnicity during their time in secondary school.

In order to achieve this purpose, a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach was employed. From June to September 2012, I recruited and interviewed ten Lahu individuals who attended Banrongrian Secondary School.

There were three common themes among most of the participants. First, most participants attended primary schools founded for ethnic minority students in the mountains. As a result, during secondary school, they were ill-prepared and saw themselves as having inferior knowledge as compared to their Thai classmates. Next, most participants spoke Lahu as their native language. As Thai was the language used in school, several participants experienced

academic and social challenges. Lastly, all participants believed that their Thai peers looked down on them because of their ethnicity.

The findings suggest two conclusions. First, being ethnically Lahu was a difference that made a significant difference in participants' experiences of school. Second, policies of national integration contributed to the marginalization of the participants as ethnic minority students in the context of school.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I begin the first chapter of this dissertation by providing background information about ethnic minorities, the Lahu people, and schools in Thailand. As this is one of the primary focuses of Chapter Two, at this point my discussion is brief and limited. I then identify the purpose and problem of the study, outline the research questions, and explain the significance of the study. To finish the chapter, I overview the dissertation as a whole.

Brief Background

Northern Thailand is home to a variety of diverse ethnic minority groups and their unique cultures. Included are the Lahu people, who reside throughout most of the countries of mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China. During the past 60 years, many Lahu people living in Thailand have attended schools founded by the Thai state. In general, the primary purpose of education within these schools has been to assimilate the Lahu into the Thai nation. Researchers have noted that the national integration and assimilation of a diverse population, including the Lahu, has been one of the primary aims of state schools in Thailand since the late 1800's (Keyes, 1991). However, little research has been conducted on the schooling experiences of Lahu persons from their perspectives, the general purpose of this study.

Purpose of the Study

Specifically, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to give voice to Lahu individuals by inquiring into and describing their lived experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. Specific attention was given to participants' interpretation of the significance of their ethnicity during their time in secondary school. In other words, this study focused on the perspectives of Lahu individuals and valued their particular viewpoints.

Statement of the Problem

In general, Lahu people, like many of the ethnic minority groups in Thailand, occupy a marginalized position in Thai society. In Chapter Two of this dissertation I attend to many of the historical conditions that contributed to this marginalization; in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, I present the findings and discussion of my inquiry into the experiences of Lahu individuals, as members of a marginalized ethnic group, in Thai schools within the broader context of Thai society. Importantly, while I provide recommendations for educators toward the end of the dissertation, this study, in itself, did not seek primarily to provide a specific solution to the marginalization of ethnic minorities in Thailand. Rather, I sought to inquire into and describe the complex secondary schooling experiences of Lahu persons, as marginalized ethnic individuals and subjects of assimilationist policies. This being said, it is my long-term hope that through coming to a better understanding of the experiences of Lahu people, both as individuals and as a group, in Thai schools, we can begin to transform the social conditions at the heart of the marginalization of ethnic minorities.

From 2005 to 2007 I had the privilege of living in a Lahu community in northern Thailand. It was during this time that I also met my wife, Natcharat Juelsgaard, a Lahu woman, whose love of her culture has influenced me a great deal. We have frequently discussed the place of Lahu people, as a marginalized group, within Thai society. More specifically, our conversations often focused on those students, including family members, who were unable to complete secondary school. I often wondered about the social structures and individual choices that served to prevent these students from continuing their schooling. As Natcharat is a graduate from a well-known university in Thailand, we also discussed her own experiences in Thai schools. Often our conversations focused on her awareness of herself as a Lahu women in Thai

society and how she learned to navigate differing socio-cultural contexts during her schooling. These casual conversations were influential in shaping the study presented in this dissertation.

Research Question

There was one main question, and two sub-questions, in this study:

1. What meaning do ten Lahu individuals ascribe to their experience of being an ethnically Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School?
 - a. From participants' perspectives, in what situations, if any, did their ethnicity play a significant role in being a student at Banrongrian Secondary School?
 - b. What was the impact of policies of national integration and assimilation on the schooling experiences of participants?

Significance of the Study

As stated earlier, researchers have recognized the powerful role that Thai schools have played in the nation's goals of national integration and assimilation (Keyes, 1991). However, there has been little research inquiring into the perspectives of Lahu individuals and the meanings they have derived from their schooling experiences in light of these goals. Besides this particular contribution, this study contributes, more generally, to the field of education in at least four other ways. First, this study sheds light on some important aspects involved in the relationship between schools and society; in doing so, particular attention is given to the roles of schools in society and the influence these roles have on individuals' experiences of schooling. Next, this study deepens our understanding of issues related to the politics of education. As I explain later in this dissertation, the marginalization of ethnic minorities in Thailand is intertwined with the creation of a Thai national identity and policies of national integration. Thus, this research discusses relevant power relations, especially between ethnic minorities and

the majority population, in the context of education and school. Third, this study contributes to our understanding of issues related to diversity and education. As the Lahu are an ethnic minority group in Thailand, their particular experiences of schooling can help us to develop a deeper understanding of schooling in diverse societies. Lastly, the process of assimilation as it occurs in schools is complex. Recognizing this, the study helps us to understand the process of assimilation based on the lived experiences and perspectives' of students who were immersed in this process.

Overview of the Dissertation

Five chapters make up this dissertation. In Chapter One, I have included some brief background information, the purpose of the study, the statement of the problem, the research questions, and the significance of the study. In Chapter Two, a review of the literature, I focus on four relevant areas. First, I discuss three theoretical topics that help us to understand the broader contexts of education. I then present the significant historical aspects of the complex relationship between ethnic minorities, as groups, and the Thai state. In the third part of Chapter Two, I continue to examine the broad contexts of education by focusing on some important historical developments of the state education system in Thailand. Lastly, I attempt to “take a step back” from some of the taken-for-granted concepts that are at the heart of this study. In widening our lens, I consider some of the complexities involved in researching and writing about “a people”, “ethnic” groups, “the Tai,” “the Thai,” and “the Lahu.” Chapter Three describes the research methodology employed in the study. I begin with an overview of some of the relevant aspects of qualitative research methods, in general, and a phenomenological approach, in particular. The collection and analysis of data are then presented in detail. I end the chapter by concentrating on important issues in performing cross-cultural research, my role as a researcher,

the trustworthiness of the study, and the limitations. In Chapter Four, I present my findings in three main parts. First, organizing the writing participant-by-participant, I describe, using verbatim examples, each individual's experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School. In the second part of the chapter, I present a composite description of the ten participants' experiences. In other words, I describe the *common lived experience* of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School. In Part Three of the chapter, I describe two additional themes that emerged during the study; these themes were unique in that their relationships to participants' ethnicity remained unclear throughout the project. Lastly, I return to the research questions and discuss the findings in relationship to the literature in Chapter Five. I conclude by looking at some implications for educators and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter is divided into four parts. I open with a general theoretical discussion in three topic areas: (a) education as a political act, (b) the relationships between education, state formation, and hegemony, and (c) assimilation. In examining the literature related to education as a political act, I draw heavily from the critical perspective of Michael Apple. Then, using primarily the work of Andy Green, I examine the influence of the process of state formation on the role of schools in society. The applicability of the literature to Thai schools is woven throughout these two sections. Lastly, in looking at assimilation, I focus on the importance of considering the socio-cultural context of this process. A discussion of these three relevant theoretical topics is helpful in developing our understanding of the relationship between ethnic minorities and state education in the context of Thailand.

In Part Two, I present some of the relevant aspects of the complex relationship between ethnic minorities and the Thai state that have been discussed in the literature by researchers focusing on highland minority groups in Thailand. To begin, I briefly discuss the place of highland peoples in the Buddhist kingdoms that existed in the area before the early nineteenth century. I then turn to the significant changes in the relationship between highland peoples and the state that began in the late nineteenth century and continued throughout the early twentieth century with the transformation of the Siamese Buddhist kingdom into a modern nation-state. Next, as much of the present day relationship between highlanders and the Thai state has developed since the 1950's, I examine some of the significant state interventions that have come to shape the place of highlanders in Thailand since that time. Lastly, I describe some of the possible reasons for a greater acceptance of diversity in Thailand during the past two decades. It is hoped that in examining both the roots and subsequent developments of the relationship

between highland ethnic minority groups and the Thai state we can come to a comprehensive understanding of the relevant socio-cultural contexts in which Lahu individuals have attended Thai schools.

Part Three consists of a discussion of the general historical context of education in Thailand. Specifically, I relay important topics in the literature that highlight the significance of national integration and national identity in Thai schools. I then move into looking specifically at the Thai state's founding of schools for ethnic minority groups in the north. While there is little published information available regarding the history of these schools, I consider some of their primary aims and purposes. Lastly, I take a look at three cases of the Thai state using education as a means to assimilate minority groups.

In the final part of this chapter, I consider some of the many complexities involved in researching and writing about "a people", "ethnic" groups, "the Tai," "the Thai," and "the Lahu." In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how many of the taken-for-granted categories and concepts that organize much of our thought in this study, are "invented." Moreover, these categories and concepts are relatively recent in history, emerging primarily in the context of modern nation-states. Becoming aware of the genealogies of the social constructions that characterize much of the present-day social landscape of Thailand, I once again emphasize the importance of situating education within broad and diverse social, cultural, historical and political contexts.

Part One: Theoretical Background

Education as a Political Act

In the 1970's critical education scholars began to articulate a perspective on the role of schools in society and the relationship of schools to the broader political, economic, historical and socio-cultural contexts in which they were created and continued to exist. Many important

concepts and perspectives have emerged from this work. In this section, I highlight the importance of viewing education as a political act, thinking relationally, and engaging in the process of repositioning, all of which are relevant to the study of Lahu students' experiences in Thai schools.

Critical education scholar Michael Apple (1990, 2010) has emphasized the importance of viewing education as inherently political in nature. To speak of education as political means acknowledging that “education is caught up in the real world of shifting and unequal power relations” (Apple, 1990, p. viii). One of the many examples Apple (1990) uses to deepen our understanding of education as a political act involves the choices inherent in creating a curriculum to be taught in schools. To decide that some groups' knowledge and culture are worthy of being passed on to future generations while other groups' knowledge and culture are not, reveals important aspects regarding power relations in society.

Further articulating education as an inherently political act, Apple (2010) claims that we must think *relationally* and engage in the process of *repositioning*. To think *relationally* means to recognize that “understanding education requires that we situate it back both into the unequal relations of power in the larger society and into the realities of dominance and subordination – and the conflicts – that are generated by these relations” (p. 14). Thinking *relationally* allows us to examine education as a political tool that can be used for purposes of domination, or serving one group's interests. As Collin and Apple (2010) write regarding schools in the United States during the industrial era, “[p]ublic schools, then, came to play central roles in the production of both high-status technical/administrative knowledge and the workers who manipulated this knowledge in more-or-less routinized ways for the corporate interests of the industrial economy” (p. 31). The end result then was that schools served to (re)produce the dominant relations

“necessary” for the functioning of the industrial economy. Viewing education, in general, and schools, in particular, *relationally* as a political act, then, requires that we examine the political, economic, historical and socio-cultural contexts within which dominant relations in education exist.

To engage in the process of *repositioning* “we need to see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive conditions” (Apple, 2010, 14-15). In repositioning we recognize that while the common good embraces all members of society, the poor, oppressed, and marginalized should be given preferential concern or attention. The needs of those who are dispossessed and oppressed are to be given priority over the desires of those occupying dominant positions in society.

Viewing education as a political act, thinking relationally, and engaging in the process of repositioning allow for a much deeper and complex understanding of being an ethnically Lahu student in a Thai school. As I discuss in detail later in this chapter, Thai schools played important roles in the process of national integration. Schooling was certainly not a neutral act but sought to promote the knowledge and culture of the dominant groups in Thai society. Thinking relationally allows us to see that Thai schools did not operate in a vacuum; rather, schools were both shaped by and served to shape the broader political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts within the country. Lastly, at the center of my project is the process of repositioning. By inquiring into the perspectives of Lahu students, who generally occupy a marginalized position in Thai society, I sought to listen to the voices of those who often find themselves oppressed. Also, I gave particular attention to the agency of the Lahu participants. In doing this, Lahu individuals were not seen simply as objects shaped deterministically by the

social forces around them; rather, they were viewed as active subjects participating in the world and influencing their social context, at least to a minimal extent.

Education, State Formation, and Hegemony

Andy Green (1990) makes the important point that the development of public education systems must be understood in relation to the broader process of state formation. State formation is defined as “the historical process by which the modern state has been constructed ... includ[ing] not only the political and administrative apparatuses of government ... but also the formation of ideologies and collective beliefs which legitimate state power and underpin concepts of nationhood and national ‘character’” (p. 77). Green (1990) employs Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony to develop an understanding of the educational role of the state and the historical beginnings of state education. In this section I focus on some of Green’s insights along with several more important points made by Apple that are helpful in deepening our understanding of how the process of state formations relates to other political aspects of education.

Green (1990), writing about the rise of national education systems in nineteenth-century Europe, asserts that any analysis of state education systems must consider the process of state formation and the political, economic, and social conditions during that historical period. Such a practice resonates with Apple’s idea of thinking relationally in that both demand we situate education in the complex social contexts, and the unequal power relations, that influence educational institutions. Later in this chapter, I situate state schooling in Thailand within the process of state formation and I emphasize how Thai schools played an important role in national integration and the creation of a Thai identity. In addition to that discussion, there are some

important theoretical positions that can further our understanding of the political aspects of Thai schooling.

First, in the context of Europe, Green claims that state sponsored public education was different than any informal education that preceded it in that it was viewed as being universal, applying to all groups in society, and “serving the nation as a whole, or rather, the ‘national interests’ as conceived by the dominant classes in society” (Green, 1990, p. 79). For most of the populace of Thailand up until the late 1800’s, education took place in the family and Buddhist temples. As Thailand entered into the process of state formation, a national education system served to promote a particular conception of Thai identity and a loyalty to the nation among the diverse peoples who found themselves living within the newly created borders of Thailand. State authorities recognized that, in order to achieve national integration, education could not be left in the hands of local Buddhist temples and families, as these had strong local languages and cultures. Education, it was believed, had to be developed from the top downwards, or from Bangkok outward, employing the modern state bureaucracy to create a new social order (Green, 1990, p. 79). Similar to Green’s description of European education systems, the Thai system was seen as responsible for the moral, cultural, political, economic, and social development of the nation. It was designed to erase regional differences between Tai¹ groups within the borders of Thailand, assimilate immigrants, promote a form of Buddhism practiced by state authorities in Bangkok, spread the national, central (Bangkok) Thai language, create a shared national identity and culture, encourage patriotism, form moral disciplines, and disseminate the political and economic beliefs of the dominant classes. In other words, the process of state formation in

¹ In this dissertation, “Tai” is used to refer to people who are presumed to share related languages categorized as the Daic language family. “Thai” is used to refer to people who are citizens of the nation of Thailand.

Thailand was also a process of cultural revolution (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985, p. 3), promoting the culture of the dominant classes, and the education system was at the heart of this process (Green, 1990, p. 79).

Green draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony in explaining how the education system serves to promote particular ideologies and create a 'national character' as well as legitimate state power and unequal power relations in society. While both Green and Gramsci's work is important, the work of Apple is particularly helpful in its articulation of hegemony and the structure of domination present in education. For him, hegemony refers to "an organized assemblage of meanings and practices, the central, effective and dominant systems of meanings, values and actions which are *lived*" (Apple, 1990, p. 5). Hegemony helps to explain how control over culture relates to the perpetuation of unequal power relations in society and the place of education in this process. Control is achieved "by gaining the 'active consent' of the ruled through a continuous process in which their culture is incorporated and reshaped so as to advance the interests of the ruling group" (Apple, 2010, p. 115).

Also, from this perspective, schools are places for the production of knowledge and thus places of ideological conflict. Schools can produce the knowledge of dominant groups; and this knowledge can serve to reproduce unequal power relations in society. However, schools are also places where dominant cultures are resisted and oppositional cultures are promoted that can reshape the dominant culture. Cultural hegemony's domination is never static; rather it is always in a dynamic state where dominant groups, seeking to promote their interests, contend with each other as well as with subordinate groups over the content and shape of hegemony (Apple, 2010, p. 116). The state is seen as an active player in this struggle and is actively involved in trying to meet its own needs as well as the competing demands of different groups in society. What

happens in schools, then, is never determined beforehand and cannot be predicted in any mechanistic fashion. Considering their non-deterministic character, schools are important places where issues relating to power, and thus politics, are played out.

Assimilation

The concept of assimilation has been used to explain the process of cultural change that immigrants experience as they encounter their new, host culture. It has been defined in various ways. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921) defined assimilation as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life” (p. 735). While this classic definition is helpful, it leaves out important issues such as who is required to assimilate, for what purpose, and to what degree (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). More recently, Walter Feinberg and Jonas F. Soltis (2009) defined assimilation as “the process whereby one group, usually a subordinate one, becomes indistinguishable from another, usually a dominant one” (p. 22). Importantly, this definition touches upon the relationships of power that are involved in assimilation. Often, and this is the case in Thailand, the host culture attempts to force the non-assimilated person or group to enter into the mainstream culture. This definition, however, is not without problems; for example, we might question how often a distinct cultural group becomes *indistinguishable* from another as the process of assimilation is often *selective*, an idea I will turn to momentarily. In addition to these two definitions, assimilation has sometimes been viewed as a simple process in which an individual’s or group’s cultural beliefs, practices and values are *replaced* by a set of new cultural beliefs, practices, and values. From this perspective, people are passive recipients of a new culture and assimilation is simply the process of shedding off an old culture and

replacing it with a new one. This process has often been conveyed as a straight-line progression from discrimination endured by the first generation of immigrants to the disappearance of ethnic traits and economic disadvantages by the third generation (Kumaravadivelu, 2008).

Furthermore, this progression is the result of “a natural process by which diverse ethnic groups come to share a common culture and to gain equal access to the opportunity structure of society; that this process consists of gradually deserting old cultural and behavioral patterns in favor of new ones; and that, once set in motion, this process moves inevitably and irreversibly toward assimilation” (Zhou, 1999, p. 196; Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 35). Such an approach, however, does not consider the complexities of human social life nor does it view the individual as an active agent in the assimilation process. All of these problematic definitions stem from the difficulties inherent to understanding and articulating a complex process. There are, however, important components of assimilation described by scholars that are helpful in deepening our understanding of this process; it is to those that I now turn.

Part of understanding assimilation as a complex process involves recognizing that individual learning and adopting of particular cultural practices takes place within wider social contexts. Drawing heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1987), socio-cultural theory recognizes that “the learning of new cultural models is a socially and tool-mediated process constituted in specific socio-cultural and historical contexts and reconstituted as contexts shift” (Monzo & Rueda, 2006, p. 191). Importantly, from this approach, the learning and adopting of aspects of a new culture are not incompatible with the maintenance of aspects of an existing culture. Rather, aspects from two or more cultures can be integrated, often in novel ways (Allendoerfer, 1999), and activated differently depending on the particular social context. Past assimilation models often assumed the presence of only two cultures; however, at present, especially with the

availability of international media, individuals may frequently encounter three or more cultures, complicating the assimilation process even more.

Adding to the complexities associated with socio-cultural contexts just described are some of difficulties with the notion of culture itself. Cultures and social contexts are dynamic. Not only do individuals move between differing socio-cultural contexts, but the contexts themselves are constantly undergoing change. In addition, cultures are not discrete phenomena. It can, at times, be difficult to categorize an individual's actions as fastened to a particular culture because the borders indicating the end of one culture and the beginning of another are not always clearly demarcated. Lastly, there is often significant variation within a culture that serves to add to the complexities of assimilation (Monzo & Rueda, 2006).

The assimilation process is also selective or interactive. By this, I mean primarily that the individuals involved in the process exercise a sense of individual agency. Individuals actively make choices in which they accept and reject the cultural practices they encounter. In other words, the dominant culture does not automatically shape the life of an individual; rather, individuals exercise agency in their interactions with the broader social context. In addition, individuals can influence the social and cultural contexts they encounter. Summarizing the importance of agency, Monzo and Rueda (2006) write:

Although cultural models provide a framework with which to view the world, not all individuals socialized to a particular culture enact all cultural models learned, nor do those who enact them do so in the same ways. People construct their own perceptions of the cultural practices with which they grow up and may employ them, reject them, or transform them. They may also ideologically learn to believe they are appropriate but not enact them for diverse reasons. (Monzo & Rueda, 2006).

The last concept I want to touch on with respect of assimilation is what Rumbaut (2008) has termed *reactive ethnicity*. The main idea is that when ethnic minority groups experience discrimination, the result is that members of that ethnic group often feel the need to retain their

own cultural heritage and resist adopting the host culture. In other words, discrimination encourages both separation from the mainstream culture and the strengthening of one's own culture (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 241).

Importantly for this study, the concept of assimilation has classically been applicable to recent immigrants and many Lahu families have been in Thailand for over 120 years. This being said, the Lahu as a group have been seen by many majority Thai's as recent illegal immigrants; in addition, some participants had adopted this view, seeing the Lahu as entering Thailand from Myanmar within the past 30 or 40 years. Even though the Lahu may not, in fact, be recent immigrants, the concept of assimilation is significant to the extent that their identity in Thailand is fastened to that of immigrant and outsider.

Part Two: Ethnic Minorities and the Thai State

At present, there are approximately one million people (Toyota, 2005) living in the mountainous border areas of northern Thailand. Most of these peoples have been subsumed under the category of 'hill tribe' (*chao khao*), a term created by state officials and anthropologists in the 1950's in order to classify approximately nine diverse non-Tai ethnic groups – Lahu, Karen, Hmong, Lisu, Akha, Yao, Lua, H'Tin. And Khamu. They have also been called mountain peoples, highlanders, uplanders, and ethnic minorities.

The relationship between these highland ethnic minority groups and the state in Thailand is complex and can be approached from a variety of perspectives (See Hanks & Hanks 2001; Jonsson, 2005; Toyota, 2005). In this section, I present some of these perspectives and examine the relevant historical aspects of the complex relationship between ethnic minorities and the Thai state that have been discussed in the literature by researchers focusing on highland minority groups in Thailand.

Precolonial Relations: Strong Centers, Frontiers, and Human Differences

In much of precolonial² mainland Southeast Asia, polities such as those at Ayutthaya did not concern themselves primarily with geographical boundaries limiting their territories. They were polities with strong centers separated by frontiers rather than borders (Keyes, 2006). Groups of peoples living on the frontiers of different empires often entered into tributary relationships, sometimes with two or more dominant centers, as subject communities (Keyes, 1989; Toyota, 2005). Regarding this, Toyota (2005) writes, “at the overlapping margins of Siam and its adjacent kingdoms, the coexistence of multiple loyalties to several overlords of the peripheral minorities was common and was accepted by the ruling state” (p. 113). She continues, “loyalty at the border area had always been fluid and fluctuating according to the shifts in power within the autonomous tributary relationship” (p. 113). While centralized political authorities often desired to bring frontier peoples under their authority, they lacked sufficient technology and manpower to do so (Keyes, 2006). Thus, the diverse subject communities at the peripheries, which included those who lived in the mountains, uplands, or highlands, were frequently granted a degree of semi-autonomy by the more dominant centers located in the lowlands or valleys.

In addition to different conceptions of territoriality and political organization, those living during the precolonial era viewed human diversity differently. Human differences in mainland Southeast Asia were primarily matters of either Sinitic (Chinese) or Buddhist civilization, for those living within the centers of dominant polities, and locality and kinship, for those living in the peripheries. Importantly, differences between groups of peoples were not based on notions of race, ethnicity, or spoken language, all of which came to be fundamental categories marking

² Unlike many of the neighboring nations, Thailand was never colonized. However, it faced many of the same colonial pressures and changed significantly as a result.

human differences since the nineteenth century (Keyes, 2006). I discuss further the categories of race, ethnicity and language below; here, however, it is important to note that the Siamese living within Buddhist kingdoms viewed themselves as people of the “civilized” center (*muang*) and the people living in frontier areas as “wild” (*pa*). From the perspectives of the frontier peoples, for the most part, notions of locality (e.g. members of a particular village in contrast to another village) and kinship (i.e. family lineages and clans) served to distinguish groups of people from one another (Keyes, 2006).

C. Pat Giersch (2001) and Charles F. Keyes (2006) have spoken of the frontier, the space in which highlanders tended to dwell in the precolonial era, as “the middle ground.” Borrowing this analytical concept from Richard White (1991), a historian of Native American-European relations, Giersch and Keyes claim the frontiers of Southwestern China and mainland Southeast Asia were places “in between” cultures, peoples and empires. In these shared frontier spaces, “people from diverse backgrounds negotiated commercial, political, and social relationships, thus creating new patterns of interaction” (Giersch, 2001, p. 31). For example, in Southwest China, schools designed to introduce imperial values to frontier people were adapted to meet local requirements with the help of the locals themselves. One result of this “middle ground” was that, from the perspectives of the dominant centers, which often desired uniformity, loyalty and control, political, economic, and social structures were often compromised (Keyes, 2006). In addition, the cultural differences between groups of people were often blurred due to marriage, moving villages, day-to-day trade, labor exchanges, learning local and imperial languages and much more.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, with the forces of colonialism, Western powers began to map Southeast Asia and draw boundaries between what were becoming distinct nation-

states. The conception of polities as strong, dominant centers with loose frontier boundaries was replaced by a conception of polities as nation states with precise and legally recognized borders. Such a transformation in notions of territoriality significantly altered political, economic, and social relationships and conceptions of human diversity in the area (Keyes, 2006). Highland peoples, who previously moved freely in frontier spaces and often pledged loyalty to multiple polities, were forced to cease moving across newly created national boundaries as well as pledge their allegiance to a single nation. Furthermore, an exclusive dichotomy between upland (*doi*) and lowland (*muang*) peoples, revealed in the discourse of state authorities, became a fundamental characteristic of the social landscape. It is to these transformations that I now turn.

Making a Modern Nation-State and ‘Non-Thai’ Ethnic Minorities

The new notions of territoriality that emerged in the colonial era were a fundamental part of the transformation of Siam from a Buddhist kingdom into a modern nation-state. This transformation fundamentally changed the social landscape and, more specifically, the relationship between highland ethnic minorities and the state. In this section, I discuss some of the significant changes in this social landscape focusing on the creation of a Thai national identity and the “scientific” classification of peoples, two processes at the roots of the present day marginalization of highlanders.

Creating Thai national identity

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Siamese authorities in Bangkok were confronted by the colonizing powers of the British and the French, they saw themselves as the authority of a newly demarcated geographical territory yet they lacked

authority over the diverse peoples who found themselves within the “geo-body”³ of Siam. In order to assert their authority and control the people and places within the borders, tributary relationships, as described previously, were undone and semi-autonomous regions were integrated into a unified nation-state. The reforms and expansion of the Siamese government into provincial areas outside of central Siam was, at times, met with resistance and revolt. Recognizing that ruling by military force alone would be unwise and, perhaps, impossible, Siamese authorities focused on the creation of a national culture and identity that would integrate the peoples of Siam’s disparate regions⁴ into a unified nation and allow for control by the centralized state (Keyes, 1987).

Keyes (1987) writes that Thai national culture and identity, or Thai nationalism, “represents a selective reinterpretation of tradition and the promotion of this reinterpretation as being the tradition of all ‘Thai’ in common” (p. 57). This reinterpretation was built on three pillars: the Thai nation, which included the people, land, and language; Thai Buddhism; and, the Thai King, or monarchy (Keyes, 1987).⁵ A state-controlled system of education came to play a central role in promoting these three pillars, along with a national language, history, songs, and symbols all of which were intended to erase regional or local differences for the purposes of national integration. Thai national culture and identity were broadly conceived so as to include

³ Thongchai’s (1994) term “geo-body” emphasizes that Thailand was not only a bordered territory or space, but that it became a concept or an idea as well. Thus, for the people living within the borders, Thailand, as a nation, would eventually become “a source of pride, loyalty, love, passion, bias, hatred, reason and unreason.”

⁴ The regions included the “Siamese heartland of central Thailand, the Lanna Thai principalities of what is today northern Thailand, the Lao and some Khmer and Khmer-related domains in northeastern Thailand, and the sultanate of Pattani as well as some other Malay-speaking areas in southern Thailand” (Keyes, 1987, p. 56).

⁵ Interestingly, in schools throughout Thailand, children are taught that the three colors making up the Thai flag represent the three pillars of Thai national identity. The red represents the nation, the white represent Buddhism, and the blue represents the King.

over 85 percent of a diverse population (Keyes, 2006). Before the promotion of a Thai national culture and identity, if we used Western linguistic criteria, Siam would have been considered a very complex and diverse society. By the late nineteenth century, 20 percent of the total population spoke languages not related to the Tai language family. Over 50 percent of the population was considered Lao by the Siamese because they spoke different Tai languages and dialects. And there was 8 percent of the population who spoke Chinese. Thus, only around 20 percent of the population spoke what is now standard Thai (Keyes, 2006). Despite this diversity, Thai nationalism was, from the perspectives of state authorities, quite successful. By World War II, for the vast majority of the population, Thai national identity had superseded local linguistic and cultural heritages. Any differences that did remain were construed as regional rather than ethnic (e.g. speakers of Malay who followed Islam became “Southern Thai” instead of Muslim-Malays) (Keyes, 2006).

Importantly for our purposes, highland peoples such as the Lahu, were unable to adopt the Thai national identity because their languages were unrelated to the Tai language family and many did not practice Buddhism. Highland ethnic minorities thus became ‘non-Thai others’ who were seen as originating from other national territories (Pinkaw, 2003). Moreover, the mapping of Siam, leading to the creation of a Thai national identity, fundamentally altered the conceptions of human difference that had existed previously. Whereas in precolonial Siam differences between groups of peoples living in the peripheries of dominant polities were typically based on locality and kinship, in the modern nation-state of Thailand, differences were based on being Thai or being (some category of) non-Thai, which came to be seen as discrete ethnic classifications. Keyes (2006) sums up well the impact of the creation of national cultures and identities on the area:

In every Asian society nationalist policies have had this dual outcome – the shaping of a national majority whose members are conceived of as sharing a common heritage and the ascription of minority ethnic status to those whose heritage is considered so distinctive as to make them marginal within the nation. (Keyes, 2006, p. 9)

The “scientific” classification of peoples

Since the eighteenth century, various “scientific” theories have been developed in order to explain human diversity. Keyes (2006) writes, “These theories were predicated on an assumption that the observable world consisted of discrete elements whose essential characteristic could be identified and then used for systematic classifications” (p. 90). In this section, I focus on a few of the attempts to explain and classify human differences that are relevant to the relationship between highland ethnic minorities and the state in Thailand.

The first theories developed in the eighteenth century were *racial* theories, which sought to explain human difference by reference to distinctive biological characteristics. It was also often believed that these biological differences were associated with differences in behavior. As each human being is capable of reproducing with any other human being⁶ and physical characteristics change over generations, racial classifications have, from anthropologists’ perspectives, proven inadequate. However, the assumption that there are fundamental differences rooted in distinct biological characteristics between groups of people remains prevalent in popular thought and some official classifications (Keyes, 2006). Moreover, the belief that there are inherent and essential differences between groups of peoples, a central aspect of racial thinking, has remained prevalent in present day classification schemes (Keyes, 2006).

Spoken linguistic differences have also been employed in order to scientifically map the differences between groups of peoples. As racial background was thought to be associated with

⁶ This assumes that the individuals are physically capable (e.g. age, fertility). The main point is that a person from any “race” can reproduce with a person from any other “race.”

behavioral differences, linguistic differences were seen as correlated with cultural differences and were to become a central determining factor in ethnic classification (Keyes, 2006).

In addition to racial and linguistic theories, some scientists distinguished between groups of peoples by classifying them on an “evolutionary” spectrum of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. This was accomplished by an examination of the social and cultural structures of a particular society. Those who had “progressed” were viewed as civilized while those who had not were often viewed as representing the historical past of the civilized. Prior to World War II, whether anthropologists employed racial, linguistic or social evolutionary approaches to human diversity, there was the fundamental belief that the social and cultural structures of a group of people remained the same from one generation to the next and thus the group of people could be classified scientifically in comparison to other groups (Keyes, 2006). Furthermore, as Emile Durkheim and Marcus Mauss (1963) note, “every classification implie[d] a hierarchical order” (p. 8) in which some differences were highly valued while others were a source of marginalization.

After World War II, anthropologists began to challenge some of the fundamental assumptions regarding the scientific classification of peoples that had developed during the previous two hundred years. The notion of a group of people possessing essential characteristics that could be classified in order to differentiate them from others began to be replaced by an understanding of groups as unbounded entities and human difference as highly dependent on historical contingencies and social relations. Moreover, for much of Southeast Asia since the colonial era, it has been recognized that modern nation states have occupied a dominant position in shaping these very historical contingencies and social relations. Capturing this, Keyes (2006) writes:

The social recognition of significant differences among peoples depends ... not only on the patterns that have previously been acquired but also on which patterns become salient in relationships between peoples who see themselves or are seen by others as being different ... In the modern world, nation-states have assumed preeminent roles not only in structuring the situations in which social relationships take place [such as in state schools] but more significantly in determining what differences are significant for peoples living under their jurisdiction. (p. 96)

The scientific classification of peoples in Thailand

Around the same time that a national culture and identity were being promoted among the outlying regions of Siam, an ethnographic project was launched that aimed at classifying the peoples and places within the domains of the state. This project would draw on the international classification schemes of race and ethnicity being carried about by colonial officials and Western scholars at the time. Thongchai (2000) has called the Thai ethnographic project “autoethnography” meaning that it was carried out by elite Siamese, as opposed to Western colonial officials. He claims it was used as a means for “advancing a hegemonic agenda over dominated subjects” by “locating and juxtaposing peoples, including the elite themselves, in a new linear (progressive temporal) cosmic order called civilization” (Thongchai, 2000, p. 41).

State authorities centered in Bangkok led the efforts of classification and notions of progress and civilization were inherent to their “racialized” discourse (Jonsson, 2005). The elite Siamese considered themselves to be racially Thai and the language they used conveyed Thais as progressed and civilized. Other non-Siamese groups speaking languages belonging to the Tai language family were conveyed as having been influenced by non-Thai groups, but belonging to the same race as the Thai. While they may not have been as evolutionarily advanced as the Thai, the other Tai groups could teach the Thai race much about its own progression from savagery to civilization and modernity. Non-Thai peoples lacked the attributes of progress and civilization to a greater or lesser degree. And, importantly for our purposes, from the high society in Bangkok,

mountain people at the periphery of the state's territory came to be known as 'wild' or 'forest' people (*khon pa*) and were depicted as 'strange', 'filthy', 'wild', and 'uncivilized' (Toyota, 2005). An example of this can be seen in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, a publication for elite foreign and Thai scholars in 1925. Regarding the Mien (Yao), one of the highland groups, a Thai scholar writes:

They live on the hill-tops and cannot live on the plains, because they are accustomed to the high air. If they come down on the plains for too long they get fever. There is no limit to the area they cover, for they have no permanent abode and no land to cultivate. They are perpetually wandering from place to place. As for cultivation of rice, if the soil is good, they come back to the same place, but if it is not they search for new land. They are stupid and rough, and they do not know the customs of other races ... Their ideas of cleanliness are very vague. (Rangsiyanan & Naowakarn, p. 83-128; Jonsson, 2005, p. 44)

Notions of cleanliness were often closely related to notions of civilization. W.A.R. Woods, the British consul in Chiangmai, captures a similar perspective in his memoir *Land of Smiles* (1935):

When the King and Queen of Siam visited Chaingmai in 1927, representatives of most of the hill tribes were brought to take part in a procession in honor of their Majesties, and to give exhibitions of the own particular styles of dancing and music. After the King had seen them, he remarked to me that the Meows and Yaos [Hmong and Mien] looked very smart and clean, whereas he had always been told that they were disgustingly dirty. "But sir," I replied, "those Meows and Yaos have been in Chiangmai for a month, and the Governor has had them scrubbed three times a day during the whole of that period, so as to make them presentable." Turning to the governor, the King asked: "Is it true, Your Excellency?" "No, Your Majesty," replied he, "Mr. Woods has grossly exaggerated the matter. I only had them scrubbed *twice* a day. (Woods, 1935, p. 130; Jonsson, 2005, p. 48).

Toyota (2005) notes that the racial/ethnic differences between Thai and non-Thai also served to create a sharp geographical dichotomy between *muang* (lowland/city) and *pa* (uplands/forest).

In a Thai manifestation of social Darwinism, *pa*, and the people who lived there, was seen as part of the uncivilized historical past of the *muang* and its inhabitants. This perspective of superiority became a fundamental characteristic of the relationship between highland ethnic minorities and the state in the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, in the period of time after World

War II, discussed later in this paper, when the relationship between mountain peoples and the state became a matter of national security, the perspective of superiority justified the variety of state interventions into the lives of mountain peoples.

The ethnographic project continued after World War II and notions of nationalism and modernity became prominent. Thai leaders such as Luang Wichit Wathakan, a key figure in the creation of Thai nationalism, as well as Bunchuai Srisawat, a Thai anthropologist and author of *30 Peoples of Chiangrai* continued to arrange the different peoples of Thailand hierarchically claiming that the diversity of peoples in Thailand implied branches off the main race, central Thai. This national framework articulating what it meant to be a proper Thai was an attempt to erase much of the differences and diversity that had existed in Thailand 50 years earlier (Jonsson, 2005, p. 52). In the preface to Bunchuai Srisawat's book on the diverse people living in Thailand, Luang Wichit Wathakan wrote:

The study of the background of the various peoples who live on Thai soil, such as Tai Ya, Lue, Khoen, Ngiao, and others is of great value for the study of the history of our own entire race, because most of these groups are branches of the Thai race. The Tai Ya, Lue, Ngiao, and Khoen are real Thai. Studying the ways, origins, and customs of these groups will greatly improve our knowledge of the ways and customs of the ancient Thai people. These [other] groups have preserved the old ways, as modern civilization has not yet entered to destroy the ancient culture. (Bunchai, 1950; Jonsson, 2005).

Tai linguistic and cultural differences were interpreted as manifestations of what the Thai used to be. Importantly, all Tai people were considered a part of the same family and connected to the territory of Thailand, even if some Tai groups were more progressed than others. An emphasis on the racial connections of all Tai peoples to the national terrain allowed for all Tai peoples to be “natural” citizens of Thailand, as the national terrain was considered the home of the Thai race. In forging a Thai identity and connecting it intimately with the territory of Thailand,

highlanders came to be seen as outsiders, originating from other national territories, and lacking any connection to the Thai race, national terrain and Thai citizenship.

Recognizing the significance of Thai national culture and identity along with the classification of peoples within the domain of the state, Hjørleifur Jonsson (2005) writes:

The roots of the marginal status of highland people in contemporary Thailand lie in the conflation of race and citizenship that emerged in the late nineteenth century ... For an understanding of the Thai public sphere during the twentieth century, the fundamental significance of the classification of peoples lies in the nationalist appropriation of agency and identity. Non-Thai peoples were deprived of agency through the nationalization of space, identity, and history that accompanied the racialization of the Thai landscape. Notions of progress and civilization were part of this discourse. As these notions were mapped onto the ethnic landscape, the Thai were civilized and had progress while the various others lacked these attributes to a greater or lesser degree. This imagery consolidated the nation-states authority and established its civilizing mission at the same time as it defined and differentiated the subjects of the modern nation. (Jonsson, 2005 p. 46-47)

National Security and State Interventions

As the state had played a central role in painting the identity of the “racially” Thai as the height of civilization and progress and in turn the highlanders as backward, savage, ancient, outsiders with no allegiance to the nation, so too the state played a central role “saving” the highlanders from their problems by integrating them into the nation beginning in the 1950’s. It was also around this time that the highlanders came to be subsumed under the category of *chao khao*, “hill tribes.” Originally, six groups of peoples were encompassed by this term – the Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Karen. Jonsson (2005) claims the term signified their need for government intervention due to their unruliness, illicit practices and threat to national security. Toyota (2005) notes that the official classification of “hill tribe” served to exert state control over formation of ethnic identity within the nation and thus to distinguish between who could be included as Thai citizens and who could not. She writes:

[T]he term hill tribes does not simply refer to the minority people who live in the uplands, but has specific political implications in terms of making a distinction between those who can be included as Thai citizens and those who cannot. (Toyota, 2005, p. 116)

She continues:

The creation of the official category hill tribe intensified the pa (non-Thai)/muang (Thai) ideology with its rigid geographical territoriality of hill/valley. In this way, in the process of confirming the boundary of the integrated Thai nation-state, the category of hill tribe came to be applied to the area where historically ethnic identifications had been ambiguous and porous. In the drive to secure a territorially bounded modern Thai nation-state, and to achieve national integration, the ambiguity of transferable identities could no longer be allowed. (Toyota, 2005, p. 116-117)

As with the creation of a national culture and identity and the classification of highlanders as Non-Thai, state interventions, in general, and the classification of “hill tribes”, in particular, served to marginalize highlanders within the context of the nation-state.

The interventions must also be understood with reference to the beginnings of the Cold War in the region. After World War II, the Thai government was eager to ally itself with the United States, requiring them to develop strong anti-communist policies. The ethnic minorities, including the Lahu, living on the borderlands of the Thai state, occupied a geographical location that was considered militarily important for the security of the Thai nation in defending itself from any communist insurgency. Seen as potential threats to the Thai nation, ethnic minority groups became ‘problems’ and, thus, targets of government policies that sought to assimilate them into Thai society. One of the initial state agencies given the task of assimilating the highlanders into the Thai nation was the Border Patrol Police (BPP), established in 1953. Through Thai language programs, schools, and the distribution of Thai nationalist symbols, such as the flag and portraits of the king, the BPP sought to integrate highland ethnic minorities into the Thai nation.

Another intervention focused on stopping the highlanders' farming practice of shifting cultivation, or slash and burn agriculture as it was called, and the production of opium. The Committee on National Tribal Welfare, established in 1959, aimed "to speed the assimilation of tribal people by settling them in the fashion of Thai lowlanders on some single tract of land that would provide a living. As uplanders 'became Thai' they would no longer grow dry rice or opium, and thus the forests would be saved and these non-Thai would be absorbed" (Hanks and Hanks, 2001, p. 128). The highlanders farming practices were viewed as a threat to national resources and the economy; as a result, shifting cultivation was declared illegal by claiming much of the forested mountains as land belonging to the state. If the land on which they lived was under the control of the state, then highlanders would also come to be controlled by the state.

Cash crop agriculture and resettlement projects sought to control highlanders' mobility and encourage a settled lifestyle (Toyota, 2005). The Department of Hill Tribe Welfare saw shifting cultivation as the cause of most of the 'hill tribe problems':

As it will be seen that almost all the problems which hill tribes constitute in this country—such as the destruction of forests, opium growing, border insecurity, difficulties in administration and control—derive from this fact. An immense progress would be made if the hill people would learn and practice cultivation of permanent fields. (Department of Welfare, 1962, p. 17; Hanks and Hanks, 2001, p. xv)

From Jonsson's (2005) perspective, state interventions were essentially about national loyalty and assimilation. For the state, stamping out any communist insurgency and banning shifting cultivation were the most important steps in exerting power and control over the ethnic minority groups in the mountains. Striving to gain control also meant employing the hegemonic discourse of Thai racial superiority that had developed during the previous 60 years; and this discourse

served to marginalize the various forms of highlander identity and agency. Jonsson (2005) captures this well when he writes,

As a mode of livelihood largely apart from state control, shifting cultivation was important to the reproduction of identity and agency in upland communities. The ban on shifting cultivation and various official campaigns against uplanders' practices of difference show the nation-state's refusal to accommodate upland formulations of agency, as well as the states power to eliminate the economic basis of such difference. (Jonsson, 2005, p. 56)

Recent Developments: Towards a Pluralistic Notion of Being Thai

As I have discussed in this paper, throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were various efforts to integrate the diverse peoples within the borders of Thailand into a homogenous and cohesive nation. During the past twenty years, however, there seems to be a growing recognition and acceptance of ethnic and cultural diversity. For example, at universities, international conferences are held that focus on the diversity of peoples within Thailand. Also, at universities, there are official clubs for students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Moreover, radio stations in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai have shows broadcasted in a variety of ethnic minority languages specifically for different ethnic minority audiences. And, while the use of "hill tribe" and all it connotes is still frequently heard in popular discourse and the tourist industry, there has been a strong push for the use of the less pejorative "mountain Thai" (*chao Thai phu khao*).

Patrick Jory (1999) claims that the end of the Cold War and a decrease in national security concerns have resulted in the government's relaxation of assimilationist policies. In addition, pro-democracy movements have resulted in the transformation of Thailand's political scene from one controlled primarily by the military to one in which elected parliamentary members have real political power. This parliamentary system has benefitted provinces outside of Bangkok and served to strengthen local and ethnic culture and identity (Jory, 1999).

Besides politics, the liberalization of Thailand's media has also allowed for a strengthening in regional and ethnic culture and identity. As TV, radio, and print media have come under the control of private operators, as opposed to the state and military, ethnic culture is becoming a commodity (Jory, 1999). And as tourism has become a fundamental aspect of the Thai economy, cultural distinctiveness has been important in attracting both international and domestic travelers. Interestingly, for Jory (1999), the resurgence of ethnic culture and identity is not a rejection of the hegemonic constructions of Thai identity that emerged during the past century; rather, it is an attempt to expand the concept of Thai identity to include a more pluralistic notion of what it means to be 'Thai.'

In sum, in this section we have examined some of the roots and subsequent developments of the relationship between highland ethnic minorities and the state that are relevant to the present day position of Lahu peoples in Thai society. While there is much that could be discussed, I posited that the transformation of Thailand into a modern nation-state, which included the processes of mapping Siam, the creation of a Thai national identity, and the classification of peoples, was the most important historical process influencing the present-day social landscape in which Lahu individuals attend school. I discussed how state interventions since World War II have, for the most part, been attempts to integrate Lahu peoples into the nation. And, lastly, in recent decades there seems to be significant challenges to Thai national identity by the resurgence of ethnic and regional identity. The relevance of these broad social and historical processes to the experiences of the Lahu participants in this study is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Part Three: Thai Education and Education for the “Hill Tribes”

Education in Thailand

Inquiring into the experiences of Lahu students in Thai schools requires an examination of the broader context within which Thai schools came to be. Such an examination allows us to further understand some of the “institutional structures, social relationships, economic conditions, historical processes and the ideological formations or discourses” (Papen, 2001, p. 41) within which Lahu individuals live and attend school. In this section, I describe some significant historical developments of Thailand’s education system. As I discuss, schooling in Thailand, in the past and at present, is intimately related to Thai nationalism and has sought to integrate a diverse population into a particular conception of a “Thai” nation.

Schooling in pre-modern Thailand⁷ had its roots in the *wats*, or Theravada Buddhist temples, that existed in many of the villages by the fifteenth century (Keyes, 1991). The primary purpose of these schools was to instruct boys in “reading and writing, Pali, Sanskrit and Thai; elementary arithmetic, addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication, using examples from daily life at the market or on the farm; Buddhist ethics; as well as some simple medicines and manners” (Watson, 1980, p. 73). With the exception of a few members of the royal family within the context of the palace, women were generally excluded from any formal education in the *wats*.

While schooling in Thailand has its roots in pre-modern Thailand, the most significant developments in understanding the present situation took place beginning in the 1890’s under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910). It was during this time, under pressure from French

⁷ The country of Thailand changed its name from Siam in 1939. Recognizing the importance of the name change, for the sake of this paper, I refer to the country both before and after 1939 as Thailand.

and British officials who had colonized the territories surrounding what would eventually become modern day Thailand that King Chulalongkorn and his advisors began the process of nation building and implementing policies of national integration (Keyes, 1971; Keyes, 2006). With the borders of Thailand being formalized, the king sought to extend his authority over the peoples, including the highland ethnic minorities, within this “geo-body” by creating a modern state bureaucracy (Thongchai 1994). The expansion of the state’s bureaucracy, which would come to include a modern education system, was critical in the process of instilling in the people a sense of personal identification or affiliation with a national heritage or culture, or *chat Thai*. Briefly, the modern meaning of the word *chat* is “a people who share a common heritage from the past” (Keyes, 2006) existing within a bounded geographical space (Thongchai, 1994, p. 135). While not everybody was able to adopt the common identity created by state authorities, *chat Thai* was so broadly conceived that it included at least 85 percent of the diverse population (Keyes, 2006). This was done by claiming that all people who spoke related but mutually unintelligible languages belonging to the Tai language family shared a common language. At that time, there were at least five distinct languages belonging to the Tai language family. In addition, the different expressions of Buddhism throughout the country were considered to be a common Thai Buddhism (Keyes, 2006, p. 105). This “invented” common heritage also included key cultural symbols, a common history and allegiance to the Bangkok, or Chakri, monarchy. Importantly for our purposes, the construction of Thai identity excluded the Lahu and other ethnic minorities, making them into “Other,” non-Thai people.

A modern system of education, founded by King Chulalongkorn, served as a key component in promoting this particular conception of Thai identity among most of the groups of diverse peoples who found themselves within the geographical borders of what eventually

become the modern nation-state of Thailand. The king founded the Ministry of Public Instruction⁸ in 1882 in Bangkok with the aim of eventually opening state schools throughout the nation. Initially, some state sponsored schooling took place, as it had in the past, in the *wats*, or Buddhist temples, found throughout the country and the monks served as teachers. Unsatisfied with the national integration efforts at the *wats*, the king, in November 1898, promulgated the “Decree on the Organization of Provincial Education” (Keyes, 1991). The decree created “hybrid” schools in the sense that they continued to use the *wats* as school grounds and monks as teachers but adopted a modern curriculum created by state authorities in Bangkok that was to be taught throughout the nation in standardized (Bangkok) Thai.

In 1910, King Chulalongkorn was succeeded by his son King Vajiravugh (1910-1925). Displeased with the teaching job of Buddhist monks at the “hybrid” schools and wanting teachers who were trained by and responsible to the state, he enacted the Primary Education Act of 1921 (Keyes, 1991). The act made schooling compulsory for boys and girls, from ages seven to fourteen (Keyes, 1991; Sargent & Orata, 1949). Also, around this time, teaching colleges were founded throughout the country as the central government recognized the necessity of training teachers for the national integration effort.

In 1932, the last absolute monarchy in Thailand was replaced by a constitutional monarchy, shifting political power from the royal family to a select military and bureaucratic elite. The new government leaders, similar to the monarchy, continued to focus their educational efforts on national integration as they saw popular education as “the best preparation for full democracy” (Landon, 1939; Keyes, 1991). In fact, under the new form of governance, national

⁸ This would eventually be called the Ministry of Education in 1889 (Wyatt, 1969).

funding for education from 1933 to 1936 more than tripled (Landon, 1939; Keyes, 1991) in an effort to instill in citizens a sense of loyalty to the Thai nation.

By the mid 1930's Field Marshall Plaek Phibun Songkhram had taken control of the country as prime minister. Continuing to promote Thai national identity through schools, Phibun's government created a curriculum that focused primarily on standard Thai language and Thai national history. In addition, Phibun, together with Luang Wichit Wathakan, a close advisor, created a number of cultural works, including a Thai historiography, aimed at increasing Thai nationalist sentiment (Barne 1993; Reynolds, 2002; Thongchai, 1994). Using schools and other government institutions, Phibun strove to "motivate the country's citizens to pursue national goals and to inculcate in them a sense of collective selfhood" (Reynolds, 2002, p. 4). A specific example of this can be seen in Phibun's creation of a series of cultural mandates (*ratthaniyom*), which promoted a particular conception of Thai national culture. The ninth cultural mandate made the central Thai language a marker of Thai identity (Diller, 2002). Schools served as vehicles for the state in ensuring the spread of these cultural mandates (Vandergeest, 1993) and therefore, a sense of what it meant to be Thai and non-Thai.

Up until this point, we have briefly looked at some of the significant developments in the creation of a national education system in Thailand up until World War II. I have emphasized that one of the primary purposes of this system was national integration. Importantly, this national integration effort was initially focused on those who were geographically easily accessible to state authorities. This included most peoples living in the lowland areas within the borders of Thailand. However, there were groups of people, such as the Lahu, living in the mountainous border regions of northern Thailand who had little contact with state authorities. It was not until after World War II, in the context of the beginnings of the Cold War, that the state,

in general, and schools, in particular, came to play a significant role in the lives of the Lahu people in Thailand.

Education for the “Hill Tribes”

Beginning in the 1950s Thailand’s Border Patrol Police assumed the initial role of integrating the “hill tribes,” or highland ethnic minorities, into the Thai nation. A significant aspect of this process was the creation of Border Patrol Police (BPP) Schools starting in 1953. Villagers provided much of the labor in building schools while the BPP provided one Thai teacher instructing local children in standard Thai. Literacy was seen as an important part of the effort to integrate non-Thai minorities into Thai society. While statistics are difficult to come by, Kunstadter (1967) writes that there were around 144 BPP schools with about 6,000 students in 1965. Another study conducted by the Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development in Singapore (1976) claimed that by 1976 the BPP education program had expanded to include 452 schools with 38,367 students (Aran, 1976). These numbers are difficult to confirm, and more research is needed on the creation of BPP schools.

In addition to the BPP, the Ministry of Education was also involved in the creation of schools for ethnic minority students. Focusing on primary education, in 1970, the Department had established 109 schools with 5,238 students (Aran, 1976). The schools, however, were not attended in equal numbers by each distinct minority group. For example, in 1970, 2,420 Karen students were enrolled in school while only 70 Lahu students were enrolled (Aran, 1976). From my perspective, the primary reason for a significant difference was most likely the location of the schools relative to the different ethnic minority groups. As many Karen lived near the city of Chiang Mai, government officials had easier access to Karen communities and they, in turn, had access to schools. Other groups that resided farther away in the mountains had less interaction

with government officials and, thus, fewer students from those ethnic minority groups attended school. Similar to the BPP schools, there is a need for more research into the beginnings of schools run by the Ministry of Education.

In general, the primary purpose of the schools for ethnic minorities was to integrate them into the nation and Thai society. Thus, the schools had a purpose similar to that of Thai education since the late 1890's. In addition to assimilation, Niwat (1996) writes that there were at least ten other objectives:

1. To provide the hilltribe students with the rudiments of an academic education, including the ability to read, write, and speak in the Thai language and also to introduce the hilltribe students to other branches of modern knowledge such as arithmetic, science, history, and the arts.
2. To inculcate hilltribe students with civic values. To teach them the principles of a democratic government, the institutional and political structure of Thai society, the rights of citizens under the constitution, and the role and sanctity of law in a democratic society.
3. To inspire them to become producers and consumers of material goods, so they will internalize the ideal of self-reliance.
4. To inspire them to be loyal Thai citizens.
5. To encourage them to identify with the state as dedicated Thai citizens.
6. To inculcate democratic virtues and freedoms, so they would become promulgators of national social progress and prosperity.
7. To inspire them to become healthy and clean citizens of Thai society.
8. To inspire them to commit themselves to the right moral path.
9. To encourage them to become protectors of the nation's natural resources.

10. To steer them from any threatening thoughts or conduct to the Thai nation (Niwat, 1996, p. 29; Jukping, 2008).

It is important to note that I have found little research on what happened in the schools created for ethnic minorities in Thailand. While we have access to some of the policy documents regarding the integration of minorities through education, we have little knowledge as to what happened in these schools. Tracy Pilar Johnson (2005) provides an informative look into the some of the daily aspects of school life in a Hmong village in Thailand. However, besides this account, there is little knowledge and understanding regarding the perspectives of those involved daily at these schools. In addition, each village-community school has a unique history; some village-communities have had schools for over forty years, while others have established schools within the past ten. One of the specific contributions of this study is that it allows us to begin to understand some of the experiences of those involved in the daily affairs of these schools.

Cases of Assimilation/National Integration in Thailand

Following previous researchers (Wyatt, 1969; Keyes, 1983; Jonsson, 2005; Keyes, 2006), earlier in this chapter, I wrote that one of the primary goals of state schools in Thailand was the national integration of a diverse populace. With regards to the schools established for highland ethnic minorities in northern Thailand, state authorities retained the goal of national integration. However, from my perspective, it has been assumed that state schools produced their intended outcomes and highland ethnic minorities were integrated into the nation as loyal members. I offer this assumption, in part, because there is little research on what actually happened in these schools, or what resulted from their existence. There is some research, however, on the dynamic interaction between Thai state schools and diverse Muslim communities in southern Thailand. Uthai Dulyakasem (1983) compared the introduction of state schools, with the intention of

national integration, in two predominantly Muslim-Malay districts in southern Thailand. He found that in one district, La-ngu, where there were no schools before the existence of state schools, most residents, over a period of about 70 years, lost their ability to speak Malay and identified themselves as Thai. Moreover, they did not consider the state, in general, and schools, in particular, to be a threat to their identity or culture. In another district, Teluban, the establishment of schools was met with significant resistance by local Muslim-Malays. The attempt to replace Malay culture, traditions and language with Thai culture, traditions and language through state schooling was perceived as a threat to local ethnic identity. More specifically, in Teluban, Muslim schools (*pondok*) existed before the establishment of state schools. The state schools, and the Thai national worldview they represented, were seen as competing with and attempting to replace traditional Islamic schools. Interestingly, Uthai (1983) claims that the creation of state schools, along with other factors, served to foster ethnic nationalism and ethnic organization. Thus, contrary to the intentions of state authorities, schools actually contributed to the resistance of national integration on the basis of ethnicity.

In a study focusing on a rural school created for northern Thai (Yuan) villagers, whose culture and language were different from that of central (Bangkok) Thailand, Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (1983) claims that the school sought to incorporate the village into the national community by teaching children the central Thai dialect, various basic skills needed for national development, particular social rules of behavior, and their duties as citizens. The school's goal of national integration was only partially achieved. Most students left school lacking proficiency in standard Thai; they gained some basic arithmetic skills and some vague ideas regarding national social norms and obligations to their country. Several of the reasons for this partial "success" include: there were only four teachers responsible for six classes; the principal was

rarely present at the school; there was little supervision from the school district; and school supplies were inadequate. There were also several contradictions that students encountered during their schooling experiences that prevented the school from fully achieving its goal of national integration. First, with only four teachers for six classes, the school was understaffed. As teachers were frequently absent from the various classrooms, they could not pass on the knowledge students were supposed to learn in order to become integrated into the nation. Their absence also prevented them from asserting their power and authority as representative of the Thai state. Second, while students were taught to be nationalistic and law-abiding citizens, many of the adults they knew were neither nationalistic nor law-abiding. For example, students saw government officials involved in illegal logging and came to realize that certain laws could be circumvented by money and power. Lastly, they were being taught to love their country, yet they also recognized that being neglected by their government had contributed to their impoverished condition (Vaddhanaphuti, 1983).

These three cases suggest that even though national integration was one of the primary intentions of the state in the establishment of schools, the actual outcomes and impact of state schools varied by community and locale. In one case, La-ngu, state schools, for the most part, served to integrate the community into the Thai nation. In Teluban, state schools ended up contributing to a sense of ethnic nationalism and organization among the local populace. And, in Ban Chang, the school only partially achieved its goal of national integration as a variety of factors influenced the lives of those involved in the daily functioning of the school. Thus, we should not assume that schools created for highland ethnic minorities led to their intended outcome of national integration. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the findings of this study relate to policies of national integration and assimilation with the aim of furthering our understanding of

the dynamic relationship between state schools, local socio-cultural worlds, and broader social and historical processes.

Part Four: Important Complexities - Who are “the Tai,” “the Thai,” and “the Lahu”?

Introducing her dissertation on the Lahu and their relationship with literacy and writing systems in Thailand, Judith M.S. Pine (2002) discusses several of the dilemmas she encountered in doing anthropological research and the “rough” strategies she employed in response. The dilemmas emerged, in part, when she realized that most people reading her research would never encounter a Lahu person, and that it would be through her writing that others would construct an image and understanding of Lahu people. This position of power confronted her, as it confronts me, in doing research. One of her primary dilemmas was that she went to the field to learn more about “the Lahu people”; in doing so, and writing about it afterward, she could not help but recognize that she had transformed the participants, whom she knew as individuals, into a single Object to be studied. Such a transformation was in opposition to her goal of increased cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect. She knew ethnicity was not “a fixed set of mutually exclusive boxes” (Pine, 2002, p. viii) and the importance of the broader social context – what people call themselves, what those around them call them, and the historical processes in which these identifications emerged. In resolving this dilemma she tried “to keep writing it out, reading it critically to see what [she] unintentionally said, and then rewriting it in an effort to say more accurately what [she] intended” (Pine, 2002, p. vii).

Her second dilemma, closely related to the first, concerned the problems of naming an ethnic group and issues of power implicit in such naming. As a researcher who chose to live in a Lahu community, come back to the United States, and write about some of her experiences, she recognized that she had the power to name and create an entity about which she wrote. This

group, by virtue of her writing, would seem to exist as a whole and identifiable unit, demarcated and identifiable, “the Lahu.” And, there was a time when most researchers simply wrote “the Lahu” into existence, but she could not. She was too aware of the arbitrary nature of the historical circumstances that put her in a position of power to create “the Lahu” through her writing and left many Lahu people incapable of creating themselves through writing. Her strategies against the reification of “the Lahu” were to clearly demarcate the limits of her experience and to deliberately include her presence as a researcher throughout her writing.

Pine’s dilemmas touch upon some of the issues raised in this study, issues such as naming ethnic groups, “a people”, power, knowledge, research and writing. In this final part of Chapter 4, I discuss these issues and their relevance to Lahu people in Thailand. What I offer is certainly not an exhaustive examination of all the relevant issues; rather, it is a recognition of some of the complexities involved in researching and writing about a people, ethnic groups, “the Lahu,” “the Tai,” and “the Thai.”

“Inventing” *the Tai, the Lahu, and the Thai*

In premodern Southeast Asia, there is no evidence of “a Tai people” or “a Lahu people” as a collectivity of human beings distinguishing themselves from others based on their language, culture or shared descent; rather, there are peoples speaking Tai languages or dialects of Lahu that distinguish themselves from others, including other Tai and Lahu speaking peoples, by locality and kinship, or by being “civilized.”

In modern Southeast Asia, there exist the constructions of “the Tai people” and “the Lahu people.” Tai and non-Tai peoples can distinguish Tai people from others based on their use of a language within the Tai language family, a shared Tai culture and a shared Tai descent. The case is the same for the Lahu. The transformation of Tai-speaking and Lahu-speaking peoples into

“the Tai people” or “the Lahu people” is relatively recent, coming only with the creation of modern nation-states in Southeast Asia. In this section, I focus on the processes by which “the Tai” and “the Lahu” came to be. This will necessitate examining “the Thai.” In doing so, I hope to show how the Tai, the Lahu, and the Thai are each a people invented by themselves and others, and not a people with presumed essential qualities that make them different from others (Keyes, 1995).

Who are the Tai and who are the Thai?

Drawing primarily on the work of Charles F. Keyes (1987; 1995; 2006), in this section I will discuss how the Tai and Thai are peoples who have been “invented” or constructed by others and by themselves and the importance of examining these processes of invention. Keyes (1995) draws on Foucault’s concept of genealogy in looking at how ethnic and national communities are created. He claims that modern ethnicity theory recognizes that all communities have a genealogy, not determined by nature, but culturally constructed and historically contingent (Keyes, 1995). Such genealogies are expressed in cultural forms, including myth, written history, ritual, monuments and much more. Both the Tai and the Thai have genealogies. What follows draws on Keyes’ (1995) important work tracing the construction of the genealogies of communities that have included Tai and Thai peoples.

At present, the word “Tai” is used to refer to people who are presumed to share related languages categorized as the Daic language family. Living throughout Southeast Asia, southern China and northeastern India, these groups of peoples have also been seen as sharing a common culture or essential “ethnic” characteristics (Keyes, 1995). However, recognizing a shared past, common culture and common language among Tai peoples is a relatively recent invention that came to be with the transformation of Southeast Asia and surrounding regions into modern

nation-states. Let us examine how this came to be.

Premodern Tai-speaking peoples did not claim to be members of a group defined using linguistic or cultural criteria. We know this because, first, they shared ancient myths, in which the heroes and heroines were claimed as extended kin, with people speaking Austroasiatic languages. In these myths we see that both Tai-speaking and Austroasiatic-speaking peoples were concerned with defining themselves as “civilized” people who lived in literate societies in contrast with “uncivilized barbarians” who lived in preliterate communities on the peripheries of more dominant political centers. In the myths there is no indication that they were concerned with distinguishing themselves from others based on being linguistically and culturally different. In addition to myths positing shared kinship with civilized peoples, Tai-speaking peoples developed writing systems based on the scripts of other Southeast Asian peoples, primarily peoples using the Mon language. The Mon derived script must have been developed during a period or periods of extended contact, demonstrating there were significant historical relations between Tai and non-Tai-speaking peoples. Lastly, in premodern histories, such as Buddhist chronicles, annals of dynastic lineages, and genealogies of “political” groups, written by Tai-speaking peoples, there is no indication of any distinctly Tai group or community. Where ancient texts do differentiate between peoples it is not what we would consider an “ethnic” distinction based on language and culture. As with ancient myths, one of the primary distinctions found in these histories was between the civilized and uncivilized and we find Tai-speaking peoples as members of both domains (Keyes, 1995).

As discussed in detail earlier, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Siamese officials, surrounded by the colonial forces of the British and French, began to assert their authority over the diverse peoples within the newly demarcated “geo-body” of Siam through the

process of nation building. Establishing rule and achieving national integration involved primarily the promotion of a Thai national culture and identity. Here, the term “Thai” refers to peoples who are citizens of Thailand. As the British and French employed notions of race in claiming what groups of peoples belonged within their colonial realms, so the Siamese followed suit. King Chulalongkorn and his advisors claimed that, despite linguistic and cultural differences among Tai-speaking peoples, most people living in the borders of Siam belonged to a *chat Thai*, a Thai nation. The term *chat* came to mean a people who shared a common heritage from the past (Keyes, 2006). This heritage was depicted as beginning with the Sukhothai Kingdom (1238-1350) and especially King Ram Khamhaeng, the greatest king of the Sukhothai period. In addition, the common heritage involved depicting all Tai-speaking peoples as connected by a common language, even though some of these languages were mutually unintelligible. And, lastly, another important aspect of the invented cultural heritage was that all Buddhist peoples, Tai-speaking or not, within the borders of Siam were claimed to practice a unified Thai Buddhism. By constructing a Thai national culture and identity as well as implementing policies of national integration, Siamese officials were able to redefine Buddhist Tai-speaking peoples as “a people” belonging to the Thai nation. In other words, in adopting the national culture and identity as their own, diverse Tai-speaking peoples within the borders of Siam began to think of themselves as a unified Thai people committed to the idea of shared descent beginning with the Sukhothai period (Keyes, 1995).

As Thai state officials were reinventing tradition as a tradition of *the Thai people*, colonial officials, Western scholars, and missionaries in mainland Southeast Asia were encountering significantly diverse groups of peoples speaking Tai languages from about 1880 until World War II. Colonial officials were interested in knowing and controlling the different

peoples who were under their rule. This was done, in part, through the process of classification and documentation. Western scholars often joined with colonial officials in attempting to document and “scientifically” classify peoples according to race. Although it should be noted that Southeast Asian scholars tended to investigate differences in language and culture and not phenotypical differences. Missionaries sought to learn and document the diverse languages of the region so that people could learn about Christianity and read Biblical texts in their own language (Keyes, 1995). Through these various efforts, by the 1950’s language had become the basis for “scientifically” classifying Tai-speaking peoples into what were being considered discrete “ethnic groups.” An ethnic group, as the term came to be used, meant a people sharing a common culture, which often include a common language, that signified, more fundamentally, shared descent (Keyes, 1976). I will come back to this in the next section. For now it is important to note that linguistic differences were seen as clear-cut indicators of cultural, and therefore, ethnic, differences. The result of classifying Tai-speaking peoples based on linguistic criteria was the creation of different ethnic groups, groups of people who, because of their shared language family, were “imagined” as sharing common cultures and, therefore, historical origins (Keyes, 1995; Keyes, 2006).

Among many Thai people, at present, there remains significant interest in who the Tai are. In the past several decades, many Thai have challenged previous conceptions of Thai national identity. In many of these debates, Thai people draw on the discourses about the Tai, as an ethnic group, in questioning what it means to be Thai. One perspective has concentrated on the similarities between the Tai and the Thai; the Thai and Tai who speak similar languages, have similar customs, and practice similar religions are seen as once being the same group, having a common origin before the drawing of national borders. Another perspective, one that

has been taken up by many Thai intellectuals, focuses on non-Buddhist Tai peoples and emphasizes the diversity among the Tai. Such research pushes for the recognition and acceptance of diverse ways of being Thai and seeks to challenge a hegemonic Thai genealogy based on a supposed common language and religion (Keyes, 1995).

In conclusion, being Tai or Thai is fundamentally about identity and identity is contingent on the social landscape and historical processes. There are no unchanging essential characteristics that make a person Tai or Thai; rather, “Tainess” and “Thainess” are dynamic identifications based on historical processes and used by insiders and outsiders. What I have attempted to do in this section is describe some of the historical processes that have served to shape present conceptions of being Tai and Thai.

Who are the Lahu

Thailand’s Lahu are an *ethnic minority group* and, in this section, I concern myself with what this entails and how this came about. In doing so I begin with a discussion on the concept of ethnicity, what it means to be “a people” and an “ethnic group.” Then, I turn my attention to the relevance of these terms with respect to Lahu people in Thailand.

Ethnicity, ethnic groups, and “a people”

Rogers Brubaker (2009) notes that the scholarship on ethnicity has become unsurveyably vast and thus, discussions of ethnicity must be highly selective. Moreover, as Thomas H. Erikson (2010) notes, many who write on ethnicity do not bother to define the term, and the actual usage of the term varies. This being said, it is still possible to make some claims about contemporary understandings of ethnicity and ethnic groups.

Ethnicity can be understood as referring to aspects of relationships between groups of people who consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive

(Erikson, 2010). On this Erikson (2010) writes, “When cultural differences regularly make a difference in interactions between members of groups, the social relationship has an ethnic element” (p. 16). Ethnicity, however, is not only about cultural differences; as Keyes (1976) claims, cultural differences signify a more fundamental difference. At the most basic level, it is people’s commitment to an idea of shared descent or origin that makes a group *ethnically* distinct (Keyes, 1976). Shared cultural attributes, which are seen as distinguishing one group from another, are secondary and are seen as signifying common descent, which is most basic to ethnicity. Thus, we might claim that the cultural differences that regularly make a difference *with respect to ethnicity* signify, or are explained by, differences in origin. It is important to note that a group’s origins, or their account of shared descent, is a present-day *construction* of the past, or an “invented” past.

The term “ethnic group” is typically used to designate “a people” who, while they may share cultural attributes, are, most importantly, committed to the idea of shared descent, as noted above (Keyes, 1976). The notion of “a people”, however, is highly ambiguous as the boundaries demarcating “a people” are obscure and have presented significant challenges for anthropologists. In a study on an ethnic group, the Lue, in Thailand, Michael Moerman (1965) faced this exact challenge in trying to respond to the question, “Who are the Lue?” His problem was that he could not demarcate the boundaries of the cultural group, ethnic group, or “people”, he had proposed to study. Recognizing that ‘Lueness’ and the Lue as “a people” could not be defined by objective cultural features or clear-cut boundaries, he conceded to an *emic category of ascription* (Erikson, 2010). When asked, “Whom did you study in the field?”, Moerman writes,

I studied a community of people who call themselves and their language "Lue." Their neighbors also call them "Lue," but I do not know in what ways and to what extent their language and behavior are similar to those of "Lue" communities elsewhere. The community exhibits certain peculiarities of speech and of custom which makes public its

notion of Lue, but these distinguish them from others far less clearly and significantly than does the identity and the label of "Lue." We must therefore consider how these peculiarities relate to identification and how the label relates to other labels. (Moerman, 1965, p. 1221)

He concludes, "Someone is Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue and of acting in ways that validate his Lueness" (Moerman, 1965, p. 1222). This does not resolve the problems surrounding what we mean when we use the term "ethnic group" to designate "a people," but perhaps it allows us to take into account some of the *significant ambiguities* in researching ethnic groups. Moreover, it makes us aware of some of the problems, as I discussed regarding Pine's research at the beginning of this essay, associated with naming, essentializing identities, taking an ethnic group as the focus of a study, and the historical processes that create ethnic identifications.

"The Lahu" as "a people" and an "ethnic group"

Recognizing the difficulties in defining "a people," Edward Spicer (1971) puts forth the following definition:

[A] people is a collectivity of human beings who believe themselves to be affiliated one to another through certain shared symbols. Such symbols cannot be listed as a specific number of invariably-present cultural traits, but among them, certainly, will be a shared belief about certain historical events, which do not, however, necessarily constitute objective historical facts. (Spicer, 1971, p. 4011; as found in Walker, 2003, p. 51)

Fusing this idea of "a people" with notions of ethnicity described earlier, Anthony R. Walker (2003) claims that we can obtain a good understanding of who the Lahu are. He writes:

[The Lahu] are a collectivity of human beings who, despite their lack of common social, political or economic institutions, share a feeling of "Lahuness", which goes beyond their common language (albeit with considerable variation between major dialects) to embrace also the idea of a shared past. They know that they are "Lahu" and not Karen, Lisu, Tai or Han, etc. They do not deny that some of their people have become Karen, Lisu, Tai or Han, but they know also that, in order to do so, such people have had to abandon – temporarily or permanently – something of their "birthright", of their "Lahuness", or, as they would likely say, their *chaw maw a li*, the "way of the ancients". (Walker, 2003, p. 53)

Interestingly, Walker does not refer to the Lahu as an “ethnic group” because he sees “group” as designating sociological functions that may not in fact exist. What is most important, from Walker’s perspective, is their shared feeling of “Lahuness”, which, he goes on to write, is that part of their shared cultural template, especially their idea of a shared past, that distinguishes them from neighboring communities. Perhaps Walker’s explanation is most helpful in categorizing Lahu people throughout the world. As this study was focused on Thailand, and Lahu peoples’ relationship with Thai state schools, my preference was to refer to the Lahu, at least in the context of Thailand, as an *ethnic minority group*. Let us look at what this means.

If we are going to speak of the Lahu as an ethnic minority group, then, as discussed earlier, there must be some cultural differences that make a difference in the social interactions between Lahu peoples and others. Later, I will cover some of these cultural differences. For now it is important to note that these cultural differences signify, fundamentally, differences in shared descent or origin. In what follows, I discuss some the origins of these differences that serve to make the Lahu an ethnic group in Thailand; I will posit that, like the Tai, the Lahu as an ethnic group have come to be since the transformation of Thailand into a modern nation-state. This transformation is also at the roots of their minority status.

The Lahu as an *ethnic minority group* in Thailand

Based on the little historical records we have, it is difficult to say much about Lahu people before the colonial era. As I discussed earlier, groups of peoples, including Lahu-speaking peoples, living on the peripheries of more dominant polities throughout Southeast Asia and Southwestern China distinguished themselves from others based on locality, people of a particular valley or village in contrast with others living in other valleys or villages, and kinship, people of a particular family or clan (Keyes, 2006). In addition, in the Siamese Buddhist

Kingdoms, a traditional hierarchy existed between the “civilized” center of the polity (*muang*) and uncivilized peripheries of the polity (*pa*) as described earlier in looking at the Tai. Thus, boundaries between groups of peoples were not defined in terms of nationality or ethnicity (Toyota, 2005). As with other groups at that time, Lahu peoples most likely distinguished themselves from others based on locality and kinship. Thus, it is unlikely that there was any sense among Lahu peoples of being a unified “Lahu people” in the ethnic sense of sharing a common culture and origin. One’s origins were one’s village and family, and, therefore, different Lahu peoples would have different origins. Perhaps further evidence to support this view is that, from what we currently know, Lahu peoples have generally lived in the peripheries of more dominant peoples, have never claimed a territory as their own “Lahu territory” and there is no indication of any unified Lahu leadership (Walker, 2003). Thus, during the precolonial era, there does not seem to be any sense, among Lahu peoples themselves or others with whom they interacted, of “the Lahu” as a people or an ethnic group. The cultural differences that made a difference in social interactions were not based on common culture and descent as conceived in our modern day sense of ethnicity; rather, the differences that made a difference were a person’s particular village or family or whether or not a person lived within the realms of the “civilized” center.

With the transformation of Thailand into a modern nation-state, we can begin to speak of “the Lahu” in Thailand as an *ethnic minority group*, a group of putatively culturally and linguistically distinct people, who came to be seen by others and to see themselves, as united through shared origins. As discussed earlier, with the fixing of the borders of Siam, state authorities sought to unify the diverse peoples within the country through the promotion of a Thai national culture and identity. Lahu peoples were not able to adopt the invented national

identity and thus were seen as ‘non-Thai others’ who originated from other national territories.

Ethnographic work classified these non-Thai others on the basis of language; peoples speaking the Lahu language came to be seen as a single unified group or a people, “the Lahu.”

Similarities in language were thought to imply a common origin and as they were not Thai, their common origin must have been in another national territory. The cultural differences then that began to make a difference, such as differences in language, religion, and agricultural practices, signified the origins of “the Lahu” as a non-Thai people. In other words, with the creation of Siam’s borders, the promotion of a Thai national identity, and the ethnographic work of classification, “the Lahu” had become “a people” distinguished from others by their common language and culture and, it was concluded, a common past; thus, they had become an ethnic group.

Lahu peoples’ status as a *minority* becomes meaningful only in this same context of Thailand as a modern state. Writing about this phenomenon, Erikson (2010) writes:

An ethnic minority can be defined as a group which is numerically inferior to the rest of the population in a society, which is politically non-dominant and which is being reproduced as an ethnic category or group. Like other concepts used in the analysis of ethnicity the twin concepts minority and majority are relative and relational. A minority exists only in relation to a majority and vice versa, and their relationship is contingent on the relevant system boundaries. *In the contemporary world, these system boundaries are nearly always state boundaries.* (Erikson, 2010, p. 147-48; emphasis my own)

In conclusion, through the process of national integration, the creation of “Thainess,” and ethnographic classification, Lahu peoples were transformed into “the Lahu” and became an *ethnic minority group*. Their “ethnic group” status was the result of cultural and linguistic differences that began to make a difference because they both signified their ‘non-Thai’ identity and made them into “the Lahu people” with common origins in other national territories. Their minority status was caused by their numerical inferiority, partial integration into the nation and

dominance thereby.

Lahu cultural differences that began to make a difference

We just discussed how the Lahu became an ethnic minority group in Thailand and how cultural differences signified their ‘non-Thai’ origins in other national territories. However, I have yet to identify what some of the cultural differences were. In this section, I briefly touch upon some of these cultural differences that became relevant to the identity of the Lahu in Thailand.

Language and Religion

With the invention and spread of a Thai national culture and identity, by World War II, most people within Thailand identified themselves as being Thai and “Thainess” had replaced many previously significant linguistic and cultural heritages. The differences that remained between Tai-speaking peoples were construed as regional rather than ethnic (Keyes, 2006). As Thai national identity was founded upon competence in the Thai language and adherence to Buddhism, most of the Tai-speaking peoples within the nation were capable of adopting the reconstructed Thai heritage. The Lahu, along with others, spoke a language and practiced a religion that was too different to be considered part of the common Thai heritage. The differences in language and religious practice, then, made a difference in their interaction with Thai others. Since the common Thai heritage was also connected to the national terrain of Thailand, the linguistic and religious differences of the Lahu signified their origins in other, non-Thai, national terrains.

Swidden Agriculture

Perhaps the most significant cultural difference that began to make a difference was the Lahu practice of swidden agriculture, or shifting cultivation. Planting paddy rice, which allowed

for a sedentary lifestyle, was seen as a fundamental to Thai economic life. The Lahu practice of swidden agriculture, and the mobile life that resulted, began to be seen after World War II as a political problem and a threat to Thai national resources. Politically, the mobile lives of Lahu people were seen as highly problematic as many lived in Thailand's border areas; crossing national boundaries was seen by state authorities as a threat to national security. In addition, forest resources, especially teak, were seen as belonging to the Thai nation and swidden agriculture was depicted as a significant impediment to using forest resources for the national economy. The Lahu, and all 'hill tribes', began to be seen as forest destroyers and their economic practices were deemed "irrational" and "destructive" of the Thai nation and economy (Pinkaew, 2003). Differences between Lahu and Thai agricultural practices came to be significant at that point in time because of the state's desire for control over national resources. As national resources were seen as belonging to "the Thai," non-Thai others, such as the Lahu, were viewed as destroyers of the forests and nation. This further reinforced, from the Thai perspective, their ethnic group status as a people with origins in non-Thai national terrains.

The Place of Education

The spread of Thai national identity, which was central to the construction of the Lahu as an ethnic minority group, occurred primarily through a state system of compulsory education. Schools focused on competency in standard Thai, the practice of Thai Buddhism and allegiance to the Thai nation. Explaining this, Keyes (1983) writes:

The primary objective of the national system of education in Thailand has been, and continues to be, to prepare children throughout the country to enter into a "Thai" national world, a world structured with reference to the Thai state ... [T]eachers in the central Thai village of Bang Chan 'recognize and accept their role of remaking the nation' ... [Teachers] made use of texts containing such 'newly written aphorisms as 'Buy Thai goods; love Thailand and love to be Thai; live a Thai life; speak Thai, and esteem Thai culture.' To be able to enter this world, the essential first step has always been the inculcation in children of a knowledge of the standard Thai language, especially in its

written form. (Keyes, 1983, p. 112)

Thus far I have attempted to show how the process of Lahu identity formation in Thailand has been highly contingent on the dynamic Thai social landscape and broader historical processes, much of which involved the creation of Thai national identity. As schools played a central role in the formation of Thai national identity, Lahu peoples' experiences of schooling certainly influenced their conceptions of "Lahuness" and "Thainess." As a part of Chapter Five, I return to this topic, relating it to the experiences of the participants in this study.

Summary

In this chapter, we have looked at previous research and literature in four general areas. To begin, I presented three important theoretical topics that are helpful in understanding the broad contexts in which education takes place. I then turned our attention to the relationship between ethnic minority groups and the state in Thailand by focusing primarily on the transformation of the Siamese Buddhist kingdom into a modern nation-state. In the third part of this chapter, I discussed a history of the national education system in Thailand, including schools that were created specifically for the assimilation of ethnic minorities. Lastly, we examined the genealogies of some of the categories and concepts that were central to this study.

Understanding these categories and concepts as social constructions allows us to position the experiences of participants in this study within the past and present social landscapes of Thailand.

Chapter Three: Methods

In this chapter, I describe the methods employed in achieving the primary aim of this study, which was to give voice to Lahu individuals by inquiring into and describing their lived experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School. To begin, I briefly overview some relevant aspects of qualitative research methods as well as the rationale for selecting a phenomenological approach. I then discuss my methods of data collection and analysis in detail. Next, I examine important issues in performing cross-cultural research and my role as a researcher. I conclude by discussing the credibility and the limitations of the study.

Brief Overview of Qualitative Methods

A researcher's questions and purposes often determine the selection of a research design and methodology (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). In general, a qualitative study is appropriate for discovering and understanding a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives of people involved (Merriam, 1998). Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that qualitative research allows for "serendipity and discovery," "endless possibilities to learn more about people," "the opportunity to connect with [participants] at a human level," "thinking in terms of complex relationships" and bringing the whole self into the process of research (p. 13). Furthermore, Merriam (1998) writes that qualitative studies help researchers in "understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6). For these reasons, a qualitative research design was appropriate for this study, which sought to produce a rich and holistic account of individuals' experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School.

Phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research can be defined as inquiry into the common lived experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals (Creswell, 2007).

Attention is given to the essence or structure of an experience (Merriam, 1998) with the aim of producing a descriptive account of “what” participants experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). This approach is best suited for research that seeks “to understand several individuals’ common or shared experience of a phenomenon ... in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

Moustakas (1994) writes that the aim of phenomenological research is “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). With this aim, phenomenological research was appropriate in determining the meaning of the experience of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School from the perspective of Lahu individuals who were able to articulate their experience. The general phenomenon was the schooling experiences, defined as the meaningful events related to being a student at school, in which participants’ Lahu ethnicity came to play a significant role at Banrongrian Secondary School. Since little was known about the schooling experiences of Lahu individuals from their perspectives, this study contributes much to our understanding of what attending a Thai school was like for Lahu students who experienced it.

Within phenomenological research, there are various orientations, including hermeneutic and transcendental, which are two of the most common approaches. An hermeneutic approach is heavily focused on the reflective interpretations of the researcher while a transcendental approach concentrates on participants’ descriptions of their experiences. As I was primarily interested in the perspectives of the participants – what they experienced and how they experienced it – a transcendental approach was preferred. Additionally, Moustakas (1994) and

Creswell (2007), in writing about a transcendental approach, offer precise steps and procedures in collecting and analyzing data. Such guidance is helpful for less experienced researchers carrying out large projects for the first time.

Data Collection

To begin, this study was exempt from full review by the University of Hawai'i Committee on Human Studies (See Appendix A). The anonymity of all the participants was safeguarded according to the guidelines of the Committee on Human Studies. Each participant was given both an "Oral and Written Consent" form and an "Agreement to Participate" form that explained the purpose of this study and the participant's rights and responsibilities. All participation was voluntary, participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time, and all identifying information was changed to protect the participants' anonymity.

Participants. In a phenomenological study, it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon to be studied. Thus, for this study, it was necessary that participants had the experience of being a Lahu individual at Banrongrian Secondary School. With the criteria of being ethnically Lahu and having attended Banrongrian Secondary School, I further focused this study by selecting participants who had graduated from Banrongrian Secondary School. This criterion was important because it ensured that the participants had experienced the process of schooling in Thailand for a period of at least twelve years and, more specifically, had attended secondary school for six years. In the end, out of the ten participants, eight held college degrees and one was in her third year of college. Only one participant had yet to attend college, primarily because of a lack of financial means. Lastly, selecting participants who had completed secondary school was important because, at the time of this study, it was

stereotypical to believe that ethnic minorities were uneducated. By selecting participants who had graduated from secondary school, I sought to begin to deconstruct this image.

Participants were recruited using a variety of means. To begin, Natcharat Juelsgaard, my wife and research assistant, put me into contact with a woman who was ethnically Lahu and had graduated from Banrongrian Secondary School. Initially, we connected on Facebook and set up a time for an interview. She agreed to participate and we conducted our first interview. Our second participant was a woman who I had met several times during my trips to Thailand over the past seven years. Her family lived in the Lahu village where I was a volunteer. As I knew she graduated from Banrongrian, I called her and we set up a time to conduct our interview. Three other participants, at the time of the study, were teachers at a school near Banrongrian. Having lived in Banrongrian, I was familiar with the school and had briefly met the teachers on previous trips to Thailand. Fortunately, all lived at the school⁹ and were willing to participate. Additionally, these three participants gave me the contact information of four other Lahu individuals who went to Banrongrian around the same time. They encouraged me to ask them to participate and again, fortunately, all were willing. Lastly, at the time of the study I lived in the same Lahu village-community as a young Lahu man who had graduated from Banrongrian. While we had never conversed previously, I approached him in person and he was willing to participate. It is important to note that initially, there were twelve participants in the study. However, interviews with two participants lacked the quality and depth needed for phenomenological analysis and I was unable to meet them for a second interview. Thus, as the study unfolded, the number of participants was reduced to ten, consisting of six women and four men between the ages of 21 and 29 (See Table 1).

⁹ In many rural schools in Thailand, but even at large universities in cities, it is common for teachers to reside on school grounds in housing provided by the school.

Table 1. Background of Participants

Name	Age/Gender	Place of Birth	Highest Degree Received
Fah	29/F	Dang Yang	B.A.
Min	23/F	Chiang Rai	Secondary School Degree (Currently attending university)
Ati	24/M	Banponam	B.A.
Sande	25/F	Ban Pung Tow	B.A.
Nacoot	26/F	Ban Pung Tow	B.A.
Sook	21/M	Chatamang	Secondary School Degree
Ann	29/F	Banponam	B.A.
Chai	26/M	Maysan	B.A.
Reme	27/F	Maysan	B.A.
Kritipong	28/M	Huay Kom Nom	B.A.

Banrongrian Secondary School. As mentioned, all participants attended Banrongrian Secondary School. The town of Banrongrian is located in Chiang Rai Province. While the town itself is made up mostly of Thai people, the area surrounding the town is ethnically diverse. As Banrongrian is a small economic and political center, on any given day in the town one can encounter people from at least six different ethnic groups – Thai, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Hmong, and Chinese. In addition, the town sits in a valley surrounded by rolling mountains. As I explain in Chapter Five of this dissertation, the geographical distinction between valleys/lowlands and mountains/highlands also serves to distinguish between peoples of differing ethnic backgrounds (i.e. in general, Thai people live in the valleys and ethnic minorities live in the mountains). As there are limited lower secondary schools and no upper secondary schools in the mountains, ethnic minority peoples in the area go to Banrongrian in order to attend secondary school. Thus,

within the town of Banrongrian, the secondary school is especially diverse. This diversity was a significant factor leading to focusing the study on Banrongrian Secondary School.

Another factor was that I lived in Banrongrian for several months in 2006. During that time, I volunteered at Banrongrian Secondary School as an English language teacher. My experience at that time, in which I observed significant differences and divisions between ethnic minority students and Thai students, in addition to my familiarity with the area, also served to influence the choosing of Banrongrian as the location of this study.

Interviews. Before recruiting any participants, I created a guiding interview script in English with the purpose of collecting data that would allow me to respond to the central research questions of this study (See Appendix B). With the help of Natcharat who was fluent in both Lahu and Thai, we translated the interview script into Thai. Then, from June to August 2012, we conducted our initial interviews in Thai with the ten participants. Two pairs of participants, Ati and Sande as well as Chai and Reme, were interviewed together in small focus groups. At the time of the study, Ati and Sande were married and lived together; interviewing them together was, for them, convenient and comfortable. Additionally, Chai and Reme grew up together, attended school together, and worked together at a primary school. As both were willing to participate in the study, they believed it was easiest to be interviewed together.

As there were ten participants and two pairs were interviewed in small focus groups, there were a total of eight initial interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and the time and location was arranged based on the participants' convenience and preference. The first interview was conducted at a university campus, as the participant was a student. Three interviews were conducted at participants' current places of residence. And the remaining four

interviews took place in participants' offices. Lastly, all interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants.

Before beginning the interview, I explained the purposes of the study and, if I had not yet done so over the phone, the expectations of the participant. I began each interview by asking participants some background questions both about themselves and their educational history. As the primary purpose of the interviews was to inquire into each participant's particular experiences as a Lahu individual at Banrongrian Secondary School, the interviews were focused on participants' experiences at Banrongrian. One of the questions that provoked some of the most in-depth responses was: "Were there any differences between you as a Lahu student and your Thai peers? If so, what were those differences?" All participants saw differences and I usually followed this question up by asking them to talk about particular incidents that they clearly remembered in which these differences became significant. Another influential interview question was: "Were there any advantages or disadvantages to being Lahu student? If so, what were there advantages and disadvantages?" As I describe in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, most participants could easily name several disadvantages of being Lahu during secondary school. And, while they were all proud to be Lahu, there were few instances when being ethnically Lahu was an advantage in school.

Epoche. An important aspect of a transcendental phenomenological approach is the use of "Epoche." This is a setting aside, as much as possible, of the researchers experiences in order to be as open as possible to the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Before beginning each interview, I took the time to remind myself of the importance of approaching each participants experience "freshly, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). In other words, I attempted to set aside my preconceptions. While bracketing out all of our

experiences is impossible, I believe, as Creswell (2007) writes, that it is possible “to suspend our understandings in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity” (p. 62). Such a practice involves, in part, writing out our past experiences with the phenomenon and clearly identifying our roles as researchers, which I do later in this chapter.

Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define data analysis as the systematic process of searching and arranging data in order to come up with findings. This process involves the constant arranging of interview transcripts, field notes, and other accumulated materials in order begin to make meaning of them by working with them, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them and searching for patterns (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

I began my analysis by writing notes and reflections as soon as possible after each interview. These word-processing files were titled “Field Journal.” At that time, I also saved the interview file and listened to the recording on my personal computer. Within one to three days, I began to translate and transcribe the interview. As the processes of translating and transcribing were significant initial steps in data analysis, I kept a running list of memos at the end of each interview transcription. This list largely contained repetitive and/or thematic Thai words and phrases that came up in the interview, in addition to brief reflections or interpretations. After completing each transcription, the corresponding Field Journal entry was then cut and pasted onto the same word-processing document. Thus, all written information, or data, regarding the interview was consolidated into a single document. Doing this for each interview, I was then prepared to move deeper into data analysis.

With all the transcriptions complete, I then focused on one transcription at a time. I listened to the audio recording in Thai while reading the interview transcription in English. This

allowed me, first, to review the accuracy of the translation and transcription, and second, to begin to become aware of some of the significant messages being conveyed by the participant. Listening to the recording several times while reading the transcription, I made a list of significant statements. In general, a statement was considered significant if it was about being Lahu and a student at Banrongrian or was related to one of the research questions. Next, perhaps the most important step, the significant statements were then thematically “clustered.” This involved coding each significant statement, organizing the codes into primary themes and subthemes, and then relating the themes and subthemes to one another. These themes and subthemes served as the basis for writing a description of the participant’s experience. Focusing on the voice of the participant by including verbatim examples, I then wrote a detailed description of what it was like for that particular participant to be a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School.

It is important to note that in analyzing each transcription I tried to maintain an openness to each participant’s unique experience (i.e. “*epoche*”). Thus, each participant’s section in Part One of Chapter Four is organized differently based on primary themes and subthemes. Additionally, many of the participants have themes that overlap or are the same. These common themes are important in the sense that they get at the *common lived experience* of all the participants, which makes up the second part of Chapter 4. However, as each participant’s experience was unique, themes and subthemes were often related to one another differently. For example, one of the primary themes that Min spoke about was the barriers she encountered in her relationships with teachers and classmates. As a part of this primary theme, she talked about the subtheme of being looked down on or being seen as inferior. In contrast, Nacoot spoke about the importance of language. It was in speaking about the primary theme of language that she spoke

about the subtheme being looked down on or being seen as inferior. Thus each participant's section is organized by primary themes and subthemes. Some primary themes for some participants are subthemes for other participants and vice versa. Furthermore, some themes for some participants are unique. In organizing Chapter Four in this fashion, I have tried to capture each participant's unique experience as they understood it. Furthermore, it allows us to see some of the layered details in the relationships between various themes and subthemes.

After writing a detailed description of each participant's experience, I set up another interview with the participant. During the second interview, I discussed with them the main themes and subthemes that were included in the description of their experience. These member checks allowed me to ask more questions if I needed clarification and, importantly, to validate with the participants the accuracy of the analysis.

I then reread all the individual descriptions and listed every verbatim quote included in each individual description in an attempt to determine what they all shared in common. Reading and analyzing the quotes, or parts of quotes, I grouped them into primary themes and subthemes. Then, using these themes, I wrote a composite description, which makes up the second part of Chapter Four, representing the experiences of the group as a whole.

Performing Cross-Cultural Research

To begin, it is important to note that I am aware of the many sensitivities and responsibilities that researchers must adopt in conducting cross-cultural research as it is rife with ethical and methodological challenges (Liamputtong, 2010). Furthermore, there is much we could discuss about cross-cultural research – ethical issues, accessing participants, cultural sensitivity, insider/outsider issues, writing and publishing cross-cultural research, representation and power issues, and much more. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I focus on some

issues related to cross-cultural communication and language, which, from my perspective, were the most important cross-cultural methodological issues in the study.

Language and communication play a central role in cross-cultural qualitative research. Monique Hennink (2008) writes, “Language is a fundamental tool through which qualitative researchers seek to understand human behaviour, social processes and the cultural meanings that inscribe human behaviour” (p. 21). Additionally, data in qualitative studies are often conveyed through words that are generated in conversations between the researcher and participants (Merriam, 1998). Differences in linguistic backgrounds can contribute to misinterpretations or misunderstandings, and this certainly affects the research findings (Liamputtong, 2010).

A major problem confronting cross-cultural researchers is an inability to speak the native language of participants. I have only a basic understanding and ability to communicate in the Lahu language. And I certainly do not know enough to conduct a qualitative research project in the Lahu language without the help of an assistant. However, having basic knowledge of the Lahu language, from my perspective, made it easier to establish rapport with participants and to cultivate a good relationship.

In this study, eight participants spoke Lahu as their native language and two spoke Thai. Those who spoke Lahu, however, also considered themselves fluent in Thai, even if it was their second language. As I had an advanced proficiency in Thai, it was best that the research be conducted using the Thai language. It is important to note that using Thai influenced the results of the research. Inez Kapborg and Carina Bertero (2002) write, “different languages create and express different realities, and language is a way of organizing the world” (p. 56). Thus, in using Thai as the language of the study, we drew on the realities created and expressed in the Thai

language. In other words, in using Thai, we had to live with the benefits and drawbacks of using concepts that we both understood and were expressed using the Thai language.

Similarly, language is “an important part of conceptualization ... It speaks of a particular social reality that may not necessarily have a conceptual equivalence in the language into which it is being translated” (Temple and Edwards, 2002, p. 3). For this study, there were times when it was difficult to translate Thai words or phrases into English because of a lack of conceptual equivalence. For example, Min spoke about “bawn nowk” or what I translated as “hill-billy.” In translating from Thai to English, I aimed to provide the reader with a “fit” between concepts expressed in different languages rather than seeking neutral equivalency (Liamputtong, 2010).

In order to guard against misinterpretation and misunderstandings, Natcharat, who is bicultural (Lahu and Thai), was present throughout the research process. She also has an advanced competency in English. Her presence allowed for me to overcome the few linguistic barriers that arose during the research process. She not only knew the languages of the participants and myself, but she also shared many social and cultural traits with us. She was able to explain the underlying cultural meanings of participants’ words and expressions if I encountered difficulties (Hennink, 2008). In particular, she played an important role in translating the interview questions from English to Thai, in conducting the interviews in Thai, and in translating the audio files from Thai into English. Thus, insofar as her role influenced the data collection and analysis, she influenced the eventual findings of the study. While her presence might be interpreted as somehow problematic, conducting this research would not have been possible without her assistance. Furthermore, I believe that her contribution and perspective add further value and trustworthiness to the study because it allowed me to be in constant critical conversation with another individual throughout the research process.

Guarding against misinterpretation also involved performing member checks and asking more questions to participants than might be necessary in order to clarify what I was interpreting. Finally, I have conducted several smaller studies with Lahu individuals in the Thai language; this past experience was helpful in guiding this study.

Lastly, I believe it is important to note that many participants expressed thanks for doing the research. Perhaps they were glad that someone outside their cultural group was interested in what they had to say and wanted to hear about their experiences. Thus, even though cross-cultural research is rife with challenges, if we are aware of these issues, then sharing our human stories across cultures can be a positive experience for both the participants and the researcher.

My Role as Researcher

In this section, I discuss my role in this study. I begin by providing some background information as to my introduction to Lahu people and education in Thailand. I then discuss some aspects of my social background, including being “White” and American.

A Lahu Village and Me. I can still remember driving on a meandering dirt road through the rolling mountains of northern Thailand into the Lahu village near Banrongrian that has shaped much of my life during the past seven years. The bamboo houses resting on wooden stilts, black pigs roaming freely, women carrying children on their backs while working their fields, and men digging their hoes into the soil of the steep hillsides were unfamiliar images for a 22 year old who had spent the previous four years on a beautiful university campus in southern California. I remained in the village for an initial period of five months as a volunteer at the local primary school. This was my first experience observing Lahu students in Thai schools. Rereading e-mails from that time, I had several initial impressions. First, the hospitality of teachers and students was incomparable to any of my previous experiences. I, a complete

stranger at that time, felt welcome because of the significant efforts made by the school community in order to make me feel at home. Second, during the days at the school, I was surprised by the amount of time the students were free to play. As there were only three teachers for preschool through Boo 6 (Grade 6), perhaps being understaffed contributed to, what seemed to me, few academic activities in the classroom and a lot of free playtime for the students. Third, I observed that it was only when speaking to teachers that the students used the Thai language. Among their friends and classmates, both in and out of the classroom, students communicated in Lahu. These initial five months at the primary school and in the Lahu community certainly initiated my interest in diversity, Lahu ethnicity, and education.

Returning to northern Thailand again in June 2006, I lived in the (Thai) town of Banrongrian and taught English at the secondary school. My experience during that time, in which I observed significant divisions between ethnic minority students and Thai students, furthered my interests in the perspectives and experiences of Lahu students in Thai schools. In addition, it was during this trip that I married a Lahu woman whose love of her culture has influenced me a great deal.

During the summers of 2008 and 2009, for a total of four months, and during the six months of this study, I returned to the Lahu village near Banrongrian. In general, living in that Lahu community has allowed me to become aware of some of the challenges many young people face in trying to go to school. And, furthermore, it has allowed me to observe some of the consequences of the marginalized position of ethnic minorities in Thailand (e.g. poverty, difficulties obtaining Thai citizenship, not being granted legal ownership of land in the mountains).

All of this said, for this particular study, it is important to know that I take a stand in favor of the empowerment of Lahu peoples in Thailand. Being Lahu, or being the member of any ethnic group, should never contribute to a person being treated unfairly, unequally, or disrespectfully. In addition, like many of the participants in this study, I believe that an education can help empower individuals and allow them to move out of marginalized positions in society. These viewpoints and biases certainly influence the study at hand. In particular, I chose to focus primarily on the perspectives and viewpoints of Lahu individuals. In doing so, I hoped to listen, understand, and give voice to people who, primarily because of their ethnicity, occupy a place on the margins of Thai society. While I hope that in future studies I can include the viewpoints of other groups of peoples, such as Thai teachers and administrators, this study was limited in that my biases in favor of the Lahu perspective influenced me to interview only Lahu individuals.

My Social Background. Being raised California, I am not Lahu, nor do I speak or understand much beyond the basics of the Lahu language. I admit that my position as an outsider may have posed challenges throughout this study. To begin, I am a “White” American. In contrast to all the participants in this study, I am not a member of an ethnic minority group. In addition, my upper economic class background was significantly different from participants’ backgrounds. I have had the opportunity to freely pursue educational opportunities with relatively few social-structural barriers or challenges. And being male has further contributed to my privileged position.

From one perspective, white, American, upper-class, secure, and educated males like me often embody many of the structural problems of societies around the world. It is not that there is something “wrong” with any of these identities or characteristics as they are applied to me as

an individual; rather, as a member of the aforementioned social groups, I have benefitted from social institutions often organized to privilege these groups. And, there is little desire for significant structural changes to major social problems because “we” are sitting comfortably at the supposed top of the pile. Yet, it is this “truth” that pushes me to write on the topics discussed in this dissertation.

At the same time that I recognize my privileged position in this world, I also recognize a privileged place for those who are in any way “poor” or marginalized. Primarily because of my Catholic education, both at home, during high school, and at university, I have been taught and recognize as true that those who are poor and marginalized in society (in any way) are able to offer a valuable perspective. This is especially true when examining power structures, or the experiences of domination, that may exist in a society at a particular time. In other words, “truth” often comes from the margins. Thus, as a white, American, upper-class, secure, and educated male, I must listen to the valuable voices of those who are marginalized in order to understand more about myself, others, and the world we live in.

Importantly, I find that being in solidarity with those who live on the margins of society is transformative both of ourselves and of the wider communities within which we live. For example, in conducting this research, the “truths” that have emerged as to what it is like to be an ethnic student and a minority student have allowed me to become much more sensitive and aware of some of the challenges and issues that ethnic minority students confront in going to school. Such valuable and transformative knowledge is exactly what we hope to produce in conducting research. Aware of some of these issues, teachers, educators, and policy makers can be of better service to students and to the wider communities in which they practice.

Thus, I recognize that in many ways I am an outsider with respect to the participants. I admit that I have never personally experienced much of what participants experienced. One perspective is that such a position might hinder me from understanding and describing the experiences of the participants. However, I believe that being fully open to participants' stories, listening attentively to and valuing their perspectives, and continually seeking to understand their experiences made conducting this study possible. Moreover, I do not believe it necessary that the researcher have the same life experiences of the participants. Perhaps, as Davis et. al. (2004) write, "naivete regarding participants' experience may permit even closer attention to the nuances of their narratives" (p. 425).

Validity, Reliability, and Credibility

Issues of validity and reliability are approached differently by various researchers. Corbin and Strauss (2008) believe the terms "validity" and "reliability" carry too many quantitative implications and, thus, they prefer to use the term "credibility." They write, "'credibility' indicates that findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants', researchers', and readers' experiences with a phenomenon but at the same time the explanation is only one of many "plausible" interpretations possible from data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 302). Other researchers still employ the terms validity and reliability; however, the conceptions of validity and reliability are different from what is seen in quantitative research (See Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2007).

Internal validity, or credibility, attempts to ensure that the research findings accurately represent reality. In other words, "Did we get the story 'right'?" (Stake, 1995). There were several strategies that I used during the research process in order to produce a credible and trustworthy study. First, triangulation, the practice of using multiple sources of data, multiple

investigators, or multiple methods, was employed in order to confirm findings (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2007). With the presence of Natcharat Juelsgaard, my wife, as a research assistant throughout the project, I was able to dialogue with her throughout regarding any tentative conclusions. Second, I discussed my findings with participants – a practice termed “member checks” (Merriam, 1998). More specifically, after finishing the individual accounts of participants’ experiences, I discussed the description with the participants. Third, my advisor and dissertation committee reviewed my methods and findings, helping me to determine if my conclusions were plausible. Fourth, I attempted to clearly articulate my role and biases at the beginning of the study (Merriam, 1998). Fifth, I have spent the past seven years learning about and, at times, living with Lahu people in Thailand. This prolonged period of study has allowed me to gain an understanding of many Lahu individual’s experiences in Thai schools. Such knowledge, in addition to the strategies mentioned above, I believe contributes to the credibility and trustworthiness of this study.

Limitations of Study

This study was limited in several ways. First, this study was focused on the perspectives of Lahu individuals. While there are many voices we could listen to, I chose to attend to the views of Lahu individuals. Furthermore, there were only ten Lahu individuals involved in this study and many attended secondary school around the same time. Thus, the perspectives of the participants cannot be said to represent the perspectives of all Lahu people or even the majority of Lahu peoples’ experiences past and present. While I do believe that other people, both Lahu and non-Lahu, will find the study relevant, the experiences of participants were specific to this study. Also with regards to the participants, this study was limited in that all participants graduated from secondary school. Living in a Lahu village at the time of this study, I observed

that there were many Lahu adolescents who did not graduate from secondary school. The perspectives of Lahu individuals who discontinued their schooling have not been included in this study.

Second, this study was limited by the specificity of the location. I was interested in the experiences of Lahu individuals who attended Banrongrian Secondary School. While Lahu people reside throughout other countries in Southeast Asia, China and, in small numbers, worldwide, this study was interested in the viewpoints of those who attended Banrongrian.

Third, I recognize this study was limited by the amount of time spent conducting research. With limited time, perhaps the participants were not able to express everything of relevance. Or, perhaps, I have yet to meet a key participant because I have not spent enough time “in the field.”

Lastly, as I discussed in my role as a researcher, my background, biases, and beliefs both contribute to and limit this study.

Summary

In this chapter, I have described the methods employed in achieving the primary aims of this study – to give voice to Lahu individuals by inquiring into and describing their lived experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School. I briefly discussed a general overview of qualitative research methods and my rationale for choosing a transcendental phenomenological approach. I then detailed the steps and procedures involved in my data collection and analysis. Next, I discussed some relevant language and communication issues in conducting cross-cultural research and presented my role as a researcher. To conclude, I considered the credibility of the study and the study’s limitations.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter consists of three parts. In Part One, which makes up the majority of the chapter, I provide individual accounts, based on our interviews, of each participant's experience of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School (or Banrongrian). Proceeding participant-by-participant, I detail the secondary school experiences in which participants understood their ethnicity as playing a significant role. Each account contains a brief background of the participant, a thematically-organized description of the participant's experience of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian, and a summary. As two pairs of participants, Ati and Sande as well as Chai and Reme, were interviewed together in small focus groups, I chose to describe their experiences together. Thus, although there were ten participants, there were a total of eight descriptions.

In Part Two, I provide a *composite description* of the participants' experiences of being Lahu students at Banrongrian. The composite description presents the *common lived experience* of the participants and aims to represent the experiences of the group as a whole. Thus, this chapter touches both the unique and individual as well as the shared and communal experiences of the participants.

Lastly, in Part Three, I present two additional themes that emerged during the interviews: being economically poor and living in a dormitory. These themes were significant aspects of participants' experiences of secondary school; however, their relationship to participants' ethnicity remained ambiguous throughout the project. Thus, I chose to address them separately.

Part One: Personal Accounts of Being a Lahu Student

Below, I provide eight separate accounts of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School. Each account begins with a brief background that focuses on the primary schooling of the participant. I then present the heart of the findings by thematically describing the participant's perspective on the significance of being ethnically Lahu during secondary school. A brief summary of the main points concludes each account.

Fah's Background

Fah, age 29, was born in Dang Yang, a Lahu village in Thailand with no official government school. At the age of five, she began attending informal Thai language classes in the village. These classes were open to everyone in the community and were taught by a Thai person associated with the Thai government. Despite attending occasional classes, she said that she was unable to speak, write, or read Thai until her father sent her to another Lahu village, about a five hours walk away, in order to attend primary school.

Beginning her formal education at Yaminin Primary School at the age of seven, Fah tested into Boo 3 (Grade 3). At that time, she lived at the school in a dormitory for students. Being away from her family, she recalled her time there as difficult. She said:

I did not want to live there. I did not want to be there ... It was really difficult. We had to cook food for ourselves, we had to find food in the forest, plant vegetables, raise chickens, everything. I almost went blind because when my friend was cutting firewood to make rice, the wood broke off and flew and hit me in the forehead. If it had hit me in the eye I would have been blind.

While it was a difficult experience, she also said that it allowed her to be capable of taking care of herself from a young age.

In addition, Fah spoke of several incidents in which she ran away from the school, usually back to her parents' home village. While she was unable to remember the exact reasons for running away each time, she did recall two particular incidents. During one incident, she ran

away from the school because she was afraid the teacher would force her to shovel out the feces from the school septic tanks. This was one of the duties the students had to perform at the rural school. Another time, Fah ran away after all the students were hit with a wooden stick for not keeping the bathroom clean. After this incident in the middle of Boo 5 (Grade 5), Fah and her father decided to take her out of Yaminin Primary School and bring her back to live with her parents in Chatamang, a village into which her parents had moved while she was away. At Chatamang, Fah finished primary school before moving away from her village-community in the mountains and into the local Thai town. There she attended Banrongrian Secondary School and lived at a dormitory nearby.

Being a Lahu Student: Fah's Perspective

For Fah, being a Lahu student at Banrongrian meant, first, having to work harder than her Thai peers in order to keep up in class. This was due, in part, to attending a primary school where “the teacher was not very good.” Additionally, she was unable to receive help on her schoolwork from her parents, to attend any special educational programs, or to utilize educational materials such as videos or CD's; importantly, she believed this made her different from Thai students. Second, Fah spoke about her relationships with her peers as a significant aspect of being a Lahu student. She claimed that many, but not all, of her Thai peers “looked down on” her because of her ethnicity and she talked about having primarily Lahu friends. In what follows, I detail, with verbatim examples from our interviews, these two main themes of Fah's schooling experience at Banrongrian.

“We had to do a lot more than Thai students”. During secondary school, from Fah's perspective, being a Lahu student meant, in part, having to do a lot more than Thai students in order to keep up. Describing a difference between herself as a Lahu student and her Thai

classmates, she said, “We [Lahu students] had to do a lot more than Thai students. If we didn’t then we wouldn’t have been able to keep up.” In addition, she said, “I had to study harder than them [Thai students].” From Fah’s perspective, there were several factors related to her ethnicity that put her in a situation in which she had to study harder. First, she claimed that the primary schools in the mountains founded for ethnic minority students contained teachers who did not teach as well as those at schools in the lowlands founded for Thai students. Talking about Chatamang, the primary school Fah attended for the second term of Boo 5 (Grade 5) and Boo 6 (Grade 6), she said, “The teacher was not very good, most students in Boo 6 (Grade 6) couldn’t even read Thai.” At that time, there was only one teacher in the school and she was responsible for teaching six grade levels. Moving from primary school to secondary school, from a mountain school to a lowland school, also meant moving from being one of the best students in the class to having trouble keeping up in some subjects. She said:

Some of the subjects that we studied were difficult. When I was in the school in the mountains for Boo 6, I was one of the best students in the class. But, since the teachers in the mountain schools did not teach as well as the teachers in the lowland, there were some subjects in which I could not keep up with other students. So, it was difficult. I once got a zero in math and I really did not like math after that.

From Fah’s perspective, one reason she had difficulties keeping up with other students during secondary school was that there was inferior teaching in the mountain schools for ethnic minority students. Further contributing to her difficulties keeping up with other students, Fah saw Lahu students, including herself, as lacking help from their parents. She said:

There was nothing that could help me to learn unless I was at school. Mom and dad couldn’t help me with homework. Thai students got help from their parents with schoolwork. If a Thai student didn’t know, then their parents could teach them. But Lahu parents couldn’t help their children.

Fah claimed that one of the significant differences between herself as a Lahu student and Thai students was that her parents were not able to help her with schoolwork. Fah’s parents were

illiterate in Thai and she only saw them about once a month as she lived in a dormitory and not at home. In addition to believing that the parents of Thai students were more capable of helping their children with schoolwork, Fah said that Thai parents often made their children attend special programs that helped to further their education. She said:

Thai parents often made their child study in a special program, made their child do their homework. But my parents never knew whether or not I did my homework and they didn't know of any special programs.

Fah's parents lacked knowledge of special programs outside of the school that may have helped her to keep up with her Thai classmates. Additionally, Fah believed that she needed to work harder than her Thai classmates because she did not have helpful educational materials at home, such as video programs, or CD's, that she claimed were frequently used by Thai students. She said:

As a Lahu student I was different because of my foundation at home. Thai students had video programs, CD's, and other things that helped them in school. These things helped them to learn more. But I did not have any of these.

As the help of parents, special programs, or educational materials were unavailable, not accessible, or not utilized by Fah, she saw herself in a position in which she had to work harder than her Thai peers in order to keep up in class.

Lastly, Fah believed that having Thai as her second language contributed to the necessity of working harder than Thai students in order to keep up. As I wrote previously, while Fah had a few limited encounters with the Thai language before the age of seven, it was not until she attended Yaminin Primary School that she started to be able to understand, speak, read, and write Thai. Talking about Thai students during secondary school, she said, "They were better students because they were learning in their own language. It was more difficult for me because Thai wasn't my language." Despite encountering more challenges than Thai students, Fah recalled

enjoying Thai language classes and receiving good grades. She said, “But I liked Thai language and I got good grades in Thai all the way through university.” Interestingly, she claimed that perhaps her enjoyment of learning Thai was uncommon among ethnic minority students. She said:

I am a strange mountain person in the opinion of others, I liked to study Thai language. Even Thai students didn't like to study Thai language because there were so many little rules. But I really liked studying Thai, a lot. And I did well in Thai, I received high scores.

In sum, attending a primary school where the teacher did not teach well, lacking help from parents, special programs, and education materials, and having Thai as a second language, Fah believed that as a Lahu student she had to work harder than her Thai classmates in order to keep up.

“They looked down on my ethnicity”. As I describe throughout this chapter, all of the participants in this study talked about their experiences of being “looked down on” or being “seen as inferior” by their Thai peers. The word that they used in describing their common experience was “*doo took*.” In Thai, *doo took* can mean “to look down on,” “to see as inferior,” “to disdain,” “to despise,” “to hold in contempt,” and “to insult” (Haas, 1964). In the interviews, participants frequently explained how Thai students “*doo took*” or “looked down on” Lahu students primarily because of their ethnic status of being Lahu and coming from the mountains. I analyze the theme of “*doo took*” further in Chapter Five; for now, let us focus on Fah’s experiences of being looked down on or being seen as inferior.

Primarily during lower secondary school, when she first moved from the mountains to the lowlands to attend Banrongrian Secondary School, Fah claimed that many of her Thai peers looked down on her primarily because she was Lahu. Furthermore, being looked down on made her feel different and not a part of their group. She said:

When I began lower secondary school I felt very different. Really, I could study and learn just as well as they [Thai students] could. But they looked down on my ethnicity. And this made me feel different from them, like I was not a part of their group. In reality, we were not that different. They were going to school just like me. But I had to study harder than them.

Fah said that during lower secondary school it was common for ethnic minority students to be seen as inferior. Furthermore, being a “mountain person” (*kon doi*) lay at the roots of being looked down on. She said:

There were some students who did not look down on us, but the vast majority of the students at the school saw us as inferior. They looked down on mountain people (*kon doi*) at that time.

It was not only Lahu students who were looked down on because of their ethnic status; other ethnic minority students from the mountains were seen as inferior as well. More specifically, for Fah, one of the particular ways in which she was looked down on was by being called “dirty.” As mentioned in Chapter Two, cleanliness often signified being “civilized,” while dirtiness was a sign of “wildness.” She said:

There were Akha¹⁰ students [at the school] as well. They [Thai students] looked down on all the hill tribes (*chao khao*). They said that the hill tribes were dirty. At the time, they said we were dirty.

Recalling one particular incident during upper secondary school, Fah said:

At Banrongrian, there was one time when I got in a fight with a guy named Jae. I was very angry and he was angry as well. I took a broom and I was going to hit him. At that time he was looking down on me. He was seeing me inferior. He was really the only person who looked down on me during upper secondary school. I was like, “Why do you look down on me?” I asked him, “Do you want to see who is better in school?” At that time, my dad was the “spirit doctor” in the village. I made Jae scared by telling him that my dad would “cast a spell on him” putting a water buffalo hide in his stomach. I really wanted my dad to do it, to put a water buffalo hide in his stomach. This made him scared, he was scared. He said, something like, “OK, let’s compete in school. Who is better in school, a mountain person or me?” I was a mountain person and we agreed to compete. After that I studied really hard. I was fortunate because I did well in the class

¹⁰ The Akha, like the Lahu, are an ethnic minority group in Thailand.

that term. I got one of the top scores. So, I told him “don’t look down on mountain people, mountain people are capable as well.”

In general, despite this particular story, incidents in which she was seen as inferior took place primarily during *lower* secondary school. By upper secondary school, there were fewer experiences in which Fah believed she was being looked down on for being Lahu. Fah said:

By upper secondary school, each person had been in school for a while and everyone had matured. So, it was a little better, people did not really look down on me.

She also said:

People did not really look down on me in upper secondary school, but those who were good students, or those who were pretty, had their own group. They did not want to be a part of our group, which was not pretty. But those Thai classmates who were not pretty, they hung out with us.

Thus, for Fah, much of what she encountered in terms of being seen as inferior during lower secondary school had declined by upper secondary school.

Looking again at the story about Jae shared above, in response to being looked down on, Fah felt the need to prove that she, as a mountain person, was capable of doing well in school. In addition to the above, she said:

Mountain people were capable as well. Mountain people could play guitar, they could do everything really. They could sing in the right key. I thought that anything Thai students can do I can do as well.

As one response to being seen as inferior, Fah wanted to prove that she, as a mountain person, was as capable as her Thai classmates.

Lastly, while many Thai students looked down on her because she was Lahu, Fah appreciated that some Thai students were her good friends. She said, “Some [Thai] classmates looked down on me. But some were my good friends as well. There were some students who did not see us as inferior.” Although Fah had some close Thai friends, most of her friends were

other Lahu students. She said, “Most of my friends were Lahu. There were a couple Thai students who were close to us. But most of them liked being with their Thai friends.”

In sum, for Fah, being a Lahu student at Banrongrian meant, in part, being looked down on by many of her Thai classmates, primarily during lower secondary school, because of her ethnicity. In response, Fah wanted to prove that she as a mountain person was at least as capable as her Thai classmates. And, lastly, while most of Fah’s friends were Lahu, some Thai classmates did not see her as inferior and were a part of her close group of friends.

Summary

In describing Fah’s experience, I have discussed two main themes that emerged during our interviews. First, from Fah’s perspective, being ethnically Lahu meant having to work harder than her Thai peers in order to keep up in class. Attending an inferior primary school, lacking help from her parents, special programs, and educational materials, and learning in a second language were primary factors placing her in this position. Second, Fah experienced being looked down on or being seen as inferior by many of her Thai peers because of her ethnicity. In response, she felt the need to prove that she was at least as capable as her Thai peers. Importantly, Fah also appreciated that, while most of her friends were Lahu, some of her good friends were Thai students who did not look down on her for being Lahu.

Min’s Background

Min, age 23, was born in the city of Chiang Rai. Her mother was Lahu and her father was Thai. Unlike most of the other participants in this study, Min did not grow up in a Lahu village and she never attended a school founded for ethnic minority students in the mountains. Additionally, Min spoke primarily Thai with her parents and relatives. However, Min’s case was especially interesting because, despite the aforementioned particularities that might entice us into

thinking that her Lahu ethnicity was insignificant, she emphasized that being Lahu played an important role in shaping her relationships with teachers and students at Banrongrian. Before looking at these relationships in more detail, it is helpful to take a brief look at Min's primary school background.

Min began primary school in a rural Thai town near Mae Hong Son. During that time she lived at the school in a dormitory for students. After being there for two years, she moved into the city of Chiang Mai and attended another Thai government school while living with an aunt. She remembered that the relationships between students and teachers were different at the two schools. She said:

I lived in Mae Hong Son for two years. The teachers there really took care of the children. Maybe it was because the children lived at the school. But when I came to study in the city, in Chiang Mai, the teachers, they didn't really take care of the children. Once they were done teaching that was it. They just let the children go and ignored them.

After being in Chiang Mai for two years, Min changed schools for a second time and began to attend a Christian school in a rural town in Chiang Rai Province. While there she lived in a dormitory primarily for ethnic minority students who came from the mountains in order to attend school. Similar to her experience in Mae Hong Son, she remembered the teachers at the school as caring well for the children. In sharing a good memory of her time there, she said:

I had a friend who was Yao¹¹ and at the school there was a forest with a lot of trees. It was the time of year when there were a lot of crickets. On the weekends, I went out with my friends and I was someone who was not very capable when it came to finding food in the forest. But my friend was a mountain person and was very good at digging for crickets. She enjoyed digging for them as well. She gave me some to take home for my family to eat. This is a good memory I have from primary school.

¹¹ The Yao, like the Lahu, are an ethnic minority group in Thailand.

Min finished primary school and continued on to her first year of secondary school, Moo 1 (Grade 7), at the same school. Before beginning of Moo 2 (Grade 8), she moved to Banrongrian. There, she attended her next five years of secondary school while living in a local dormitory.

Being a Lahu Student: Min's Perspective

Min's experience of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School from Moo 2 (Grade 8) through Moo 6 (Grade 12) involves, in part, encountering barriers between herself, as a Lahu individual, and her teachers. Encountering such barriers often included feelings of inferiority. Similarly, in Min's relations with her Thai classmates, she perceived significant divisions based on her ethnicity. As with the barriers, these divisions were associated with feelings of inferiority and also a lack of confidence. In what follows, I describe these two main themes that emerged during our interviews.

“It was like there was a barrier”. Min was one of the top students in her class. However, from Min's perspective, being a Lahu student during secondary school meant, in part, encountering barriers in her relationships with teachers because of her Lahu ethnicity. In one of the experiences Min shared, she talked about her desire to be the student who made the morning announcements over the school's public address system. However, she never pursued the opportunity because of a perceived barrier between herself and the teacher. She said:

I wanted to be the person who made the morning announcements at school. Each secondary school has one, like a D.J. But I thought, I am Lahu, and my Thai classmates were closer to the teacher than I was and they could easily approach the teacher. It was like there was a barrier. I was a dormitory student, a child from the mountains, a Lahu person. It was difficult to approach the teacher and I was like, “wait a minute, do you really want to go to the teacher?” It was a feeling of, a feeling of being inferior (*doo took*).

For Min, barriers between herself and her teachers were based primarily on her being a dormitory student, a child from the mountains, a Lahu person. Additionally, such barriers involved feelings of being inferior or being looked down on. In general, Min saw Thai students as having better relationships with teachers than Lahu students. She said:

Thai students were close to the teachers. Speaking Thai allowed them to converse easily with the teachers. Those students who were not very good in school could still be of assistance to the teachers and help them. And the teachers allowed them.

Teachers often asked students for help with tasks like delivering messages or getting books from the library. From Min's perspective, even if a Thai student did not do well academically, they could still have a good relationship with their teachers. Even though Min grew up speaking Thai and was one of the top academic students, she claimed being Lahu still hindered her relationships with teachers. She thought that this was true for all ethnic minority students. She said:

For students from the mountains, when we turned in our work, the teacher stared at us like "What do you want?" It might just have been my own personal feeling or maybe the teacher really did think that. I don't know.

Believing that Lahu students were often treated differently than Thai students, Min saw the differences as more fundamentally a matter of equality. She said:

The teacher had an important role. The students knew when a teacher did not treat everyone equally.

Being treated differently because she was Lahu, Min believed the barriers she encountered between herself and her teachers were fundamentally about equality or being treated equally.

In sum, Min, as a Lahu student, encountered barriers in her relationships with teachers that most Thai students, from her perspective, did not face. At times, the barriers, which involved feelings of inferiority, served to prevent her from pursuing particular opportunities. Moreover, she saw the barriers as fundamentally about equality. Similar to barriers, Min also spoke about *divisions* between herself and her Thai classmates. It is to these that I now turn.

“Different” and “Inferior”. As mentioned, Min went to a rural school in Chiang Rai Province from Boo 5 (Grade 5) to Moo 1 (Grade 7). In speaking about Banrongrian, where she was from Moo 2 (Grade 8) through Moo 6 (Grade 12), she often compared her experiences at the two schools. In Chiang Rai, she claimed there were no divisions between classmates of differing ethnic backgrounds. She said:

My classmates, the ones I studied with in Chiang Rai, there was no space or division between different ethnic groups. By this I mean that because we all lived in the same place, we were friends, we cared for each other, connected and communicated with each other.

In Chiang Rai, her friends included both Thai and ethnic minority classmates; however, when she moved to Banrongrian, the situation changed significantly. She said:

[In Chiang Rai], I had Thai friends and mountain people friends. We were all friends. But this was different from my experience in secondary school.

Before entering Moo 2 (Grade 8) at Banrongrian, Min had not encountered any divisions drawn along ethnic lines in school. Experiencing such divisions at Banrongrian, she was confused by some of her classmates’ attitudes and viewpoints. More specifically, she was confused as to why her Thai classmates saw ethnic minorities as different and inferior. She said:

I was confused because when I was in Chiang Rai there weren’t the divisions. But when I came to Banrongrian, I lived in the dormitory. And the students in Banrongrian thought that the children who lived in the dormitory were mountain people. At first, I did not really think anything of it because I had never encountered something like that before. But as I continued to go to school at Banrongrian, I was confused as to why Thai students saw the mountain people the way they did, as different, as inferior. They saw the mountain people as this or that, as “hillbillies” (*baan nowk*)¹² ... people’s attitudes and viewpoints were very different.

¹² Min used the Thai term “baan nowk” in describing how she believed Thai students saw mountain people. In Thai, “baan nowk” is a derogatory term for people who live rurally and are seen as “backwards” or “undeveloped.” Here, I have translated it as “hillbilly” as I believe it best captures in English the meaning of the Thai term.

As Min continued through secondary school, she became aware of differences between Lahu students and Thai students that she believed did not exist at her previous school. Furthermore, these differences, which Min believed were a significant part of the wider society within which the school existed, made her feel inferior and unconfident. She said:

When I was first in school, I did not think there was any difference [between Lahu students and Thai students]. But as time went on, there were things that happened with teachers, classmates and the like that made me feel inferior. I wasn't confident enough to be a leader. In my previous school, I felt confident, but when I came to Banrongrian, the situation was different, the society was different, and it made me aware of the differences between students. I lost my confidence.

Being made aware of differences between herself as a Lahu student and her Thai classmates, Min felt inferior and lost her confidence. Speaking further about the relationship between the divisions at school and the wider society, she said:

The problems, the divisions I was talking about were not really caused by Lahu students. For example, the society oppressed students to think, "I can't speak in class because I am Lahu" or "I can't participate in class." The society didn't accept us. If the problems are going to be fixed, then the school is a good place to start.

For Min, Lahu students did nothing to create divisions between themselves and their Thai peers. Rather, such divisions were a part of the wider society, which was not accepting of Lahu students. Interestingly, Min also saw the school as a good starting place to challenge such divisions.

To summarize, from Min's perspective, her Lahu ethnicity was the principal feature of the divisions between herself and her Thai classmates. Having never previously encountered divisions between different ethnic groups, she was initially confused as to why her Thai classmates saw her as inferior. As she continued through school, these divisions were instrumental in her feeling inferior and unconfident. Lastly, Min saw the divisions as existing

not only within the school, but also as a part of a wider society not accepting of being ethnically Lahu.

Summary

In this section, I have described two of the main themes that emerged during Min's interviews. First, Min perceived significant barriers in her relationships with her teachers. Such barriers were founded on being ethnically different and served to make her feel inferior. Second, Min believed there were divisions, drawn along ethnic lines, between Lahu students and Thai students. These divisions, which existed in the wider society outside the school, contributed further to Min's feelings of inferiority and to her loss of confidence.

Ati and Sande

Ati, age 24, and Sande, age 25, both attended Banrongrian Secondary School. At the time of this study, they were married, had two children, and lived in Chiang Rai. In this section, I provide a brief separate background of each participant. However, as Ati and Sande were interviewed together in a small focus group, I analyzed the interview transcription as a whole, developing themes from both Ati's and Sande's accounts together. In other words, in thematically describing their experiences of being Lahu students at Banrongrian, I did not develop separate themes for each participant; rather, the themes are shared by both Ati and Sande and their individual accounts are retained by referring to each participant by name.

Ati's Background

Ati was born in the Lahu village of Banponam. At the age of four, he began preschool in his home village and was there until Boo 2 (Grade 2). Moving from the mountains at the age of eight, Ati attended Bangon School, a school founded for Thai students in the lowlands, for Boo 3 (Grade 3) and Boo 4 (Grade 4). Describing the reasons for transferring schools, Ati said:

At the time, my parents worked as farmers and they didn't really have much time to take care of me. And my aunt was living near the school. They thought that there was a better opportunity for me to continue my education. Living in the lowlands was better than living in the mountains. (Ati)

Ati claimed that when he moved from the mountains to the lowlands he became aware, or was made aware, of being different from Thai students. It was also the first time he experienced being seen as inferior (*doo took*) because of his ethnicity. He said:

I knew I was different ever since I went to study in a school in the lowlands. I knew that I came from the mountains. I believe that every person gets teased and made fun of when they enter school, but the differences that existed were exaggerated. I began to know that I was different in this way and that way. But truly, we weren't as different as they thought we were. But the exaggerated differences made me think that I was different. They would say "Musser" or "ee Musser."

The term "Musser" was a pejorative term used for Lahu people in Thailand. Moreover, "ee" before Musser was meant to indicate that the person was of lower status or standing than the speaker. In moving from a mountain school to a lowland school, Ati was made aware of being ethnically different; furthermore, according to Ati, from his Thai peers' perspective, his ethnic difference placed him in a position of inferiority.

Believing that Ati would receive a better education at a different school, his parents took him out of Bangon School and sent him to a private school for Boo 5 (Grade 5) and Boo 6 (Grade 6). After finishing primary school, Ati moved into the town of Banrongrian in order to attend the local secondary school.

Sande's Background

Sande was born in the Lahu village of Ban Pung Tow. Living at home with her parents, she began school at the age of five and remained a student in her home village until finishing Boo 6 (Grade 6) seven years later. The school was located between several ethnic minority villages, which included Hmong, Akha, and Lahu peoples. Students from the various villages

came to school at Ban Pung Tow. Sande recalled being friends primarily with ethnic minorities because there were only a few Thai students at the school. She also remembered having good relationships with her teachers. Sharing one experience, she said:

I can remember a teacher from the school. I had to take P.E. and gymnastics but I wasn't very good, I even failed once. The teacher helped with everything, whether it was a summersault of whatever, I couldn't do it. But the teacher was helpful and I eventually passed. (Sande)

After finishing Boo 6 (Grade 6) in her home village, Sande moved into the lowlands in order to attend Banrongrian Secondary School.

Being a Lahu Student: Ati's and Sande's Perspectives

Being a Lahu student at Banrongrian, from the perspectives of Ati and Sande, meant to be at a disadvantage because of inequalities. At the heart of these inequalities lay their "status" (*tan na*), which, as I describe in detail below, was entwined with their ethnicity. In addition, Ati and Sande emphasized being friends primarily with other ethnic minority students. They believed that Thai students had little desire to befriend them and that they often saw them as inferior because they were Lahu. In what follows, I detail these two main themes that emerged during our interviews.

"The disadvantage of being Lahu ... was that we were not equal...". In describing their experiences of being Lahu students at Banrongrian, Ati and Sande often spoke about differences that existed between themselves as Lahu students and their Thai classmates. These differences entailed inequalities.

To begin, by attending primary school in the mountains, as Sande did for seven years and Ati for four years, they saw themselves as receiving an inferior education and having fewer opportunities than their Thai peers. Furthermore, the different upbringings of Lahu and Thai students resulted in Lahu students having less knowledge during secondary school. Ati said:

People who lived in the highlands and people who lived in the lowlands were different because their upbringings were different. Thai students spent their entire childhood in good schools, while highland students, we didn't have as much knowledge. When Thai students came to study in secondary school, they had more knowledge, they had a better foundation than us, because they went to good [primary] schools. (Ati)

From Ati's perspective, spending their childhood in good primary schools, Thai students had a better foundation and more knowledge than Lahu students during secondary school. Similarly, Sande said:

We came from the mountains, we came from schools that were in the mountains. And we didn't really have the opportunity to encounter technology and different things like students in the Muang.¹³ This caused us to, [pause, thinking] what? When we came to go to school together, we, [pause, thinking] what? Knowledge, we didn't have as much knowledge about the world around us as did students who lived in the Muang, those who had more opportunities than us. (Sande)

Without the same opportunities as Thai students, such as opportunities to encounter technology, Sande saw herself as not having as much knowledge about the world around her as her Thai peers. In another example of having fewer opportunities, Sande talked about being less prepared than her Thai classmates because English language classes were not offered at her primary school. She said:

English was not taught in my primary school, so I started in Moo 1 (Grade 7). I didn't have the opportunity to learn English before secondary school. I had classmates from other schools who were capable of the basics of English by the time they started secondary school. But I had no preparation for English classes. (Sande)

Without the opportunity to take English classes before secondary school, Sande felt unprepared compared to her Thai classmates. She also talked about being placed in a lower academic track primarily because her knowledge was inferior. She observed that this was likely the result of attending a primary school in the mountains, where, as described, there were inferior schools and

¹³ As mentioned in Chapter 2, Muang, in the Siamese Buddhist Kingdoms of the past, referred to the "civilized" center of the polity. At present, Muang is often used to refer to those who live in the city or the lowlands.

fewer opportunities. She also believed that this was the case for many ethnic minority students.

She said:

When I came to Banrongrian I knew there was a difference between Thai students and Lahu students. Ever since I came and took the test in order to determine which homeroom I would be in, the best students were in the first, and I was put into the third. The majority of Lahu or mountain people were in the third and fourth rooms. And the majority of the first and second rooms were made up of Thai students. So, I thought I was different from them because I had inferior knowledge. Because I went to school in the mountains, my knowledge was inferior. (Sande)

In sum thus far, for Ati and Sande, being Lahu students during secondary school meant, in part, having inferior knowledge or less knowledge than their Thai peers, being less prepared for secondary school, and being placed into a low academic track. For the most part, these were the results of attending inferior primary schools in the mountains where there were fewer educational opportunities than Thai students.

Another difference and inequality they saw between themselves as Lahu students and their Thai classmates involved having the necessary school supplies. Ati and Sande both talked about how their lack of school supplies hindered their ability to complete schoolwork. Ati said:

Another difference I think existed had to do with being prepared to attend school. By this I mean having the necessary school supplies. Thai students were more likely to be prepared by having all the necessary school supplies. They had the means to be attentive and prepared. By this I mean they had the money. But, for us, this was not the case. We didn't have money. This was a difference. (Ati)

Sande captured some of the details of lacking school supplies when she said:

For example, we had to compose reports, we had to make Powerpoints or put together a presentation. But I didn't have Powerpoint or a computer. I couldn't prepare if I didn't have the time to go to the computer lab or the store to buy supplies. And I didn't have the school supplies. This made me not want to do the work. (Sande)

Furthermore, Sande said:

One thing that made me lazy when it came to doing my schoolwork was that in studying we needed all these different school supplies. Sometimes, we needed our own computer to use outside of class, a talking dictionary, and other things. My classmates had these

but I didn't so I had to work and try harder than they did. This problem made me feel annoyed and uninterested. (Sande)

Whether it was composing reports for classes, preparing a presentation, or completing other schoolwork, Ati and Sande often found it difficult to obtain necessary school supplies primarily because, as Ati said, they did not have the money. This also left them feeling annoyed and uninterested in doing the work. From their perspective, most Thai students did not face this problem because they had the financial means to purchase school supplies.

Interestingly, Ati and Sande talked about their "status" (*tan na*) laying at the roots of being unable to purchase school supplies, being unprepared secondary school, having fewer educational opportunities, and having less knowledge, as discussed above. In other words, their status, which, as I describe below, was entwined with their ethnicity, was at the heart of the inequalities they faced. Moreover, their status was viewed as a product of, among other circumstances, coming from the mountains, not having suitable land for farming, and not owning any property. Talking about her status as being a primary source of the inequalities she faced during secondary school, Sande said:

The status (*tan na*) of our families was different. Their [Thai students'] status was better than ours. We, our parents, lived in the mountains. In some places there was no land for farming. This wasn't the same as those who lived in the Muang. They had land suitable for agriculture. They were capable of sending their children to school and taking care of them. But, if we farmed in the mountains, then we had to farm in the forest and clear the trees. We didn't own any property and our parents did not have any land to make a living. This caused us to have limited opportunities for an education, for knowledge about technology, for having school supplies, for being prepared to go to school, as compared with those who lived in the Muang. (Sande)

Sande drew on the Thai concept of *tan na* in describing the roots of the inequalities she faced during her time in school. The word "*tan na*" (Thai spelling) in Thai is often translated as "status," "position," "standing," or "condition" (Haas, 1964) and is often used to describe the social, political, and economic position or standing of individuals or families relative to others in

society. The concept of *tan na* can have Buddhist religious connotations in the sense that, for some Thai people, *tan na* is dependent on Karma. For example, if, in a past life, a woman did good by making merit, donating money to the poor, and acting morally, then she will be born into a family with good *tan na* – that is, a wealthy family with a good name and many opportunities. As Thailand has become further secularized, the concept of *tan na*, for some Thais, has changed to be interpreted as one's position in society independent of Karma. Ati and Sande used a secular concept of *tan na* when speaking about their unequal position as Lahu students relative to many of their Thai peers. When I talked with Ati and Sande about their understanding of *tan na*, they said that they understood it to be the general position in society into which we are born. Differences in *tan na*, for Ati and Sande as Christians, could not be accounted for by differences in Karma; rather, whether one's family was economically wealthy or poor, politically empowered or marginalized, and the like, depended on having access to good agricultural land, technology, and educational opportunities. In employing a secular concept of *tan na*, Ati and Sande sought to point out that their “low,” “bad,” or marginalized status (*tan na*) was the result social inequalities.

In returning to Sande's quote above, she claimed that her limited opportunities for an education, for knowledge about technology, for obtaining school supplies, and for preparation for school, were intimately related to the status (*tan na*) of her family. Additionally, her family's status stemmed from being Lahu and their origins in the mountains, where there was limited access to suitable agricultural land and few people were granted official legal ownership of the land that was utilized for farming. In other words, coming from the mountains and being Lahu, Ati and Sande encountered broader inequalities outside of the context of school. Importantly,

these broader inequalities served to place them at a significant disadvantage during secondary school. Sande said:

The disadvantage of being Lahu, when it came to education, was that we were not equal to those who live in the Muang, equal in the sense of educational opportunities and status (*tan na*) ... We didn't really have the opportunities. This was the disadvantage of being Lahu. (Sande)

In sum, as Lahu students, Ati and Sande believed they experienced inequalities during secondary school. First, attending inferior primary schools and encountering fewer educational opportunities than Thai students, they saw themselves as having inferior knowledge or less knowledge about the world around them as compared to their Thai peers during secondary school. In addition, they were not as well prepared as their Thai classmates and were placed in low academic tracks. When it came to completing schoolwork, Ati and Sande found that there were times when they did not have the necessary school supplies. They believed that at the roots of these inequalities lay their status; they were Lahu, mountain people who farmed the poor agricultural land in the mountains and did not own the land they worked. As a result, they found themselves in a disadvantaged position.

“I wasn't really friends with Thai people, but mainly with mountain people”. For Ati and Sande, another significant aspect of their experiences of being Lahu students at Banrongrian was their relationships with their peers. Throughout their schooling, most of their friends were other ethnic minority students who lived at the same dormitory. And in their relationships with their Thai peers, with whom they were rarely friends, they felt that they were looked down on or seen as inferior (*doo took*). In this section, I describe some of the details of these relationships.

Living at a dormitory for ethnic minority students while attending Banrongrian, Ati and Sande's close friends were other ethnic minority students. Sande said:

When I came to go to school in Banrongrian, I had friends who were mountain people. Most of my friends were mountain people because I lived at a dormitory for different ethnic groups, Akha, Lahu, and others. (Sande)

Ati and Sande were friends primarily with other ethnic minority students because, in part, they lived together at the dormitory. However, they also claimed that Thai students had little interest in befriending them. Ati said:

My friends, from the time that I was in primary school through secondary school, were mainly Lahu, or ethnic people, those who lived in the highlands. Because, those who live in the lowlands, or Thai people, at the time, primary and secondary school, they didn't like us. They wouldn't befriend us. They liked to look down on us (*doo took*). We spoke Thai unclearly and they looked down on us. So, at the time, I wasn't really friends with Thai people, but mainly with mountain people. (Ati)

From Ati's and Sande's perspectives, Thai students had little desire to befriend them primarily because they were Lahu. Moreover, they believed that Thai students saw them as inferior, in part, because of their inability to speak Thai clearly. In addition, Sande believed that Thai students did not want to befriend them because they saw Lahu students as "hillbilly," undeveloped, and non-modern. She said:

Another reason they didn't really want to be friends was because they thought that we were "hillbillie" (*baan nowk*), undeveloped, and non-modern. Sometimes they thought that we were dirty. Thai people thought that Lahu people, people from the mountains, were dirty hillbillies who didn't know anything, and who didn't really join the rest of society. (Sande)

As mentioned in describing Fah's experiences, being dirty signified being "wild" or uncivilized, backwards, undeveloped, and non-modern. Recalling one specific experience at school in which one of her Thai classmates verbally expressed how she looked down on Lahu people, Sande said:

At the school, Thai students liked to look down on (*doo took*) mountain people. One time I was sitting, I was sitting and talking to an Akha person and Thai classmate. The Thai person said that she didn't like Musser¹⁴ people, even though I was Musser and sitting right there. I think she thought that I was Akha, so she said that she didn't like Musser people. So, I asked, "What are Musser people like? Why don't you like them?" She said

¹⁴ As I mentioned previously, "Musser" was a pejorative term for Lahu people in Thailand.

that, the Musser, the Musser in Fang, she said that if there was ever a festival or party, like a festival at a Buddhist temple, the Musser liked to come and create problems or trouble. So, she didn't like Musser people. This is what she said. I told her that I was Musser. But because of this incident, I recognized that Thai people didn't like mountain people, Musser people. (Sande)

From the perspectives of Ati and Sande, Thai students, seeing Lahu students as inferior, had little desire to befriend them. Moreover, there was a general dislike of mountain people, who were sometimes seen as creating problems or trouble.

Although not the focus of this study, Ati also spoke about his relationships with Thai students during university. He said that, perhaps because of being older and in the context of a wider society, there was little, if any, sense that Thai students saw him as inferior. He said:

But when I went to university, things changed. At that time and now, things have changed. At university, they didn't look down on me. They wanted to befriend me. It isn't the same as when I was in secondary school. I can be friends with anyone – people who live in the lowlands and people from different ethnic groups. I have Thai, Akha, Karen, and Hmong friends. (Ati)

When asked what he thought some of the reasons were for the differences between secondary school and university, Ati said:

I think that it was likely that, at the time we were young and, they, lowlanders, perhaps weren't capable of thinking or reasoning. They had a different upbringing and maybe that caused them to look down on us (*doo took*). But as they grew older and became a part of the wider society, perhaps they became more open-minded. Perhaps they became more accepting because it was a wider society. (Ati)

For Ati, moving out of secondary school and into university and beyond, also allowed him to enter into a wider society in which he was not looked down on because of his ethnicity. In addition, after secondary school, he found that many Thai people desired to befriend him.

To conclude, in this section I have described, based on themes that emerged in our interviews, some of the details of Ati's and Sande's relationships with their peers. In brief, throughout secondary school, Ati and Sande were close friends with other ethnic minority

students, especially those who resided together with them at the dormitory. They believed that, because they were Lahu and had come from the mountains, there was little interest among their Thai peers in befriending them. Furthermore, there was a sense of being looked down on or being seen as inferior primarily because of their ethnicity as Lahu. Lastly, I noted that as Ati moved beyond secondary school and into a wider society, he believed that Thai people no longer saw him as inferior and wanted to befriend him.

Summary

In describing Ati and Sande's experiences of being Lahu students at Banrongrian, I focused on two major themes that emerged from our interviews. To begin, I described how they saw themselves as being at a disadvantage relative to their Thai peers because of inequalities, including an inferior primary school education, fewer educational opportunities, and less knowledge than their Thai peers. Importantly, the inequalities were seen as emerging from their "status" as Lahu people from the mountains. Next, I detailed some of the relevant aspects of Ati's and Sande's relationships with their Lahu and Thai peers. In general, being Lahu, they were friends with other Lahu or ethnic minority students. They also believed that Thai students saw them as inferior and had little desire to befriend them. Finally, I briefly touched on Ati's experiences beyond secondary school in which he claimed Thai people no longer saw him as inferior and, moreover, desired to befriend him.

Nacoot Background

Nacoot, age 26, was born in the Lahu village of Ban Pung Tow. Beginning preschool at the age of four, she lived with her parents and walked to school daily until graduating from Boo 6 (Grade 6) and moving to Banrongrian to begin secondary school. Describing her daily life during her time in primary school she said:

When I was in the mountains, at home, I did everything. I got up early in the morning at about 5 a.m. I had to get up early because I had to cook rice, make breakfast, and go get water. I had to do everything myself. Even though I had a younger sibling who helped a little, but she was very young. So, I had to do most of the work myself. At about 7 a.m. I ate breakfast. When I was done I got dressed and went to school, at about 7:30 a.m. We lined up from 8 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. School was finished at 4 p.m. and then I went home. When I went home, I did the same thing. I cleaned the house, went to get firewood, sometimes I went with my friends to gather food in the forest. Then I came home, made rice, made dinner, ate, and went to bed.

During the day at school, Nacoot enjoyed sports, dance, and music. She said:

At the time, I just wanted to have fun. I wasn't really interested in studying. But the teachers had us play a lot of sports, which I enjoyed a lot. Living in the mountains, I played sports all the time. I liked to dance as well. For three years I competed against other schools and won each year. Also, I played music for three years at the school. Most of the time, I played sports and music.

Living at home and attending a primary school in the mountains, Nacoot also said that her friends were primarily Lahu classmates who lived in the same village.

After finishing Boo 6 (Grade 6), Nacoot's parents sent her to Banrongrian in order to attend secondary school. She said that, one day, about a week before the beginning of school, without knowing where her parents were taking her, she was brought to a dormitory near the school. And it was there that she lived until graduating from Banrongrian six years later.

Being a Lahu Student: Nacoot's Perspective

To begin, it is important to note that compared to most other participants, Nacoot believed there were fewer experiences during secondary school in which her Lahu ethnicity played a significant role. In addition, she saw fewer differences between herself as a Lahu student and her Thai classmates. However, one primary theme that emerged during our interviews was the importance of having Thai as a second language. In this section, I describe some of the details of her experiences as a Lahu student with the Thai language in the context of secondary school.

“I didn’t speak Thai clearly”. In the area of language, Nacoot believed that being Lahu played a significant role in her experiences of secondary school. Born into a Lahu family and growing up in a Lahu village, Nacoot’s first language was Lahu. In speaking with her family and friends during primary school, Nacoot spoke Lahu. In communicating with teachers within the context of the school, however, she had to learn to speak Thai. Moreover, it was primarily in going to school that she encountered and began to learn the Thai language. Even though she had attended eight years of primary school in her village, when she came to study at Banrongrian, she claimed that she still spoke Thai unclearly. She said:

I had gone to school in the mountains and even though I knew Thai and I understood what they were talking about, when I came to live in the lowlands, I spoke Thai unclearly. Some words, or at times, I spoke unclearly.

Being a Lahu student from the mountains and having Thai as a second language, Nacoot spoke Thai unclearly. Importantly, it was primarily when she moved to the lowlands to attend secondary school that speaking unclearly became significant in that it allowed Nacoot’s classmates to recognize her as being from the mountains and as being Lahu. She said:

My classmates teased me and said, “You are a mountain person.” They liked to say that. They said that I was a mountain person, a Lahu person, and that I spoke unclearly, that I was a mountain person. They knew because of the way I spoke. At school, they knew because I didn’t speak clearly.

Being recognized as Lahu, as a mountain person, by speaking Thai unclearly opened up the possibility for being teased. In addition to the above, Nacoot said:

Sometimes they teased me, they thought it was funny, saying that I didn’t speak Thai clearly, that I was a mountain person, that I was Lahu. I told them that we were the same and that I was a person like them. But they thought it was fun.

For Nacoot, speaking Thai unclearly allowed her classmates to recognize that she was Lahu, which then became the focal point for those who teased her. Additionally, it influenced her

presence in the classroom. She claimed that one of the disadvantages of being Lahu and speaking Thai unclearly was that she was reluctant to participate in class. She said:

A disadvantage [of being Lahu] was that I did not really have the courage to participate in class. Because I was from the mountains, I didn't want others to take notice. So, I didn't really speak up in class or participate because I was embarrassed that I spoke unclearly.

Nacoot's reluctance to participate in class emerged primarily from her embarrassment of being unable to speak Thai clearly and her fear of being recognized as coming from the mountains.

Despite this, Nacoot believed that having Lahu as a first language was to her advantage. It set her positively apart from her Thai classmates. She said:

An advantage [to being a Lahu student] was that they [Thai students] couldn't speak my language but I could speak theirs. Even though they looked down on us (*doo took*) because we were Lahu and we didn't speak their language clearly, they couldn't speak our language, but I could speak their Thai language. And I could do anything that they could do as well.

Additionally, Nacoot said:

There was some benefit to knowing the Lahu language. Thai people speak Thai. I can speak Thai like they can as well. And I can also speak Lahu. I know their language and several languages. This is good, it is good for me.

Even though Nacoot was looked down on and teased at times for being Lahu and not speaking Thai clearly, she still believed it was an advantage to have Lahu as her first language and that there was a benefit to knowing Lahu in addition to knowing Thai.

Lastly, Nacoot emphasized that, even though she was ethnically Lahu, she was also Thai.

Again, she noted this in relation to language and school. She said:

Are there any differences between Thai students and Lahu students? If we live in Thailand, then we are Thai as well. But there is a difference in language. The languages are different. I am a mountain person, I am Lahu. They are Thai, so they speak Thai. And I have to speak Thai just like them. When I first started school, even though I was Thai, the language I spoke was different from them. So, sometimes it was difficult because I didn't speak clearly or I couldn't communicate with them because they didn't understand. These were problems that resulted because of differences in language. But, in terms of education and learning, we were the same. But language, our first languages

were different. Because we have different cultures, our languages are different. Lahu people speak a different language, we have our own language ... But the language that is used in Thailand is Thai, which means we have to be able to speak Thai.

Claiming both a Thai national identity and a Lahu ethnic identity, Nacoot, as I have described throughout this section, saw language as the primary difference between herself as an ethnically Lahu student and other Thai students. With Thai being the national language, she saw the need for Lahu students to be able to speak Thai. And, lastly, while at times there may have been difficulties in communication, with respect to her abilities to learn and do well in school, she saw herself as the same as, and equal to, Thai students.

Summary

In this section, I have described the primary theme that emerged during Nacoot's interviews – the significance of relating to Thai as a second language. For Nacoot, being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School meant being different from Thai students in that she spoke Thai unclearly. This signified to others that she was from the mountains, that she was Lahu. Speaking unclearly and being Lahu, moreover, were central factors contributing to her being teased and her reluctance to participate in class. Despite this, she considered speaking Lahu as a first language an advantage and a benefit. Lastly, I concluded by further describing Nacoot's perspective that her ethnicity only played a significant role in her schooling experiences insofar as Thai was her second language. In areas other than language, she saw herself as the same as her Thai peers and, furthermore, identified herself as both Thai and Lahu.

Sook Background

Sook, age 21, was born in Chatamang, a Lahu village about 15 kilometers from Banrongrian Secondary School. Entering primary school at the age of six, Sook attended school

in his home village until he finished Boo 6 (Grade 6). Living at home during this time, he walked to school daily with his older sister. Describing a memory of primary school, Sook said:

From Boo 1 (Grade 1) to Boo 6 (Grade 6) I studied in the mountains. In the rainy season, it was very difficult for the teachers because the dirt road was slippery. There were times when it was so slippery that the teacher's car would get stuck and the students would go to help push the teachers car. All the students would help to get some grass and put it under the tires of the car to make it less slippery.

Sook also recalled that it was during primary school when he first saw a computer. He said:

I had never seen a computer before. But when I was in, I think it was Boo 4 (Grade 4), the school got a computer. It was very exciting for me. Although, I never used it, only the teacher used it.

After graduating from primary school at the age of 12, Sook moved out of his parent's house in Chatamang and into a dormitory near Banrongrian Secondary School in order to begin Moo 1 (Grade 7).

Being a Lahu Student: Sook's Perspective

When describing his experiences of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian, Sook believed it was important to consider that he attended a primary school in the mountains that was inferior to primary schools in the lowlands. As a result, Sook believed he had less knowledge and was less prepared for secondary school than his Thai classmates. He also perceived distinct divisions between ethnic minority students and Thai students at school. More specifically, being Lahu meant being friends with other mountain students and being disliked by Thai students primarily because of differences rooted in ethnicity. And, lastly, for Sook, being Lahu and coming from the mountains meant being economically poor, which contributed to problems such as being unable to purchase schoolbooks. In what follows, I describe these main themes in detail using verbatim examples from our interviews.

“Their primary schools were better”. In describing his experiences at Banrongrian Secondary School, Sook talked about himself as different from Thai students in that he attended a primary school in the mountains for ethnic minority students that was inferior to those in the lowlands for primarily Thai students. As a result, he was less prepared for secondary school than his Thai classmates and he often experienced difficulties keeping up. He said:

Going to school in the lowlands was different than in the mountains. The education in the mountains was inferior. They [Thai students] knew more than us. Their primary schools were better. Going to school in the mountains, the teachers didn't teach very well. At Chatamang school, the teachers did not teach very well. But in the lowlands they taught well. When I went to Banrongrian, I was not prepared and I couldn't keep up with my classmates.

Receiving an inferior education in the mountains, Sook believed that he had less knowledge than his Thai peers who had attended better primary schools in the lowlands. In addition to the above, Sook said:

Their schools were better. The primary schools were better. I thought, why are the teachers that teach in the mountains not as good as those who teach in the lowlands? Why is the teaching in the lowlands good, while the teaching in the mountains is bad?

During secondary school, in part as a result of being unprepared, Sook began to question why there was a significant difference, especially with regards to the quality of teaching, between the primary schools in the mountains and those in the lowlands. As a specific example of not being well prepared for secondary school, Sook spoke about never having the opportunity to take an English language class. He said:

I didn't know any English because during primary school they never taught English. At Chatamang, they didn't teach English. I didn't know the alphabet or anything. When I went to school in Banrongrian, many of my classmates had taken English classes for several years. I learned a little during secondary school, but at Chatamang I didn't know anything.

Sook said that he failed English class every year of secondary school. In addition to struggling in English, Sook faced challenges with the Thai language as well. At home and among his

friends, during his six years of primary school, Sook spoke Lahu. Like most other participants, it was primarily within the context of the school that Sook encountered the Thai language. Moving out of his village and into Banrongrian, where Thai was the primary language, Sook experienced difficulties understanding Thai. He said:

At first when I went I didn't understand much. People spoke to me and I only understood a little bit. When I was in Chatamang, we didn't speak Thai. But when I was in Banrongrian, people only spoke Thai ... There were some words that I couldn't spell or didn't understand, but I guess I knew enough to get by.

As Sook moved through secondary school, his understanding of Thai improved. However, he spoke unclearly, which at times led to being teased by his classmates. He said:

As time went on, I understood what the teacher was saying. The only thing was that I was teased for not speaking clearly. They teased me about language, that I couldn't speak Thai clearly.

In addition, Sook said:

As time went on, I understood Thai more and more. I could listen to what others were saying. And as I understood I could speak with others. But to this day I still don't speak clearly.

Sook did not recall any specific incidents in which he was teased for not speaking clearly; however, he said that, in general, he remembered being teased.

In sum, Sook entered Banrongrian Secondary School after attending six years of primary school in his Lahu village in the mountains. Moving into the lowlands to attend secondary school, he felt unprepared compared to his Thai classmates because of the inferior quality of education he had received in the mountains. In addition, he faced challenges with having Thai as a second language. And while he knew enough to make it through secondary school, he spoke unclearly, which, at times, made him the focus of teasing by classmates.

“Mountain people hung out with mountain people”. When asked to share some of his favorite memories of secondary school, Sook talked about the close relationships he had with his

friends, who were ethnic minority students as well. For him, an important aspect of being Lahu was having friends who were Lahu or mountain people. Moreover, from Sook's perspective, there seemed to be little desire among his Thai peers to befriend him because of his ethnicity.

Talking about the different groups at school, Sook said:

Usually, mountain people were friends with mountain people and we didn't bother the Thai students. They didn't come and hang out with mountain people. Because they knew that we were mountain people, they didn't come into our group. They hung out with their own group.

Additionally, Sook said:

When we had a break or at lunch, that was the way it was, mountain people hung out with mountain people and Thai people hung out with Thai people.

Sook perceived distinct groups at school: mountain people in one group and Thai people in another. From his perspective, it was because his Thai peers had little desire to befriend ethnic minority students that the divisions between groups were maintained. In talking about what he believed Thai students thought of him, he said:

I thought that they didn't like me because I was a mountain person. They thought that if they hung out with mountain people then their life would somehow deteriorate. What I mean is that they were afraid of having friends who were mountain people because then they might not be accepted by their Thai friends.

Sook believed that Thai students disliked him because he was Lahu. Furthermore, he thought Thai students were afraid to befriend mountain people because it might lead to not being accepted. Importantly, for Sook, being a minority and being ethnic laid at the roots of the divisions between himself as a mountain student and his Thai classmates. Sook said:

Just making eye contact with them made them [Thai students] not like us. They thought that mountain people were a minority group and they were the majority. They saw mountain people as not like Thai people, as different from them. They thought that mountain people, they lived in the mountains, spoke Thai unclearly, were not modern, didn't wear modern clothes. So, they didn't want to be friends.

For Sook, the divisions that existed between ethnic minority students and Thai students were maintained, in part, because Thai students had little desire to befriend ethnic minority students. He also believed that, as the majority, Thai students disliked mountain students and saw them as different in that they were the minority, came from the mountains, spoke Thai unclearly, and had yet to develop and live in modernity.

In sum, for Sook, there were distinct divisions between ethnic minority students and Thai students at school. Being a Lahu student meant being friends primarily with other ethnic minority students. Furthermore, Sook believed that there was little desire among his Thai peers to be friends because he was a mountain person and was seen as being significantly different.

“Being from the mountains, we were poor”. The final relevant theme that emerged from Sook’s interviews involved being poor and coming from an economically poor family. For Sook, such poverty was entwined with being ethnic and coming from the mountains.

As mentioned, when Sook began secondary school he lived at a dormitory for ethnic minority students. Without any money to pay for room and board at the dormitory, his parents paid in bags of rice. He said:

The dormitory provided me with a ride to school and back. And they also paid for lunch. But my parents paid six bags of rice for me to stay at the dormitory. For other students it cost 5000 to 6000 Baht (\$165-200).

Caught consuming alcohol during Moo 4 (Grade 10), Sook was dismissed from the dormitory. Wanting to finish secondary school, he and his parents decided he could stay at home and drive the family’s motorcycle to school. Without help from the dormitory and coming from an economically poor family, Sook encountered problems purchasing books for school. He said:

There were problems. I didn’t have enough money to buy some of the books. I had to look at classmates’ books and some days they wouldn’t let me look at their book. My parents didn’t have money so not having books was an issue.

In addition, he said:

When we were in school, I looked at a classmate's book. But when the teacher gave us homework, I didn't have a book to use at home. So, this was a problem.

Sook saw his poor economic background, ethnicity, and limited opportunities for continuing his education after secondary school as related to one another. He said:

Thai people had more opportunities than mountain people because mountain people didn't have the money in order to go to school, to continue school. Being from the mountains, we were poor. I only went to school until Moo 6 (Grade 12) because we didn't have any more money to continue school. Truly, I wanted to continue to go to school, but we didn't have the money.

From Sook's perspective, being Lahu and coming from the mountains meant being poor and facing some of the challenges of poverty, such as not having enough money to purchase books. Moreover, although higher education was not the focus of this study, Sook claimed he was unable to continue his education through university primarily because he and his family did not have the financial means.

Summary

In this section, I have described three main themes that emerged during Sook's interviews. Attending a primary school in the mountains for Lahu students, Sook believed he received an inferior education as compared with his Thai peers and was thus unprepared for secondary school. More specifically, Sook struggled with English and Thai; and, as he spoke Thai unclearly, he was teased by his classmates. Next, for Sook, being a Lahu student meant being friends with primarily mountain people as there were distinct groups, mountain students and Thai students, at the school. Moreover, Sook believed that Thai students disliked him because he was a minority student who came from the mountains, spoke Thai unclearly, and was not modern. Lastly, for Sook, being poor, which contributed to problems such as not having schoolbooks, was a significant aspect of coming from the mountains and being Lahu.

Ann's Background

Ann, age 29, was born in Banponam, a Lahu village about 13 kilometers from Banrongrian. The eldest of five children, she was the only one in her family to finish secondary school. She began primary school at the age of five in a Christian school near the city of Chiang Rai. Sent there primarily because Ann's parents wanted her to be able to speak Thai well, Ann lived with her aunt while attending Boo 1 [Grade 1]. After finishing Boo 1 [Grade 1], her parents brought her back home and she attended the primary school in her village until finishing Boo 6 [Grade 6]. Having lived in Chiang Rai for almost a year, and speaking both Thai and Lahu at home, Ann claims that she did not experience any problems with the Thai language that many of her Lahu classmates faced. She said:

I never had any problems with Thai because when I was in Chiang Rai and when I lived with my aunt, I only spoke Thai. When I came back from Chiang Rai and was going to school in my village, I had to help my classmates. My classmates did not speak Thai clearly or correctly. I felt like I was really the only one who could speak Thai clearly. I am not saying this to brag or anything, but because I lived in Chiang Rai, I knew how to speak Thai. So, the teacher asked me to help teach my classmates how to speak with the teachers and adults.

After finishing Boo 6 [Grade 6] in her village, Ann returned to Chiang Rai in order to begin Moo 1 [Grade 7]. She was offered financial assistance by a dormitory there and her parents thought it was a good opportunity. However, after one year, a dormitory in Banrongrian offered to pay for all of Ann's educational expenses. Entering Banrongrian for Moo 2 [Grade 8], Ann remained a student there until graduating from Moo 6 [Grade 12].

Being a Lahu Student: Ann's Perspective

Compared to other participants in this study, as was the case with Nacoot, Ann saw fewer differences between herself as a Lahu student and her Thai peers. In addition, there were fewer experiences in which she saw her ethnicity as playing a significant role. However, she did believe that being Lahu was significant in her relationships with friends and classmates. In what follows, I describe Ann's perspective that being Lahu her friends were primarily other mountain students and, at times, she was looked down on or seen as inferior by her Thai classmates.

“What mountain is this girl from?”. Being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School, from Ann's perspective, meant having primarily ethnic minority friends. Although she had some Thai friends, Ann believed that, in general, Thai students disliked mountain students and had little desire to be friends. Ann said:

I had friends who were mountain people and Thai. But my close friends were classmates that lived at the dormitory with me and were Lahu as well. At school, I hung out with mountain people more so than with Thai people because Thai people didn't really like mountain people.

While Ann had some friends who were Thai, most of her close friends were Lahu classmates who lived at the dormitory as well. In addition to believing that Thai students disliked mountain students, Ann said that there were times when Thai students looked down on her or saw her as inferior because she was Lahu. She said:

They [Thai students] looked down on us [Lahu students]. Some of the things they said, things like, “Ee Musser.” They liked saying these things to us. But I didn't get angry or anything. But I wasn't very close friends with Thai students.

As mentioned previously, “Musser” was the pejorative term for Lahu people. Additionally, “Ee” was meant to indicate that the person was of lower status or standing than the speaker.

Describing one specific experience of being looked down on, she said:

There was one time when I was in P.E. class and we went to a camp for one week. We went in the morning and came back in the evening. On the last day, the head teacher had us line up and count off. I suppose I don't really know exactly how they [Thai students]

saw me. But they knew that I was a mountain person and not from the lowlands, a Thai person, or the like. We counted off, and when it came time for me to count off, I think I was number 77, and after I counted off about four or five Thai boys started to laugh at me. And then one of them said, "What mountain is this girl from?" I don't really know why they laughed. I thought, did I make a mistake? Did I miscount, misspeak? I didn't really understand why they laughed. But there were a lot of times when Thai students looked down on us. Some of the things that they said, things like "Musser." They liked to say these things.

Ann was uncertain as to exactly why the Thai students laughed after she spoke. However, she was certain that they were looking down on her because she was from the mountains.

As mentioned, Ann had some friends who were Thai classmates and she recognized that not all Thai students looked down on her. She said:

It is difficult to say how Thai students saw me. Some of them looked down on me because I was a mountain person. And some of them wanted to hang out with me and were friendly. And some of the students who did not want to be friends with mountain people at that time, when I see them now, they are friendly and want to be friends.

In Ann's experience of being at Banrongrian, there were times when she believed that she was being seen as inferior by her Thai classmates because of her ethnicity. However, there were also Thai classmates who befriended her. And, lastly, some of the classmates who looked down on her during secondary school, at present, no longer see her as inferior and desire to be friends.

Summary

To begin, I noted that Ann did not view her ethnicity as playing as significant a role in her experience of being a student as most of the other participants. However, during Ann's time in secondary school, she said that, because she was Lahu, most of her close friends were Lahu or other ethnic minority students. Additionally, from her perspective, Thai students did not want to befriend mountain students and there were times when they saw her as inferior because she was Lahu. Lastly, Ann recognized that not all Thai students were the same and some desired to befriend her.

Chai and Reme

Chai, age 26, and Reme, age 27, both grew up in the Lahu village of Maysan. They attended school together from kindergarten through secondary school and, at the time of this study, they both worked as teachers at the same school. Here, I provide brief separate backgrounds of each participant. However, as with Ati and Sande, I chose to analyze the interview transcription as a whole, developing shared themes from their accounts of being at Banrongrian Secondary School. The primary reason for this was that they were interviewed together in a small focus group. There were differences in their individual perspectives and I have retained these distinctions by referring to each participant by name.

Chai's Background

As mentioned, Chai was born in the Lahu village of Maysan. He began kindergarten in his community's school and remained a student there until finishing Boo 6 [Grade 6] seven years later. During this time Chai lived at home with his grandparents and older sister. He said that working as farmers in the mountains, his parents were poor. When it came time for Chai and his older sister to begin school, his parents went into the city of Chiang Mai in search of better paying work opportunities. The money they saved was sent back to Chai's grandparents in order to pay for school expenses, such as uniforms and books. He said that he only saw his parents a few times a year, during the Lahu New Year Festival and other holidays.

Chai remembered enjoying primary school because it was a time to be with his friends. In addition, he said that, although he was not a great student, he was committed to school and had perfect attendance. After finishing primary school, Chai moved away from his grandparents' home in the mountains and into a dormitory in order to begin secondary school at Banrongrian.

Reme's Background

Also born in Maysan, Reme entered the local village school at the age of four in order to begin preschool. Unable to remember anything significant about school before entering Boo 3 [Grade 3], Reme shared that her parents, in a similar situation as Chai's parents, moved to Chiang Mai in order to find work as she was beginning Boo 3 [Grade 3]. Needing help caring for Reme's younger sister during the day, Reme's parents brought her to live in Chiang Mai. However, she did not enroll in school while there. Moving back and forth several times a year between Chiang Mai and Maysan, Reme remained a student at the school in her village and attended classes only occasionally. She said that, because of her family's frequent moving, she had a difficult time understanding what was going on in class. She continued to move back and forth for four years and was able to get through each grade level by passing a final competency test at the end of each year. After finishing Boo 6 [Grade 6], Reme's parents sent her to Banrongrian in order to attend secondary school while living at a local dormitory.

Being a Lahu Student: Chai and Reme's Perspectives

Growing up in the mountains and attending a primary school for ethnic minority students, Chai and Reme believed they received an inferior foundation in their education as compared to their Thai classmates during secondary school. In addition, during the initial years of secondary school they saw themselves and were seen by their Thai peers as being inferior. As they moved through school, however, they proved to themselves and to their Thai peers that they were capable of doing well in school. This allowed them to develop their relationships; they "came together" and they saw themselves and were seen by others as having value. In what follows, I describe Chai and Reme's perspectives by detailing two closely related themes that emerged from our interviews.

“I received a different foundation in my schooling”. To begin, Chai and Reme believed that they received a “different” foundation, one that was “not really that good,” in their education as compared with their Thai classmates during secondary school. More specifically, they believed that Thai students, who for the most part attended primary schools in the lowlands, received a better primary school education. Attending an inferior primary school in the mountains, Chai and Reme, at the beginning of secondary school, saw themselves and were seen by their Thai peers as being inferior. From this position of inferiority, secondary school was the time when they “developed to be equal” with their Thai peers. Reme said:

If we are talking about ethnic peoples, our upbringing, or the beginnings of our education, then we were different. What I received from the beginning was different. I received a different foundation in my schooling. I am an ethnic person, which means that I went to school in the mountains and came down in order to go to [secondary] school. But, they [Thai people] went to school in the lowlands, and they received a better education. Their foundation was better than mine, like their family’s ability to [financially] support their schooling. I had an upbringing that was not really that good, but I developed to be equal when I came to school together [with Thai students]. (Reme)

Being Lahu, Reme and Chai received a different foundation, especially with regards to their primary schooling and their family’s ability to support them financially. However, as Reme said, during secondary school they were able to develop themselves to be equal with their Thai peers. Further details regarding this development make up the next theme. For now, it is important to note that, from Chai and Reme’s perspectives, many ethnic minority students saw themselves as inferior to Thai students because of the differences in their upbringings. Chai said:

Many ethnic people, many mountain people thought they were inferior to Thai people in many ways. When it came to our families, or education, or the opportunities available to us, we were inferior them. We thought this way because we were ethnic people. (Chai)

Being ethnic people, Chai and Reme believed that, at the beginnings of secondary school when they first moved into the lowlands, their upbringing, primary school education, families, and limited opportunities placed them in a position of inferiority relative to their Thai classmates. In

addition to his perspective that many ethnic minority students saw themselves as inferior to Thai students, Chai added that Thai students often saw ethnic minority students as being inferior. He said:

Thai people, whenever they did something, they liked to do it by themselves. They didn't want us to come along. They didn't want us to come and work with them, and help them. They saw us in one way, as inferior to them, that was for certain. They didn't really see us as having any value. (Chai)

Chai believed that Thai students liked being together with other Thai students and had little desire to work with or to be with Lahu students, who they saw as inferior and as having little value. Importantly, however, Reme and Chai saw secondary school as a time when they “developed” themselves to be equal with their Thai peers. The details of this development are the focus of the next theme.

“We had to prove that we were capable”. Believing that they were inferior to their Thai peers primarily because of differences in the foundations of their education and their upbringings, Chai and Reme saw secondary school as a time when they developed themselves, moving from being inferior to being equal with their Thai peers. However, as their Thai peers saw them as inferior and separated themselves from ethnic minority students, developing to be equal required primarily that they proved they were capable of doing well in school. This also allowed for ethnic minority students and Thai students to “come together.”

As mentioned previously, Chai believed Thai students saw ethnic minority students as inferior. Describing his perspective in further detail, Chai spoke about some of the difficulties he had making friends with Thai students. At Banrongrrian during that time there were four homerooms that were divided based on the results of a test taken before entering Moo 1 [Grade 7]. The top scoring students were in the first and second rooms, while those who scored poorly on the test were in the third and fourth rooms. Chai scored well on the test and was placed in the

top academic track. Being the only Lahu student in the class, Chai found it difficult to make friends with his Thai classmates because of his ethnicity. He said:

Being in the first room, it was difficult to make friends. What I understood was that Thai people and mountain people found it difficult to live in harmony with each other, because they looked down on us (*doo took*), because we lived in the mountains and came down to go to school. They didn't like me and didn't want to befriend me. But it was necessary to make friends, so I had to develop and make an effort. (Chai)

From Chai's perspective, it was difficult for Thai students and Lahu students to live in harmony with each other primarily because Thai students saw Lahu students as inferior or looked down on them. Furthermore, such inferiority was based on Lahu students living in the mountains and coming down to the lowlands in order to attend secondary school. However, Chai believed that by developing himself and making an effort, he could become friends with his Thai classmates.

As for Reme, she was put into the fourth room. Talking about a similar separation between Lahu students and Thai students she said:

In the fourth room, there were a lot of mountain people. About half the students were Akha or Lahu, but there were more Akha than Lahu. And the other half were Thai people. Sometimes when we had activities or group work, mountain people were in groups, we were in groups with each other and Thai people were in groups with themselves. We separated from each other ... At first, when I entered the school, it was like because we were mountain people, the Thai students didn't want to be involved with us. They separated themselves into their own group. (Reme)

Being in the fourth room, where about half the students were ethnic minorities, Reme claimed that Thai students and Lahu students were often separated from each other. She believed that such separation existed primarily because Thai students did not want to be involved with mountain students.

Importantly, for Chai and Reme, being looked down on, having difficulties making friends, and being separated from their Thai classmates were characteristics primarily of their three years of lower secondary school. As they moved onto upper secondary school, Chai and

Reme claimed that they were able to develop their relationships with their Thai peers allowing them to “come together” and be seen as “having value.” This was done primarily by proving that they were capable of doing well in school. Reme said:

As we went through school, they [Thai students] knew that most of the mountain students were committed to school. And they saw that we were capable, that we were good students, that our schoolwork was good. So, they came to rely on us, and befriend us. We developed our relationship together, meaning that we came together. At first, our groups were separated from each other because they thought that we were mountain people. So, we had to prove that we were capable and demonstrate that we were capable of doing well in school. And sometimes we were better than they were. (Reme)

Being able to prove that she was capable of doing well in school allowed for Reme and her Lahu classmates to develop their relationships with their Thai peers. For Reme, once Thai students knew that mountain students were capable of good schoolwork, there was no longer the separation between Lahu students and Thai students common during the first couple years of secondary school.

Similarly, Chai spoke about how his commitment to school allowed both himself and others to see that he was capable. Furthermore, he believed that others began to see him as having value because he was one of the better students. He said:

When it came to schoolwork, I was committed allowing others to see that I was capable. As time went by, there were only a few people in the class who were better students than me. The majority of students were not committed to school, the Thai students were not committed to school, so they weren't great students. There were students who were below me, or inferior to me in class. And this made me see that making an effort and being committed, it made others see me as having value. It also made me see myself as having value and that I was better than some of the Thai students in the same class. (Chai)

As mentioned earlier, Chai claimed that many Thai students saw Lahu students as having little value. However, as Chai was committed and capable of doing well in school, and received better grades than many of his Thai peers, he saw himself and was seen by his Thai classmates as having value.

In sum, for Chai and Reme, proving that they were capable of doing well in school allowed them to develop to be equal with their Thai peers. More specifically, for Chai, being committed and proving that he was capable of doing well in school allowed for him to move from being seen by himself and others as having little value because of his Lahu ethnicity to being seen as having value. Similarly, for Reme, proving that she was capable allowed her to develop her relationships and to come together with her Thai peers.

Summary

At the beginning of secondary school, Chai and Reme saw themselves as being inferior to their Thai peers due primarily to differences in primary school education and upbringings. The beginning of secondary school was also characterized by a separation between Lahu students and Thai students. They believed that Thai students often looked down on mountain students, saw them as inferior, and as having little value. As they moved through school and, most importantly, proved that they were capable of doing well, Chai and Reme's relationships with their Thai classmates developed. As Reme talked about, they came together; and for Chai, Thai students saw him as having value.

Kritipong's Background

Kritipong, age 28, was born in the Lahu village of Huay Kom Nom. Moving away from home and into a dormitory at the age of six, he began his schooling at Ban Tae Mam, a school in the mountains that consisted primarily of ethnic minority students. The main reason he left home in order to begin primary school was that his parents were poor and the dormitory provided him with financial assistance, obtained through a Japanese organization, in order to attend school. He remembered the dormitory as being "very poor" and constructed using only bamboo and thatch. After attending Ban Tae Mam for two years, Kindergarten and Boo 1 (Grade 1), Kritipong's

father, receiving better financial help from another dormitory, moved him into Suket School, about 60 kilometers away. Similar to Ban Tae Mam, Suket School was located in the mountains and consisted largely of ethnic minority students. After Boo 4 (Grade 4), Kritipong transferred schools once again because there was a better financial help. Describing his frequent changes in primary schools he said, “I was always changing schools, but I didn’t change schools because I was expelled or anything. I changed because it was financially necessary for my family, for my dad.” The new school was located in the town of Banrongrian and consisted primarily of Thai students. After two years, Kritipong finished primary school and then moved into another dormitory nearby before beginning secondary school.

Being a Lahu Student: Kritipong’s Perspective

In describing his experience of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School, Kritipong spoke about “issues” or “problems” he had with some Thai students. At times, these issues included being hit, or physical violence. Moreover, Kritipong believed his ethnicity played a central role in that Thai students saw him as inferior because he was a part of a group of people who came from “some other place.” In addition, Kritipong spoke of the troubles he had keeping up academically with Thai students. Being Lahu, he had attended primary schools in the mountains where “the teachers did not teach very well” and he felt unprepared for secondary school. Furthermore, with Thai as his second language, he believed that he had not yet acquired the language capabilities necessary to do well in his classes during secondary school. In what follows, I describe these themes using examples from our interviews.

“They looked down on us and they didn’t really accept us”. One of the significant themes of Kritipong’s experiences of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School was the “issues” he had with Thai students. In part, these issues included fighting and being looked

down on or being seen as inferior (*doo took*) because of his ethnicity. Personal feelings of inferiority for being Lahu were also a significant aspect of his experience.

To begin, Kritipong described himself as generally disinterested in school when he was at Banrongrian. He, along with a few of his Lahu friends, frequently cut classes primarily because they did not enjoy being there. In addition, he said that he received “incompletes” in most of his classes most semesters. Not the same as failing a class, an incomplete meant that Kritipong needed to make up work and perform extra duties after the semester ended in order to pass his classes. Much of his general disinterest in school emerged from issues, or problems, he had with Thai students at the school. He said:

At that time, there were a lot of things about Banrongrian that made it so I didn't want to go to class, that I had to cut class, like issues with Thai teenage boys at the school. Sometimes when I was just hanging out, a group of three or four boys would come and hit me for no reason at all. This was one of the main reasons why I didn't really enjoy being at school.

Kritipong said there was never a particular incident that escalated to the point where he got physically hurt from being hit by or fighting a Thai classmate. However, during one particular experience, he believed that he was hit because his Thai classmate “wanted to send a message that at this school he was dominant.” He said:

I did have one experience when I was first at Banrongrian. At that time I didn't know anybody at the school. I was sitting in the classroom and I fell asleep with my head on the table. And as I was sleeping a hand came and smacked me on the head. I looked and saw three older teenage Thai boys in front of me. I didn't understand why they came and hit me because I was just sitting there. I turned around to look behind me and there was the leader of their group who was sitting on top of the table. When I saw him I understood that we had a history. When I was in primary school, I was one year younger than he was, and one of his friends had a problem with me. His friend hit me, I hit him, and he got hurt. So, I think this guy was seeking revenge for his friend. I didn't respond, I just sat there. So, after he hit me, he walked away ... I don't think he said anything. But, it was like he wanted to send a message that at this school he was dominant. He was also the teenager who had a lot of problems with fighting at the school, along with about ten of his friends.

Kritipong also shared a related story about one of his close Lahu friends. He said:

My friend that I was talking about, I saw him get hit a number of times. Sometimes he was just sitting there not doing anything and someone would come up and hit him in the back of the head. Or one time, I remember him walking out of the school gates and the other students kicking him in the butt all the way down the street. He walked a little and then they kicked him, walked a little farther and then they kicked him again, all the way down the street ... This trampling on others existed. Sometimes when we finished school or a test, we had to quickly leave or sneak away even though there was nobody around because we were afraid of having any problems.

From Kritipong's perspective, issues and problems such as these were common and served to make him disinterested in being at school. Importantly, Kritipong saw his Lahu ethnicity as playing a significant role in the aforementioned cases. He said:

I think that it [being Lahu] was an important factor. Because we were from, or those who were Lahu or Akha, at school, they felt that we were ... what were we? ... Truly, I feel that they looked down on us (*doo took*), with regards to several things at that time. For example, they criticized us saying we were "mountain bugs." They let us know that we came from some other place, we were one group and they were another group. They were the people who normally lived here and we had come from the mountains in order to go to school. Teenage boys, at that time, four or five years before I went to school and three or four years after, had problems like this all the time. After that, the teenage Thai boys didn't really behave like that anymore. But around the time that I was in school, it was pervasive. There were several incidents in which I was looked down on and I didn't like it.

For Kritipong, being seen as coming from some other place, being a member of the group of people who were seen as not normally living in Banrongrian, and, ultimately, being Lahu were important components to these particular incidents and to being looked down on by his Thai classmates more generally. Personal feelings of inferiority based on his Lahu ethnicity were also a significant aspect of attending school in this context. He said:

I felt that I was inferior because I was Lahu. Sometimes, I felt that even though my ancestors didn't get an education, I was a part of a new generation that was ready to go to school and was prepared to adjust in order to become a part of this [Thai] society. But perhaps they just didn't like us or perhaps they just didn't understand at the time.

Encountering issues and problems with his Thai peers occasioned feelings of inferiority that were based primarily on his ethnicity. Kritipong believed that he was willing to change in order to be a part of Thai society. However, from his perspective, his Thai peers did not like him or did not understand that he was trying to adjust and thus he felt prevented from becoming a full member of Thai society.

In addition, from Kritipong's perspective, being Lahu and being from the mountains prevented his Thai peers from seeing him as an individual. He said:

The disadvantage of being Lahu was like I was saying previously. Even though we all came from different places in order to go to school, and some of us may have had good upbringings while others may have had bad upbringings, but they [Thai students] saw us all as the same. They didn't know us, they didn't know us very well. We were a strange face in Thailand. They looked down on us (*doo took*) and they didn't really accept us, they didn't see us each as individuals. Rather, they saw us and thought, "Oh, this person is from the mountains."

Kritipong believed that most Thai students saw Lahu students, and other ethnic minorities, as all the same. In other words, they did not see Lahu students as individuals; rather, they looked down on Lahu students as a group of "strange face[s]" that came from the mountains.

Additionally, he believed most Thai students were unwilling to accept him as a Lahu person.

Lastly, it is important to note that Kritipong recognized some Thai students were accepting and wanted to be friends. He said:

Some Thai classmates were good people. Some of them looked down on us (*doo took*), didn't really accept us, and didn't want to befriend us. But there were some Thai students who made the effort to be friends with us. I believe that those people saw us for who we were, they didn't just look at our face, or where we were from. There were a lot of times when Thai students helped me when I was in need of help. So, when I talk about Thai students, it is not as if they all saw us the same way, that they all did not accept us. There were some Thai students who enjoyed being with us and they liked having us as a part of their group.

Not all Thai students looked down on Kritipong. Some Thai classmates, who saw Kritipong's coming from the mountains as insignificant insofar as their friendship was concerned, enjoyed having Kritipong and other Lahu students among their group of friends.

In sum, for Kritipong, being a Lahu student at Banrongrian involved issues and problems with his Thai peers. Frequently, these issues included being looked down on or being seen as inferior. And, on occasion, physical violence arose. The paramount element underlying these relations was Kritipong's Lahu ethnicity, where he was seen as being from – “some other place,” the mountains. Lastly, Kritipong appreciated that not all Thai students looked down on Lahu students and some wanted to be friends.

“I couldn't keep up with Thai students”. As briefly mentioned in the previous section, Kritipong was generally disinterested in school and he often received incompletes in his classes. While he spoke of the problems with his Thai peers as being the fundamental factor, there were other reasons, from his perspective, as to why he could not keep up with his classmates. Importantly, he saw many of these reasons as intertwined with his being Lahu.

To begin, Kritipong believed that the schools in the mountains, which he attended from Kindergarten to Boo 4 (Grade 4), contained teachers who did not teach well. In addition, he saw many students as graduating from primary school simply because they were old enough to move on as compared to being competent enough to move on. As these schools were in the mountains and were founded for ethnic minority students, Kritipong saw his ethnicity as being a significant element contributing to his difficulties keeping up with other students during secondary school.

He said:

Most Thai students went to schools near their homes and they had good teachers. But a lot of us came from primary schools in the mountains where the teacher's didn't teach very well. We also graduated from primary school because we had been in school for six years and we were old enough to move on. When I entered Moo 1 [Grade 7], I couldn't

really speak, write, or read Thai and I couldn't keep up in other subjects. I couldn't keep up with Thai students, making me uninterested in school.

Entering secondary school, Kritipong found it difficult to keep up with his Thai classmates as a result of attending primary schools in the mountains for ethnic minority students for five years. In addition, being Lahu and living in the mountains, it was not until Boo 5 (Grade 5) that Kritipong was immersed in a primarily Thai-speaking environment. He emphasized that having Lahu as a first language and Thai as a second language made school especially difficult. He said:

Another reason has to do with language. For some subjects, for example math, when I was in primary school I really liked math. But, when I got to secondary school, I had not acquired the language necessary for different subjects ... By Moo 2 [Grade 8] and Moo 3 [Grade 9] the schoolwork became very difficult. There were a lot of words that I just did not understand.

As Kritipong spoke Thai as a second language, he found that he had not acquired the language necessary to do well in most of his classes during secondary school.

Kritipong also claimed that, at times, living in a dormitory, which was common for most ethnic minority students, inhibited him from doing group work at school. He said:

Because I lived in the dormitory, at times it was not possible to go do group work or activities with other students. Because if we live in the dormitory, then leaving the dormitory can be difficult at times. Sometimes the adults running the dormitory didn't understand. Or, finding transportation from the dormitory to the school, which was about three kilometers, if nobody took me, then I couldn't go. Thai students did not really have this problem because they lived at home and their parents understood if they had to do work.

Living at the dormitory, doing group work with other students was difficult because, at times, the director of the dormitory did not allow him to leave. Other times, there was no way of finding transportation to meet up with classmates. Importantly, Kritipong saw living in a dormitory as a significant aspect of being a Lahu student. These were difficulties that he believed Thai students

did not encounter because they lived at home with their parents and not in a dormitory, which was often a necessity for ethnic minority students.¹⁵

Lastly, while there existed circumstances or factors in Kritipong's life related to his ethnicity that hindered him from keeping up with his classmates, he also recognized that his own personal choices during secondary school often contributed to his challenges. Regretting that he did not take an interest in any school subjects, he said:

I have to accept that during that time, during lower secondary school, that was a time when I was a teenager, 14 and 15. So, if you are asking what subjects I liked, then I have to say I didn't like any subjects. What I mean is that at the time I didn't know very much and I didn't think too much. As I look back on it now I am sorry that I didn't have an interest in any subject. Except for P.E., I usually got incompletes in my classes. For P.E. and agriculture class, I didn't have to use my brain a lot, just physical strength and I had physical strength. But, also, because I was a teenager, I liked to cut class. I didn't really like going to class, so I got incompletes, zeros and the like.

Additionally, at the time he saw no benefit to what he was learning primarily because from his perspective his knowledge and thinking were limited. He said:

Another thing is that at that time, my knowledge and thinking were very limited. For example, in math, I didn't like memorizing all the formulas. I thought what was the point of all these, I'll never use them in my daily life. Being able to add, subtract, multiply were enough. Yes, for those students who were interested in math, then it was of great benefit. But, for me, I saw no benefit to what we were learning, so I wasn't interested and I didn't go to class.

Again, looking back on his experience, now that he is a teacher, he recognized that his own personal choices to cut class in addition to his group of friends contributed to his academic struggles. He said:

¹⁵ It was a necessity for most ethnic minority students to live in a dormitory for several reasons that I will discuss further in Chapter Five. For now, it is important to note that many Lahu villages in the district were located too far away from Banrongrian to commute daily, especially during the rainy season when some of the dirt roads leading to the villages were impassible. In addition, the dormitories often helped to pay for school. As many Lahu families were economically poor, living at the dormitory provided financial means in order to attend school.

Everyday the homeroom teacher checked who was present and who was not. At the time I was a kid and I didn't think much about what I was doing. Now that I am a teacher I think, "Wow, why is this kid like this?" Sometimes, for certain subjects, I was surprised when I saw that my name had been erased from the roster, or crossed out. They thought that I had left the school. When the teacher took attendance and my name wasn't called, I checked the roster and saw that the teacher had crossed my name off in red ink.

Kritipong admitted that when he was in secondary school he did not think much about the choices he made. Also, talking about the influence of his friends, he said:

I grew up in the dormitories and I did not really have any friends who were a very good influence on me. They were friends who were always thinking about how to sneak away from the dormitory or cut class. When we cut class or snuck away from the dormitory we either smoked cigarettes or sniffed glue. We did these two things a lot for a year or two during lower secondary school.

For Kritipong, being over ten years removed from secondary school, he recognized that, in addition to certain factors related to his ethnicity, such as attending an inferior primary school and speaking Thai as a second language, the personal choices he made served to contribute to his difficulties keeping up with his Thai classmates.

In sum, for Kritipong, being a Lahu student during secondary school meant, in part, experiencing difficulties keeping up with his Thai classmates. Coming from the mountains and attending primary schools for ethnic minorities, he was not prepared for secondary school. Also, speaking Lahu as a first language and Thai as a second language made school especially difficult. Like most Lahu students, Kritipong lived at a dormitory in order to attend secondary school. At times the dormitory rules and practices prevented him from being able to join other students for group work or school activities. Lastly, Kritipong recognized that personal choices, such as cutting class to be with his friends, further contributed to his challenges keeping up.

Summary

In this section, I described the two main themes with respect to the significance of being a Lahu student that emerged during Kritipong's interviews. To begin, Kritipong believed that

some, but not all, of his Thai classmates looked down on him or saw him as inferior because he was Lahu. Occasionally, the issues with Thai students reached the point of physical violence. In addition, Kritipong saw himself as inferior for being Lahu. In the second theme, I described Kritipong's difficulties keeping up with his Thai classmates. Again, he saw his ethnicity as significant in that he had attended primary schools for ethnic minorities and thus was not well prepared for secondary school. Moreover, learning in Thai, as it was his second language, made school especially challenging. Lastly, I described his admission that his personal choices at that time also contributed to his challenges.

Conclusion

In Part One of this chapter, I have described the unique lived experiences of the individual participants. As we have seen, each individual's perspective on the significance of being ethnically Lahu during secondary school was distinct. And, perhaps, any study involving human experience will reveal that experience is, in part, idiosyncratic and individual-specific. However, experience also encompasses an equally important communal dimension. In the next part of this chapter, I present a composite description that identifies three main themes shared by many of the participants.

Part Two: The Common Lived Experience of Lahu Students

In the second part of this chapter, I present a composite description, developed from all the individual descriptions, of being a Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School. Importantly, this description does not represent the experience of any particular individual; rather, it aims to represent the experiences of the group as a whole. In doing so, I organized the composite description around three common themes derived from the individual descriptions above. In the first theme, I present the influence of participant's primary schooling in the

mountains on their secondary school experiences. Next, I detail the significance of having Thai as a second language. And, third, I describe the relationships that participants often had with their Thai classmates, who they believed saw them as inferior. Before turning to these three themes, it is important to note that I have included quotes from the interviews that can also be found in Part One of the chapter. While the repetition might be viewed as undesirable, I believe it gives a valuable voice to the participants in representing the experiences of the group as a whole. Furthermore, it allows us to hear the different expressions and details of the three themes that constitute Part Two of this chapter. Let us now look at the first theme.

“We came from schools that were in the mountains”.

Being Lahu, most participants in this study came from the mountains. “We came from the mountains, we came from schools that were in the mountains.” For many participants, growing up in the mountains made them different than Thai students who grew up in the lowlands. “People who lived in the highlands and people who lived in the lowlands were different because their upbringings were different.” “As a Lahu student I was different because of my foundation at home.” In general, growing up in the lowlands was viewed as better than growing up in the mountains. “Living in the lowlands was better than living in the mountains.” “I had an upbringing that was not really that good.” Furthermore, participants believed there were differences in the schooling backgrounds of students from the mountains and those from the lowlands. “If we are talking about ethnic peoples, our upbringing, or the beginnings of our education, then we were different. What I received from the beginning was different. I received a different foundation in my schooling.” More specifically, the education and schools in the mountains were inferior to those in the lowlands. “Going to school in the lowlands was different than in the mountains. The education in the mountains was inferior.” In other words,

participants saw the schools founded for Thai students in the lowlands as better than those founded for ethnic minority students in the mountains. “They went to school in the lowlands, and they received a better education. Their foundation was better than mine.” “Thai students spent their entire childhood in good schools.” In general, participants saw their upbringing and the beginnings of their education in the mountains as lacking opportunities, especially when compared to Thai students in the lowlands. “We didn’t really have the opportunities. This was the disadvantage of being Lahu.” “The disadvantage of being Lahu, when it came to education, was that we were not equal to those who live in the Muang, equal in the sense of educational opportunities.”

Participants highlighted several aspects of the mountain primary schools that were inferior. To begin, many emphasized the poor quality of teaching. “Going to school in the mountains, the teachers didn’t teach very well.” “The teacher was not very good, most students in Boo 6 (Grade 6) couldn’t even read Thai.” Thai students were seen as having better teachers because they attended schools in the lowlands. “In the lowlands they taught well.” “They had good teachers.” Thus, for most participants, “The teachers in the mountain schools did not teach as well as the teachers in the lowlands.”

In addition to poor teaching, some participants saw mountain primary schools as inferior in that they did not offer English classes. “English was not taught in my primary school.” “I didn’t have the opportunity to learn English before secondary school.”

As a result of attending inferior primary schools, many participants encountered academic challenges during secondary school. Some felt unprepared and had difficulties keeping up with their Thai classmates. “When I went to Banrongrian, I was not prepared and I couldn’t keep up with my classmates.” “When I entered Moo 1 [Grade 7], I couldn’t really

speaking, writing, or reading Thai and I couldn't keep up in other subjects. I couldn't keep up with Thai students, making me uninterested in school." Some participants voiced that they had to do more than Thai students during secondary school in order to keep up. "We [Lahu students] had to do a lot more than Thai students. If we didn't then we wouldn't have been able to keep up."

Additionally, many participants believed they did not have as much knowledge or they had inferior knowledge as compared with their Thai peers. "Because I went to school in the mountains, my knowledge was inferior." "We didn't have as much knowledge." "When Thai students came to study in secondary school, they had more knowledge, they had a better foundation than us, because they went to good [primary] schools."

Some participants believed their inferior primary schooling led to them being placed into a lower academic track during secondary school. "The majority of Lahu or mountain people were in the third and fourth rooms." Some participants attempted to overcome their inferior primary schooling by developing themselves during secondary school. "I developed to be equal when I came to school together [with Thai students]."

In sum, for most participants, being Lahu meant coming from the mountains, which, importantly, made them significantly different from their Thai classmates during secondary school. Growing up in the mountains, participants attended inferior primary schools, where the teaching was poor and the opportunities few. In moving into the lowlands to attend secondary school, many were not well-prepared and experienced difficulties keeping up with their Thai peers. In addition, they saw themselves as having inferior or less knowledge than their Thai classmates. Lastly, as a result of inferior primary schooling and limited educational opportunities in the mountains, some participants were placed in low academic tracks and some

participants saw secondary school as the time to overcome their inferior primary school background by developing to be equal with their Thai peers.

“Thai wasn’t my language”.

Being Lahu, most participants spoke Lahu as their native language. “We didn’t speak Thai.” It was primarily in the context of school that participants encountered the Thai language. Despite learning in Thai during primary school, many participants did not consider themselves fluent in Thai come secondary school. “At first when I went I didn’t understand much. People spoke to me and I only understood a little bit.” “When I got to secondary school, I had not acquired the language necessary for different subjects ... By Moo 2 [Grade 8] and Moo 3 [Grade 9] the schoolwork became very difficult. There were a lot of words that I just did not understand.”

Some participants saw Thai students as academically better because they were learning in their native language. “They were better students because they were learning in their own language. It was more difficult for me because Thai wasn’t my language.” Additionally, some participants believed speaking Thai as their native language allowed Thai students to have better relationships with their teachers. “Thai students were close to the teachers. Speaking Thai allowed them to converse easily with the teachers.”

Coming from a predominantly Lahu speaking environment, many participants spoke Thai unclearly during secondary school. “I had gone to school in the mountains and even though I knew Thai and I understood what they were talking about, when I came to live in the lowlands, I spoke Thai unclearly.” “Sometimes it was difficult because I didn’t speak clearly or I couldn’t communicate with them because they didn’t understand.”

Speaking Thai unclearly signified to others that participants came from the mountains and it often led to being teased by Thai classmates. “My classmates teased me and said, ‘You are a mountain person.’ They liked to say that. They said that I was a mountain person, a Lahu person, and that I spoke unclearly, that I was a mountain person. They knew because of the way I spoke. At school, they knew because I didn’t speak clearly.” “I was teased for not speaking clearly. They teased me about language, that I couldn’t speak Thai clearly.” In addition, speaking Thai unclearly, participants believed they were looked down on by their Thai peers. “We spoke Thai unclearly and they looked down on us.” “They looked down on us because we were Lahu and we didn’t speak their language clearly.”

Lastly, with Thai as their second language, some participants were reluctant to participate in class. “I didn’t really speak up in class or participate because I was embarrassed that I spoke unclearly.”

In sum, for many participants, being Lahu meant being a native speaker of Lahu and having Thai as a second language. During secondary school, some participants experienced challenges primarily because they were learning in Thai. These were challenges Thai students did not encounter as they were learning in their native language. Additionally, most participants spoke Thai unclearly, which led to being teased and being seen as inferior. Lastly, in class, out of embarrassment for speaking Thai unclearly, some participants were reluctant to participate. **“They looked down on us”.**

Being Lahu, every participant experienced being looked down on or being seen as inferior (*doo took*) by their Thai peers because of their ethnicity. “They looked down on my ethnicity.” “The vast majority of the students at the school saw us as inferior.”

Participants believed that it was not only Lahu students who were seen as inferior; Thai students looked down on all mountain people. “They looked down on all the hill tribes (*chao khao*).” “What I understood was that Thai people and mountain people found it difficult to live in harmony with each other, because they looked down on us, because we lived in the mountains and came down to go to school.” In other words, from participants’ perspectives, being from the mountains, or being a mountain person, was the significant difference that resulted in being seen as inferior. “They saw mountain people as not like Thai people, as different from them.” “They let us know that we came from some other place.” “They were the people who normally lived here and we had come from the mountains in order to go to school.” Furthermore, some participants added that they were looked down on because being from the mountains meant being a minority. “They thought that mountain people were a minority group and they were the majority.”

Participants recalled specific expressions of being looked down on by their Thai peers. “They said that the hill tribes were dirty.” “They would say ‘Musser’¹⁶ or ‘ee Musser.’” “They criticized us saying we were ‘mountain bugs.’” For some participants, being seen as inferior included being hit, or experiencing physical violence. “Sometimes when I was just hanging out, a group of three or four boys would come and hit me for no reason at all.” “This trampling on others existed.”

In response to being seen as inferior, most participants felt different. “I knew I was different ever since I went to study in a school in the lowlands. I knew that I came from the mountains.” “The exaggerated differences made me think that I was different.” “This made me feel different from them, like I was not a part of their group.” Some participants were confused.

¹⁶ As I mentioned previously, “Musser” was a pejorative term for Lahu people in Thailand.

“But as I continued to go to school at Banrongrian, I was confused as to why Thai students saw the mountain people the way they did, as different, as inferior.” Some participants felt inferior. “I felt that I was inferior because I was Lahu.” Some participants lost their confidence. “In my previous school, I felt confident, but when I came to Banrongrian, the situation was different, the society was different, and it made me aware of the differences between students. I lost my confidence.” And some participants wanted to prove that they were equally as capable as Thai students. “I thought that anything Thai students can do I can do as well.” “We had to prove that we were capable and demonstrate that we were capable of doing well in school.”

Participants also focused on the divisions between mountain students and Thai students at school. “Mountain people hung out with mountain people and Thai people hung out with Thai people.” “We were one group and they were another group.” For many participants, it was their Thai peers who maintained the divisions because they had little desire to be involved with mountain students. “At first, when I entered the school, it was like because we were mountain people, the Thai students didn’t want to be involved with us. They separated themselves into their own group.” “At first, our groups were separated from each other because they thought that we were mountain people.”

Many participants believed that there was a general dislike of Lahu and mountain people among their Thai peers. “I thought that they didn’t like me because I was a mountain person.” “Thai people didn’t really like mountain people.” “Those who live in the lowlands, or Thai people, at the time, primary and secondary school, they didn’t like us.”

Additionally, participants believed their Thai peers did not want to be friends with them. “They wouldn’t befriend us.” “Another reason they didn’t really want to be friends was because they thought that we were ‘hillbillies,’ undeveloped, and non-modern.” “They didn’t come and

hang out with mountain people. Because they knew that we were mountain people, they didn't come into our group. They hung out with their own group.”

With clear divisions between mountain students and Thai students, participants tended to be friends with other Lahu or mountain students. “My friends, from the time that I was in primary school through secondary school, were mainly Lahu, or ethnic people, those who lived in the highlands.” “Usually, mountain people were friends with mountain people and we didn't bother the Thai students.” It is important to note that participants had some close Thai friends who they believed did not see them as inferior. “There were some Thai students who made the effort to be friends with us. I believe that those people saw us for who we were, they didn't just look at our face, or where we were from.” “So, when I talk about Thai students, it is not as if they all saw us the same way, that they all did not accept us. There were some Thai students who enjoyed being with us and they liked having us as a part of their group.”

For some participants, being divided from most Thai students as well as being looked down on for being Lahu were characteristics primarily of lower secondary school. As they moved on to upper secondary school, there were fewer divisions and fewer incidents in which they were seen as inferior. “As we went through school, they knew that most of the mountain students were committed to school. And they saw that we were capable, that we were good students, that our schoolwork was good. So, they came to rely on us, and befriend us. We developed our relationship together, meaning that we came together.” “By upper secondary school, each person had been in school for a while and everyone had matured. So, it was a little better, people did not really look down on me.”

In sum, for all participants, being Lahu meant to be looked down upon by Thai peers. Coming from the mountains and being a mountain person made participants significantly

different from their Thai classmates. Furthermore, such differences entailed being seen as inferior. At times, they were called “Musser” and “mountain bugs” and some experienced physical violence. In response, some participants felt different, confused, inferior, and unconfident. Other participants wanted to prove themselves to be equally as capable as their Thai peers. Additionally, participants emphasized the divisions between Thai students and mountain students. As there was a general dislike of mountain people, the participants believed that their Thai peers had little desire to befriend them. Participants tended to be friends with other Lahu or mountain students. Lastly, for some participants, being looked down on by their Thai peers and the divisions between mountain students and Thai students were features primarily of lower secondary and, for the most part, had resided by upper secondary school.

Conclusion

In Part Two of this chapter, I presented a composite description made up of three themes that were common among most of the participants. The description is not meant to represent the experience of any particular Lahu individual; rather, it is meant to represent the experiences of the group as a whole. In the first theme, I discussed the significance of growing up in the mountains and attending inferior primary schools on participants’ secondary school experiences. Next, I described the importance many participants placed on having Thai as a second language. And, lastly, I detailed how every participant believed their Thai peers looked down on them for being Lahu. In the next chapter, where I return to the study’s primary research questions and relate the findings to the literature, I continue to draw on the participants’ common lived experiences as well as their individual-specific experiences described throughout this chapter.

Part Three: Being Economically Poor and Living in a Dormitory

In Part One and Part Two, I thematically described aspects of participants' ethnicity that clearly stood out to them as relevant during secondary school. In Part Three, I discuss two more themes that emerged during our interviews – being economically poor and living in a dormitory. The two themes presented in this section are significantly different from the themes presented earlier. To begin, from my perspective as a researcher, based on the initial interviews, it was unclear whether or not most participants saw a significant relationship between these themes and their ethnicity. Or, if there was some indication that they perceived a relationship, then the character of the relationship, from my perspective, remained ambiguous. As a researcher, ambiguous results are uncomfortable. However, instead of hiding uncomfortable results by omission, I chose to include all relevant findings, even if this meant admitting an unclear understanding. Perhaps this also points to the nature of qualitative research on human experience; namely, our understandings and conclusions are never perfectly complete and further inquiry allowing for a better understanding is always possible.

Another difference in the themes presented below was that they were based on both the initial interviews with all ten participants as well as brief (10 to 15 minutes) follow-up interviews with five participants. Toward the end of the study, after much of Part One and Part Two were written, I spoke with Fah and Sande over the phone and I was able to meet in person with Chai, Reme, and Kritipong. Unfortunately, I was not able to meet with the remaining five participants in order to further discuss the themes. Thus, while the discussion to follow is relevant to the study, the conclusions reached should be taken more tentatively than those presented earlier in the chapter.

Being Economically Poor

During our initial interviews, many participants spoke about coming from economically poor families. However, only Ati, Sande, and Sook, whose experiences were discussed in Part One, described a relationship between being poor and being ethnically Lahu. Even after following up with Fah, Chai, Reme, and Kritipong specifically about this topic, from my perspective, as mentioned above, it was unclear whether or not many participants saw a significant relationship between their lower class economic background and their ethnicity. In this section, based on the initial interviews with ten participants and follow-up interviews with four participants, I discuss some of the details with regards to the theme of being economically poor.

Financial Assistance. The most common topic that participants spoke about with regards to being economically poor was their need for financial assistance or scholarships in order to attend school. Local teachers, Christian dormitories and organizations, and the Thai government were the primary sources of financial help.

To begin, Fah said that one of the teachers at Banrongrian provided her with a scholarship in order to attend school. In addition, she performed household chores for the teacher in exchange for spending money to buy necessities such as toothpaste and soap. She said:

I liked Kroo Natpalai. She was a good person. Some days, I went to work for her, cleaned her house. She gave me some money and she provided me with a scholarship as well, a scholarship to study. (Fah)

Fah was the only participant who talked about receiving financial help from a teacher. Most other participants obtained assistance through Christian dormitories and organizations as well as the Thai government.

For Min, attending school would not have been possible without financial assistance as both of her parents died of AIDS when she was in Moo 3 (Grade 9). Without parents to support her, the Christian dormitory helped to pay for Min's educational expenses. In addition, she received a government scholarship specifically for children whose parents had passed away.

Talking about her situation, she said:

My family did not have any money to give me in order to go to school. Therefore, I had to be the kind of person that was capable of obtaining scholarships by myself. My aunt, well, if she asked me, "Do you want to go to school?" I responded, "I want to." But she didn't have any money to help pay for school. But she wanted me to finish secondary school, to go to university, and to study abroad if possible. (Min)

Similarly, Nacoot, Chai, and Reme, also received government financial assistance. However, for them it was in the form of a loan. Nacoot said:

My parents helped to pay for school. But I also took out a loan from the government, for upper secondary school, because my parents couldn't pay for me to go to school. They could pay for some of the little things, but they couldn't pay for school tuition and the like. (Nacoot)

Likewise, Chai said that he took out a government loan during Moo 6 (Grade 12) for a total of 7,000 Baht. And Reme took out a loan for 500 Baht a month during most of her six years of secondary school. When she graduated, she said she owed approximately 20,000 Baht.

In addition to government loans, some participants received help from Christian dormitories or Christian organizations. For example, the Thailand Lahu Baptist Convention dormitory, which I discuss in the next section, paid for Kritipong's school tuition and expenses. However, he said that his parents paid the dormitory fees of about 2,500 Baht a year. Ann, as mentioned in Part One, also had assistance from the dormitory where she resided. And Chai mentioned that he received 2,000 Baht a term from World Vision, an international Christian organization.

Motivation. In addition to the need to obtain financial assistance, participants also spoke about how being economically poor was a motivating factor for staying in school and graduating. In other words, school was seen as a means to better economic opportunities. When I asked Fah, “Why did you want to finish school?” she replied, “Because I was poor and life was difficult.” Like most participants’ parents in this study, Fah’s parents were farmers in the mountains, which typically meant that they were of low economic status in Thailand. Not wanting to work as a farmer like her parents, Fah saw school as a means to different, and from her perspective better, work opportunities. When I asked Ann the same question, she said, “I didn’t want to work like my parents. By this I mean that I didn’t want to be a farmer, working in the sun.” Similarly Ati said, “Perhaps I saw how difficult my parents life was and so I wanted to go to school.” Thus, for these participants, coming from poor families was an incentive to stay in school, which was seen as a means of moving away from the difficult life of farming like their parents and towards easier and better paying forms of work.

Lastly, as I wrote earlier, from my perspective, participants’ understanding of the relationship, if any, between their low economic class background and their ethnicity was unclear. Before examining this in more detail, it is important to note that for Ati and Sande, as I discussed in Part One, there was a significant relationship between their status (*tan na*), including their economic status, and their ethnicity. Sook also spoke about the relationship between being poor, being ethnically Lahu, and being a student. However, for the seven other participants there was significant ambiguity as to the relationship. For example, in a third interview I asked Fah, “Did you ever think that you were poor because you were Lahu? Or that being Lahu and being poor were related to one another?” Fah said:

I don’t know if I ever thought that. Maybe. I thought that because of the work that we did, we only made a little bit of money. The work was extremely difficult, but we only made a

little bit of money. And, we couldn't do much of anything else besides farming because we did not have the knowledge.

Fah attributed her poverty primarily to the little amount of money her parents made in being farmers. In addition, she believed they did not have many options for work as they "did not have the knowledge." However, she was uncertain as to the relationship between being poor and being Lahu. And, being a farmer was not necessarily an essential aspect of being Lahu, even though many Lahu people were, in fact, farmers. Thus, it seems that, for Fah, being poor was more entwined with the type of work her parents performed than with her ethnicity.

When I asked Reme the same question, she said, "My parents were poor mainly because they did not have an education. And they could not really be a part of Thai society because they never received an education." For Reme, it was primarily a lack of education that contributed to her parents' poverty. Furthermore, never having attended school in Thailand, she saw her parents as living apart from mainstream Thai society. However, there was little connection, if any, between being Lahu and not having a formal education, even though none of the participants' parents had attended school in Thailand. Thus, from Reme's perspective, her lower class economic background was primarily the result of her parents' lack of formal education and not necessarily her ethnicity.

In sum, a relevant theme that emerged from our interviews was the low economic class background of the participants. For many, attending school necessitated that they obtain financial assistance, whether it was from local teachers, Christian dormitories and organizations, or the Thai government. In addition, being poor was a motivation to complete school in the hopes that an education would allow for participants to find easier and better paying work. Lastly, while being poor was an important theme, its significance in relation to participants' ethnicity was often unclear or ambiguous.

Living in a Dormitory

All the participants in the study lived in a dormitory. During our initial interviews, many participants spoke briefly about life in the dormitories. However, as with being poor, they did not focus on the relationship between their ethnicity and living at the dormitory. Thus, I did not include much about life in the dormitories in the individual accounts presented earlier in this chapter. From my perspective, as a “normal” underlying feature of being a Lahu student during secondary school, participants did not emphasize a relationship between living in a dormitory and their ethnicity, even though it contributed to shaping their experiences.¹⁷ After writing much of this chapter and wanting to inquire further into the dormitories, I conducted a small focus group with Chai, Reme, and Kritipong, three participants who were easily accessible toward the end of the study. In what follows, I touch upon some aspects of dormitory life that emerged from this focus group as well as the initial interviews with all ten participants.

When participants were attending Banrongrian, there were two dormitories that housed Lahu students. One dormitory was founded by the Thailand Lahu Baptist Convention (TLBC), which was one of the major Lahu Christian denominations in Thailand. Only Christian Lahu students lived at the TLBC dormitory and a Lahu couple oversaw its daily running. The dorm often paid for students’ school tuition and expenses (e.g. books and uniforms); however, most students’ families paid room and board, which was about 2,500 Baht at the time. Kritipong was the only participant in this study to live at the TLBC dormitory. He said that there were about

¹⁷ In other words, living in a dormitory was as normal for them as living at home was for me. If I was asked to talk about my experiences during secondary school, I would not talk much about living at home. Just like living at home would be assumed in my case, living in the dormitories was assumed by participants. I believe this was the reason the dormitories were not a focus of our initial interviews.

fifteen students, boys and girls, who lived in the dormitory and everyone spoke Lahu to one another.

The other dormitory was founded by a Lahu couple with financial help from foreign Christian missionaries. While this dormitory began with about ten Lahu students, within a few years, other ethnic minority students, primarily Ahka, also came to live at the dormitory. Additionally, both Christian and non-Christian students lived at the dormitory. Usually there were around twenty students, boys and girls, at the dormitory. As they were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, Thai was the common language among the students. A few students were provided with scholarships and financial help for school and room and board. However, most students had to pay 4,000 Baht a year or ten bags of rice, depending on arrangements made between the directors of the dormitory and a student's family.

Fah, Min, Ati, Ann, and Kritipong had lived in dormitories prior to secondary school. Sande, Nacoot, Sook, Chai, and Reme began when they entered Moo 1 (Grade 7). Sande recalled the transition from living at home to living in the dormitory as difficult. She said:

When I was living at the dormitory, really, when I first came, I missed home and I wanted to go back home all the time. It was difficult to be away from my parents. Sometimes even though I wasn't permitted to leave, I snuck out and went home. (Sande)

Similarly, Nacoot said:

I missed home. When I first came to the dormitory, to Banrongrian, I went back home every week. Monday through Friday I went to school. On Friday evening I went back home. Then, on Sunday evening I came back to the dormitory. But after being there for a while, the director of the dormitory didn't let me go back. I could only go once a month. (Nacoot)

After adjusting to life away from home, most participants said they enjoyed living at the dormitory, primarily because they lived with their friends. Ati said

As for me, the dormitory, really it was a fun and enjoyable place because I had a lot of friends there. It was fun. And there were a lot of things to do with my friends. I didn't

really want to go back home. At the time I was a teenager and I loved playing around, so I wanted to be around friends. (Ati)

In addition, Sande said:

After living there for a while, I made a lot of friends and we became close. So, I enjoyed being there. During the school year, I wanted to go home; but when school was closed during break, I didn't want to go home because I missed my friends. Being home for a long time made me miss my friends. (Sande)

Living at the dormitories, students were required to help with its daily running. Some of their duties included cooking, cleaning, and gardening. In addition, participants had the opportunities to play sports and music during their free time after school. A couple of the participants spoke about their daily lives at the dormitory. Chai said:

I lived at a dormitory. I woke up, washed my face, brushed my teeth and then went to morning worship, came back, did my chores. After that I ate breakfast, got dressed and went to school. At school, I went to class. After class, around 4 PM, I came back and did my chores. Sometimes I cleaned the bathroom, swept the dorm, or cooked dinner. After cooking dinner, there was a little bit of time to play soccer. I liked to play soccer. Or sometimes I played music with my friends. After that I ate dinner, went to evening worship, and did my homework. Around 9 PM or 10 PM I went to sleep. (Chai)

Similarly, Fah said:

When I was in Banrongrian, I lived at the dormitory. Every week there were four or five people in charge of the dormitory chores. I woke up early in the morning at 5 AM and started to make breakfast. If I wasn't responsible for making breakfast, then I went to morning worship. At 6:30 AM we ate breakfast. When we finished at 7 AM, we left for school. After school, I came back to the dormitory at about 4:30 PM. I did my chores again, cleaned the dormitory. At 6 PM, everyone had to go to worship. We worshiped for an hour and then I went to do my homework that the teachers had assigned. At 10 PM, everyone had to go to sleep. (Fah)

In addition, most of the participants were born into Christian families and living in the dormitory allowed them to be members of a Christian community. Fah and Sook were the only participants who were not born into Christian families. Fah claimed that she became Christian during upper secondary school primarily because she lived at the dormitory. Sook did not become Christian.

Living in a dormitory throughout secondary school was a necessity for most participants. In Reme's words, "There was no other option besides living in a dormitory." Based on conversations with Chai, Reme, and Kritipong there were two main reasons students from the mountains needed to live in dormitories in order to attend secondary school. First, there were few lower secondary schools and no upper secondary schools located in the mountains. In contrast to primary schools, which were located in almost every Lahu village, secondary schools were located in (Thai) towns and cities in the lowlands. Without secondary schools in the Lahu communities where participants grew up, most attended the secondary school closest to their home communities.

The second reason participants lived in dormitories involved their families' poor economic backgrounds. For most, it was a financial impossibility to live at home and commute to school. Banrongrian Secondary School was approximately 13 kilometers from the closest and 40 kilometers from the farthest home village-community of participants in this study. In terms of transportation at that time, some families had one motorcycle and some families had no means of motorized transportation.¹⁸ It was very rare for a family to own a car. Sook's case, mentioned earlier, in which he commuted to school was atypical. Furthermore, Sook was the youngest participant in the study and when he attended school, many Lahu families had purchased motorcycles and acquired more money than only a few years earlier. In describing his daily expenses at that time, Sook said:

Living at home, my mom paid for my school. Each day she would give me about 50 or 60 baht. I bought gasoline for motorcycle; in the past, gas was not as expensive, 20 or 25

¹⁸ During my first stay in a Lahu village near Banrongrian seven years ago, out of approximately 100 families, only two owned cars. Most families owned one motorcycle that was used by the parents for work, especially driving to their fields located outside the village center. During the time of this study, I lived in the same village. Over half the families in the community owned cars and most families owned two motorcycles.

baht for 1 liter. Everyday I bought 1 liter. Then I used 25 baht for food. At the school, it cost 12 baht for lunch and I usually bought some snack.

For most participants, living at the dormitory was the least expensive of the few options that might have existed. For 2,500 Baht, 4,000 Baht, or ten bags of rice, depending on the dormitory and the participants' financial circumstances, they had much of what they needed in order to attend school. Additionally, as mentioned, some participants received financial assistance and scholarships from the dormitories, which certainly was an additional incentive.

While most of the students who lived in the dormitories were members of ethnic minority groups, in general, participants did not emphasize any relationship between living in the dormitories and their ethnicity. Moreover, based on a third follow-up interview, Chai, Reme, and Kritipong did not see the dormitories as further separating them from most of their Thai peers, who lived at home. On the contrary, they believed that living in dormitories allowed them the opportunity to live like Thai students in the lowlands. Kritipong said, "Living in the dormitory allowed us to know the lifestyles of those who lived in the lowlands. We lived among Thai people and we were able to go to school just like Thai people." Even though students who lived in the dormitories around Banrongrian were primarily ethnic minority students, Chai, Reme, and Kritipong believed that living in the dormitories made them similar to Thai people in that they lived and attended school in the lowlands.

In contrast, however, Min believed that living in the dormitory was related to her ethnicity. As mentioned in discussing the barriers Min perceived between herself and her teachers in Part One, Min said, "I was a dormitory student, a child from the mountains, a Lahu person." Being a dormitory student, a mountain person, and a Lahu person were entwined with one another. Moreover, for Min, they signified fundamentally the same thing in that she was different from her Thai classmates. While many participants grew up in the mountains, moved

into a dormitory in the lowlands, and thus felt similar to Thai people, Min grew up in the lowlands, moved into a dormitory for ethnic minority students, and thus felt different from Thai people. In other words, from my perspective, as Min grew up in the lowlands among Thai people, moving into the dormitory and living with other ethnic minority students perhaps made her Lahu ethnicity more significant than it was previously.

In sum, living in a Christian dormitory during secondary school was for the most part a necessary and, from my perspective, “normal” underlying aspect of participants lives. Upon first moving into the dormitories, it was common for participants to miss their homes and families. However, after adjusting many enjoyed living there as they were around their close friends. Performing chores, playing sports and music, completing homework, and going to worship were some of the activities participants remembered as being parts of the daily routines. Lastly, as I have discussed throughout Part Three, there was an unclear relationship between participants’ ethnicity and living in the dormitories. During our initial interviews, most participants, with the exception of Min, did not speak about any relationship between being Lahu and living in a dormitory. And during a follow-up focus group, participants saw the dormitory as allowing them to be more similar to Thai people than they would have been if they remained in the mountains.

Conclusion

In Part Three of this chapter, I have discussed two themes that emerged during this study – being economically poor and living in a dormitory. The relationship between these themes and participants’ ethnicity, from my perspective, remained unclear, which is the primary reason I have separated them from earlier analysis. In addition, Part Three was based, in part, on additional interviews conducted with five participants as I hoped to gain a better understanding

of the relationship between the themes and being Lahu. In the end, it is necessary to admit that more research is needed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the themes presented above.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I “take a step back” from the findings presented in Chapter Four in order to interpret the results in light of broader contexts and issues relevant to the study. To begin, I examine the findings in relation to the three research questions that guided this study. I then turn my attention to the literature and consider the contributions of this study to previous research and knowledge. Recommendations for practice and further research conclude the chapter.

Responding to the Research Questions

Recall that the purpose of this phenomenological study was to give voice to Lahu individuals by inquiring into and describing their lived experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School. Specific attention was given to participants’ interpretation of the significance of their ethnicity during their time in secondary school. Furthermore, I focused on the perspectives of Lahu individuals and valued their particular viewpoints.

With this purpose, two research questions that guided this study sought the perspectives of the participants:

1. What meaning do ten Lahu individuals ascribe to their experience of being an ethnically Lahu student at Banrongrian Secondary School?
 - a. From participants’ perspectives, in what situations, if any, did their ethnicity play a significant role in being a student at Banrongrian Secondary School?

Detailed responses to these questions were the focus of Chapter Four. However, we might respond generally to the first question by stating that being ethnically Lahu made a significant difference in participants’ experiences of being students at Banrongrian Secondary School. Being ethnically Lahu, participants saw themselves and were seen by others as being different;

and, being different made a difference in their experiences. As described, each participant's experience was unique and individual-specific. However, there were also common themes in their experiences that emerged during our interviews. Specifically, coming from primary schools in the mountains, having Thai as a non-native language, and being looked down on by many of their Thai classmates were important aspects of being an ethnically Lahu student common among most participants. Additionally, in response to the first research question, being ethnically Lahu was generally seen as a difference that placed participants at a disadvantage relative to their Thai peers. In other words, in the context of school, being Lahu rarely worked in participants' favor. However, it is also important to note that despite the disadvantages, all participants were proud and happy to be ethnically Lahu.

In response to the second question, it is helpful to recall from Chapter Two that it is peoples' commitment to the idea of shared descent or origin that makes a group ethnically distinct (Keyes, 1976). With respect to ethnicity, cultural differences that regularly make a difference in interactions between members of groups are secondary and signify, more importantly, differences in origin. In Chapter Four, I described both the individual-specific as well as the common situations in which participants saw their ethnicity as playing a significant role. Recalling two examples, most of the participants were friends primarily with other ethnic minority students and several participants spoke of the need to work harder in school in order to keep up with their Thai peers; in both of these situations, participants saw their ethnicity as playing a fundamental role. Broadly speaking, living in the lowlands among Thai people, participants often saw themselves and were seen by others as coming from, in Kritipong's words, "some other place." Participants spoke about themselves as "mountain people," "people from the mountains," "highland students," "hill tribes," "ethnic people," and "Lahu people." "Those

who live in the lowlands,” “students in the *muang*” (lowlands/city), and “Thai people” were terms used to describe peoples on the other side of the dichotomy. All of these terms signified differences in origin and, thus, ethnicity. As noted in Chapter Two, from the transformation of Thailand into a modern nation-state emerged a geographical distinction between lowlands and highlands that also served as a significant social and ethnic distinction between Thai and non-Thai peoples. Those who were ethnically “Thai” were “natural” citizens of Thailand and those who were “non-Thai others” were seen as originating from other national territories (Pinkawee, 2003). The findings from this study suggest that the intertwined geographical and social/ethnic distinctions remain fundamental aspects of the social landscape of Thailand.

As noted above, cultural differences are significant insofar as they indicate differences in origin, which are most fundamental to ethnicity. The primary cultural difference for most participants in this study was their native Lahu language. In situations where participants were required to speak Thai, differences in native languages made a significant difference in their interactions with Thai people. Some of the consequences of this difference, such as challenges keeping up in class and being teased by Thai peers, were described in Chapter Four. Most importantly, speaking Thai as a non-native language, and often speaking unclearly, signified to others the more significant difference of participants’ origins in the mountains and therefore their ethnic minority status.

Interestingly, in describing Min’s account, I noted that she had a Lahu mother and Thai father. She grew up in the lowlands, never lived regularly in the mountains, and spoke Thai as her native language. While she did not actually come from the mountains or speak Lahu as her native language, her ethnicity still played a significant role in her experiences of being a student. Such a phenomenon is difficult to explain as there were few, if any, significant cultural

differences between herself and her Thai peers. Perhaps, living primarily with other Lahu students in a dormitory, her Lahu ethnicity became significant. However, she had lived in a dormitory for ethnic minority students at her previous school as well. Recall that she said, “But when I came to Banrongrian, I lived in the dormitory. And the students in Banrongrian thought that the children who lived in the dormitory were mountain people.” As Min suggests, perhaps it was not only living in the dormitory that contributed to her ethnicity being significant; the specific context of Banrongrian, the people who lived there, and the social relationships specific to the area, were also important in shaping the situations in which her ethnicity played a significant role. As Min’s account in particular provides us with a deep understanding of the significance of ethnicity at Banrongrian, I return to it below.

The third question guiding this study was: What was the impact of policies of national integration and assimilation on the schooling experiences of participants? Recall that, in Chapter Two, I noted Keyes’ (2006) important point that in every Asian society national policies of integration, which include the creation of a national culture and identity, have had a twofold outcome: “the shaping of a national majority whose members are conceived of as sharing a common heritage and the ascription of minority ethnic status to those whose heritage is considered so distinctive as to make them marginal within the nation” (p. 9). The findings from this study further support this claim and suggest that policies of national integration contributed to the marginalization of the participants as ethnic minority students in the context of Banrongrian Secondary School. As the concept of “marginalization” tends to be abstract, one of the main contributions of this study is that it allows us to see concrete examples of this abstract notion. We got a sense of what it was like to be an ethnically Lahu student in a broader Thai social context that often marginalized ethnic minority peoples. In other words, we got a glimpse

of what specifically this marginalization “looks like” in a particular Thai secondary school from the perspectives of the individuals who experienced it. A look back at some of the relevant literature is helpful in coming to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between policies of national integration and the marginalization of participants as ethnic minority students. It is to this that I now turn.

National Integration/Identity, Ethnic Identity, and Education

I began Chapter Two by discussing the importance of viewing education as inherently political in nature in that “[it] is caught up in the real world of shifting and unequal power relations” (Apple, 1990, p. viii). Furthermore, I noted that in order to understand education we must look at the unequal power relations in society and the realities of dominance and marginalization that characterize these relations (Apple, 2010, p. 14). The present study certainly reinforces the importance of viewing education as a political act. More specifically, understanding the experiences of participants in this study is not possible without reference to the broader social and political contexts discussed in Chapter Two. Furthermore, this study points to the value of examining the politics of education “through the eyes of the dispossessed” (Apple, 2010, p. 14-15). While the marginalization of ethnic minorities in Thailand has been noted by past scholars, the specific expressions of this marginalization in the context of school from the perspectives of the marginalized were previously unknown. The findings of this study suggest that marginalized ethnic minority students in Thailand encounter barriers to equality intimately associated with the broader social and political context of the nation. Recall that, for most participants, the mountain primary schools founded for ethnic minorities were of lower quality to those founded for Thai students in the lowlands. As members of a subordinate group in Thai society, participants often recognized the inequalities in primary school resources and

opportunities granted to themselves as Lahu individuals. As discussed in Chapter Four, such inequalities placed participants at a disadvantage relative to their Thai peers during secondary school. Another specific expression of marginalization that emerged from this study was related to language. As Thai was the dominant language of Thailand and the primary language used in schools, it was valued. Without “native” knowledge of the Thai language, or speaking Thai unclearly, several participants experienced academic difficulties and were the focus of teasing by their Thai classmates. In other words, as non-native speakers of Thai, in a context where the Thai language was dominant, they occupied a marginalized position relative to their Thai peers in school. It is also important to note that there was no place for the Lahu language, or the languages of other ethnic minorities, in the school at that time. Another relevant expression of marginalization shared by participants was that they were seen as inferior by many of their Thai peers. In a broad social and political context where being a non-Thai ethnic person placed one in a position of subordination relative to Thai people, participants believed they were looked down on by Thai classmates because of their Lahu ethnicity. These three specific expressions of marginalization allow us to recognize that, as noted in Chapter Two, Thai schools did not operate in a vacuum. The marginalization of ethnic minorities in the broad social context of Thailand, noted by past scholars, and the marginalization of participants as ethnic minority students at Banrongrian were intimately entangled.

Also in Chapter Two, I discussed the transformation of Thailand into a modern nation-state, which included the processes of mapping Siam, the creation of a Thai national identity, the classification of peoples, and policies of national integration. I posited that this transformation shaped much of the social relations in Thailand since the late 1800’s and that it was the most important historical process influencing the present-day social landscape in which Lahu

individuals attend school. In general, the broad social and political context that was created and emerged from this transformation discouraged difference. Within the borders of the Thai state, those who saw themselves or were seen by others as being significantly different insofar as they were unable to share in the invented national heritage were regarded as ethnic minorities and became marginal within the nation (Keyes, 2006). Specifically, language, religion, and agricultural practices were discussed as three cultural differences that became relevant to the identity of Lahu people in Thailand in that they signified their ‘non-Thai’ origins in other national territories. For most participants in this study, language remained an important cultural difference that signified to others their ethnic status. As fluency in the Thai language was a pillar of being Thai (Keyes, 1983), participants’ inability to speak Thai clearly was an easily observable difference that signified to others their ‘non-Thai’ origins. Most participants did not focus on any differences in religion and agricultural practices; the exception was Ati and Sande, who saw farming in the mountains, in contrast to farming in the valleys, as contributing to their “low status” (*tan na*) in society.

It is especially interesting that, even in the absence of cultural differences for some participants, Min and Ann in particular, their ethnicity still played a significant role. As mentioned above, Min grew up in the lowlands and spoke Thai as her native language. Ann grew up primarily in the mountains but, like Min, she spoke Thai with her family. In addition, both participants performed academically well during secondary school and did not experience troubles keeping up with Thai students like most other participants who attended primary schools in the mountains. From our conversations, there seemed to be no observable cultural differences between Min and Ann as Lahu students and their Thai classmates. Thus, cultural differences themselves could not have been the most important element contributing to being seen as inferior

by their Thai classmates. This suggests that the primary difference that made a difference was not cultural; rather it was a difference in identity – identifying themselves and being identified by others as being Lahu. In other words, the identification of being ethnically Lahu was the fundamental difference at the roots of their marginalized position at Banrongrian. Furthermore, for Min, her ethnic identity was not the result of coming from the mountains, as she grew up in the lowlands. It appears that her ethnic identity resulted primarily from her mother’s identity as Lahu. Thus, it was her mother’s ethnic identity, not cultural differences, that signified her ‘non-Thai’ origins and her own Lahu ethnicity. Thus, it was possible for Min to remain ethnic without cultural differences; and, in this case, her ethnic status was “inherited” or originated from one of her parents.

In sum, the roots of participants’ marginalization in the context of secondary school lay primarily in their Lahu ethnic identity. Furthermore, their ethnic status was not necessarily fixed to any particular cultural differences; rather, it was a product of where they, or in Min’s case their families, were seen as coming from – “some other place.” In addition, their ethnic status only became significant in its relation to the creation of a Thai national identity and policies of national integration more generally. In a broad national context that discouraged difference and determined what differences were significant within the boundaries of the state, being ‘non-Thai’ ethnic peoples, participants were relegated to marginalized positions within the context of Banrongrian Secondary School.

Assimilation

It is also important to briefly discuss the contributions of this study to our understanding of the process of assimilation. First, in Chapter Two, I discussed the concept of *reactive ethnicity* – that ethnic discrimination encourages both a separation from the mainstream culture

as well as the strengthening of one's own culture (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 241). Based on the findings, there was little indication of a desire among the participants to separate from mainstream Thai culture. Rather, participants seemed to want acceptance among their Thai peers who were gatekeepers of mainstream Thai society. For example, I described how Kritipong believed he was willing to change in order to be a part of Thai society; however, he believed that his Thai peers either did not like him or did not understand at the time that he was trying to adjust in order to be a member of Thai society. This also suggests that the process of assimilation is highly dependent on native gatekeepers. Without being accepted by many of their Thai peers, participants were temporarily prevented from becoming members of mainstream Thai society.

While there was little desire for separation, most participants were friends primarily with other Lahu or ethnic minority classmates. This suggests that there was a sense of solidarity among ethnic minority students perhaps built around their common backgrounds – coming from the mountains – and shared experiences. It was unclear, however, whether or not this solidarity also included a strengthening of Lahu culture. For example, both Min and Kritipong spoke about their personal feelings of inferiority for being ethnically Lahu. In other words, their response to being seen as inferior for being ethnic was not a strengthening of their Lahu identity and culture; rather, during secondary school, they experienced difficulties accepting their Lahu ethnicity. Perhaps, now that Min and Kritipong are older and have come to be proud and accepting of their Lahu ethnicity, those experiences during secondary school over time came to important in strengthening their ethnic identity and culture. However, such a conclusion remains uncertain.

Being Economically Poor and Living in a Dormitory

In general, I was surprised that most participants did not focus on relations between being economically poor and being Lahu. From my perspective, most of the ambiguity with regards to this relationship can be attributed to the difficulties inherent to describing the complex intersection of ethnicity, class, and education. Ati, Sande, and Sook were the only participants who articulated a significant relationship. Sande, in particular, provided important details.

Recall that she said:

The status (*tan na*) of our families was different. Their [Thai students'] status was better than ours. We, our parents, lived in the mountains. In some places there was no land for farming. This wasn't the same as those who lived in the Muang. They had land suitable for agriculture. They were capable of sending their children to school and taking care of them. But, if we farmed in the mountains, then we had to farm in the forest and clear the trees. We didn't own any property and our parents did not have any land to make a living. This caused us to have limited opportunities for an education, for knowledge about technology, for having school supplies, for being prepared to go to school, as compared with those who lived in the Muang. (Sande)

Sande saw her "low" social status, which included her economic status, as stemming from being Lahu and her family's origins in the mountains. Being poor was accounted for by inequalities in access to suitable agricultural land. Furthermore, she identifies that her family was not granted legal ownership of the land they farmed because, as was the case with most mountainous land in northern Thailand, it was considered to be state property. These inequalities, which limited her opportunities for an education, were seen as entwined with her origins in the mountains and thus her ethnicity.

Despite the ambiguities in the relationship between ethnicity and economic class for most participants, it is important to recognize that they saw their economic class as a salient aspect of their experience. Furthermore, this points to the need to gain a deeper understanding of Lahu

individuals' experiences of being economically poor and the relationships of these experiences to other relevant aspects of identity such as ethnicity and gender.

In Chapter Four, I also described how living in a dormitory was common among the participants. I posited that as a "normal" underlying aspect of participants' lives during secondary school, they did not focus on a relationship between being Lahu and living in a dormitory. Again, as with the theme of being economically poor, it is important to be aware that living in a dormitory was a notable aspect of participants' experience, even though its relationship with participants' ethnicity was unclear. In general, the themes of being poor and living in a dormitory point to the importance of aspects of participants' experiences that were significant but perhaps more elusive in their relationships with ethnicity.

Recommendations For Educators

Getting to know the secondary school experiences of the participants in this study provides us with valuable knowledge that is useful and applicable for educators. While the study involved a small sample of ten participants at a specific school in Thailand, their stories express important insights regarding ethnicity, national identity, culture, diversity, equality, and education. In what follows, I provide a list of recommendations for educators based on some of the important findings in this study.

1. Know the differences that make a difference within both the broad social (usually national) context as well as the local context. In this study, we saw that participants' ethnic identity made a significant difference in their experience of being in school. Other differences that might be significant include traditional sociological categories such as gender, age, class, race, and sexual orientation. However, I would also encourage

educators to look beyond these categories to see other differences that might be significant in a particular context.

2. Openly discuss significant differences. Whether in the classroom with students or among faculty, administrators, and policy makers, discussing differences that make a difference can lead to better understandings of social and educational issues, controversies, questions, and practices.
3. Educators need to be aware of the relevant stereotypes that exist in their particular contexts. Furthermore, discussing stereotypical images in the classroom with students allows us to begin to deconstruct any negative influences they might have.
4. Ethnicity and culture play a significant role in education. Educators should be aware of their own ethnic and cultural background and related advantages and disadvantages that such a background might carry. Teachers should always be aware of and take into consideration students' diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
5. In schools that are linguistically diverse, it is important to affirm the value of students' native languages. On the individual level, this can be achieved by getting to know basic words and expressions in students' native languages. Schools can also make efforts to hire faculty and staff who are capable of communicating in the native languages of diverse students.
6. Limited proficiency in the languages used in schools can influence classroom behaviors. As described, Nacoot was reluctant to participate in class because she was embarrassed for speaking unclearly and did not want others to notice she was an ethnic minority student. It is easy to misinterpret students with limited language proficiency as being

“incapable” or “lacking intelligence.” Teachers should avoid such judgments and work closely with students as they gain the language necessary to do well in school.

7. Encourage students and educators to learn non-native languages and cultures. Getting to know another language and culture on a personal level can allow for a deeper sense of empathy for those who might face challenges in school as a result of linguistic or cultural differences.
8. Offer assistance to students who are learning in their non-native language. Schools with diverse students can create centers or classes for students who are learning in their non-native language. Such centers or classes allow time and space for students to gain proficiency in the language while learning subject matter.
9. In doing group work, consider students ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
10. Provide diverse students with mentors who can help them to navigate the school context, which can seem “foreign.”
11. Provide clubs or organizations for students from diverse backgrounds. Such communities can be places where students feel a sense of solidarity and know that their identities are valued. In addition, students can be of assistance to one another as they face similar challenges such as limited language proficiency.
12. Provide financial assistance to groups that have been historically marginalized or underrepresented in education. In addition, make financial assistance easily available for such groups.
13. Ensure equitable distribution of educational funding and resources among different schools. Furthermore, contribute extra funding and resources to schools, areas, and populations that have been historically marginalized. From participants’ perspectives,

and from what I have observed during the past seven years, the schools founded for ethnic minorities in the mountains of Thailand have been largely neglected in terms of educational resources compared to schools in the lowlands. The effects of these inequalities were detailed in Chapter Four (e.g. not being prepared for secondary school and being in lower academic tracks).

Recommendations for Future Study

A significant aspect of this study that I discussed in Chapter Three was my role as an “outsider.” A study conducted by a Lahu person in the Lahu language on this same topic might yield different or additional data. In addition, a Lahu researcher might select a different research design that would be helpful in understanding the experiences of Lahu students.

Future research might consider examining the experiences of Lahu students at several different secondary schools. As this study was limited to Banrongrian Secondary School, we do not yet know of any similarities or differences between the experiences of participants in this study and those of Lahu students at other secondary schools.

Also, including non-Lahu ethnic minority students might give us a deeper understanding of the significance of ethnicity in Thai schools. As ethnic minority students are often grouped together as being “mountain people,” an inquiry into the similarities and differences in their schooling experiences would certainly yield interesting results.

Lastly, based on this study, I believe it is also necessary to inquire further into the primary schools in the mountains founded for ethnic minority students. A case study would allow for a rich and holistic account of a particular school. Valuing a variety of perspectives, such a study ought to include the voices of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members.

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APPENDIX A: Consent Form

Agreement to Participate in “Lahu Students in Thai Schools”

Matthew Juelsgaard

Educational Foundations Department, University of Hawai’i, Honolulu, HI 96822

Purpose of the Research

The primary purpose of this study is to give voice to Lahu individuals by inquiring into and describing their lived experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School.

What You Will Be Expected To Do

You are recognized as being either a Lahu individual or an individual who is significantly involved Lahu students’ lives during secondary school. Participation in this project will consist of a series of interviews with the investigator as well as focus groups. Interview questions will focus on the experiences of Lahu students in Thai schools. No personal identifying information will be included with the research results. Each interview will be between 15 minutes and 1 hour long.

If you give permission, interviews will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription. All research records will be stored on the investigator’s computer and in a locked file in the investigators’ office for the duration of the research project. Tapes will be kept for the private use of the investigator in future projects.

The investigator believes there is little or no risk to participating in this research project.

Participating in this research may be of no direct benefit to you. It is believed, however, the results from this project will help educators and Lahu students in Thai schools

Research data will be confidential to the extent allowed by law. Agencies with research oversight, such as the UH Committee on Human Studies, have the authority to review research data.

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time during the duration of the project with no penalty, or loss of benefit to which you would otherwise be entitled.

If you have any questions regarding this research project, please contact the researcher, Matthew Juelsgaard.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the UH Committee on Human Studies at (808) 956-5007, or uhirb@hawaii.edu

Your Rights

- To Confidentiality: We will omit all information that may reveal your identity.

- To Ask Questions At Any Time: You may ask questions about the research at any time. Call the investigator at (808) 347-8933 or if this is unsatisfactory you may contact: Committee on Human Studies, University of Hawai'i, Telephone: (808) 956-5007, or uhirb@hawaii.edu
- To Withdraw At Any Time: You can withdraw at any time and you may require that your data be destroyed, without any consequences.

Agreement to Participate in
“Lahu Students in Thai Schools”

Matthew Juelsgaard, Principal Investigator

Educational Foundations Department, University of Hawai'i, Honolulu, HI 96822

*After orally explaining the agreement above, I will ask the participant the following questions and record their answers. An oral-consent form is being used due to sensitivity to local Lahu culture.

“Do you understand the purpose of this research, that your participation is voluntary, and that you may choose not to participate at any time?”

Yes

No

“Do you give permission to record the interviews or focus groups with an audio recorder?”

Yes

No

“Do you agree to be a part of this study?”

Yes

No

I, Matthew Juelsgaard, certify that the above answers are the spoken answers of the participant and have recorded those as accurately as possible to the best of my knowledge.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Interviewer

Date

APPENDIX B: Interview Script

Interview Procedures

1. Thank the participant for taking the time to meet.
2. Explain the purpose of the research.
 - a. The primary purpose of this study was to give voice to Lahu individuals by inquiring into and describing their lived experiences of being ethnically Lahu at Banrongrian Secondary School.
3. Explain what the participant will be expected to do.
 - a. You are recognized as being a Lahu individual who attended Banrongrian Secondary School and therefore can provide us with some insight into Lahu experiences in Thai schools.
 - i. Participation in this project will consist of a series of interviews with the investigator as well as focus groups. Interview questions will focus on the experiences of Lahu students in Thai schools. Each interview will be between 15 minutes and 1 hour long.
 - ii. If you give permission, interviews will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription. No personal identifying information will be included with the research results.
 - iii. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary.
 - iv. After hearing this, are you interested in being a part of this study? Do you have any questions or concerns. If so, would it be OK to record the interview for the purposes of transcription.
4. Present consent form.
 - a. Give card for further questions or inquiries regarding the study

Interview Questions

Background Questions

1. Would you state your name and spell it for us?
2. If you don't mind, would you tell us your age?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. Can you tell us a little about your family?

Schooling Background Questions

5. When and where did you first begin to attend school?
6. Where did you live during that time?
7. What was it like being a student in school?
8. What events, activities or experiences do you remember from this time?

Schooling an Banrongrian Secondary School

9. What was it like being a Lahu student at Banrongrian School?
 - a. If the participant does not give much description, then the following questions can be used to try to gain more in-depth description:
 - i. What do you remember about some of the teachers?
 - ii. What do you remember about classes?
 - iii. What do you remember about other students?

- iv. What is your favorite memory of school? Least favorite memory?
- v. What was a typical day like?
- vi. Who were some of the people you remember from your time at school?
- vii. Who were your best/closest friends?
 - 1. What did you enjoy doing together at school?
- viii. What did your family think about you going to school?
- ix. Did you enjoy being at school? What did you like? What didn't you like?
- x. What subjects did you like? Dislike? Why?
- xi. Can you describe a good school day that you will never forget?
- xii. Can you describe a bad school day that you will never forget?
- xiii. Did you encounter problems in school?
- 10. How would you describe your experience of being at the school?
- 11. What feelings, events, or thoughts come to mind when recalling your experiences of being in school?
- 12. Having attended school, what meaning/importance/value does it have in your life? (How did your time at the school affect you? What changes in you do you associate with the school?)
- 13. Did you think that academic achievement would influence the type of job you would have?
- 14. What did you see as the purpose of going to school?

Identity Questions

- 15. What does it mean for you to be Lahu?
- 16. What is good about being Lahu?
- 17. Can you describe what it was like to be a Lahu student in a Thai school?
- 18. What were some differences between Lahu students and Thai students? Or were there any differences?
- 19. Were there any advantages or disadvantages of being Lahu during school? If so, what? Why?
- 20. What did you think about the Thai students at the school?
- 21. What did the Thai students think about you?
- 22. Was there a time or experience that caused you to be conscious of being Lahu? (What experiences influenced your awareness of "being Lahu" at school?)
- 23. Do you think it is important to retain Lahu culture?