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Negotiating Ethnic Representation between Self and Other: The Case of Karen and Eco-tourism in Thailand*

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Abstract

Since the late 1980s, the hill dwelling minority in Thailand have gained visibility amid social movements concerning environmental conservation, community forest rights, and the appeal for citizenship. In this process they have gained a stage and a voice to represent themselves to a considerable degree. The discourse and representation pertaining to the hill-dwellers are becoming an arena of negotiation, where the hill-dwellers themselves are active participants. In this paper, I examine the layers of discourse regarding the Karen which has evolved within the changing socio-political context. Participants in the discourse adopt varied elements of the existing layers of discourse by travelers, missionaries, academics, administrators and NGOs which have all contributed to the stereotype of the Karen as the meek and submissive hill-dwellers. In the latter half of the paper, I take up a case of a recent eco-tourism venture in Chiang Mai Province, and analyze how villagers whose existence has been precarious for decades due to its position on the edge of a National Park have chosen to represent themselves in the venture. Eco-tourism especially provides a pertinent arena for the negotiation of such self/other representation.

Keywords: Eco-tourism, Northern Thailand, Karen, identity negotiation, ethnic representation

"[treating a whole range of other cultural elements as if they were co-variant with language in defining ethnic classification] gives weight to ways of perceiving the highlanders which have far-reaching political, social, and economic consequences: it cannot be dismissed as being merely an academic peccadillo.

The social realities of the highlands are far more subtle, complex, and fluid than an ethnic classifier could ever conceive." [Hinton 1983: 158, 166]

With respect and appreciation for his lifetime of work especially in Northern Thailand, I begin this paper by reflecting on the work of the late Peter Hinton. Hinton points out that in Burma,¹⁾ tribalist notions of minorities and inaccurate description of facts regard-

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1) Throughout this paper, I will use "Burma" rather than "Myanmar," since I am referring to the evolving context of ethnic representation since colonial times.

ing them have paradoxically made real those very facts. The result was the longstanding conflict and tragedy after independence. Hinton claims that Thailand did not experience such conflicts partly for demographic reasons where the hill-dwellers are far smaller in proportion, and, because the modernist European ideas of societies and cultures had less of an impact. In his understanding, in Thailand, pre-existing “tacit understanding” between “the central power and the people of the periphery largely remains, despite the efforts in the past by various Europeans (myself included) to impose a tribal model on approaches to administration” [1983: 167 parenthesis by Hinton].

During the quarter of century since the time he wrote the above quote, Thailand has undergone significant changes. Perhaps we are now in a better position to look back at the changing contexts of ethnic characterization. Hinton’s words now lead us to look at the current state of “ethnic cultures” in Thailand in a new light.

It was at the time when Hinton began his research in the Northern Thai hills in the early 1960s that the position of the hill people became problematized, including the “tacit understanding” suggested in Hinton’s words above. As Pinkaew points out, the tacit recognition of the pre-modern state’s hill/valley distinction, which enabled the mountain minorities to come to terms with the powerful valley-dwellers in asymmetrical reciprocal relationships, was absent in the term *chaw khaw* (hill tribes) which came to official use in 1959 [Pinkaew 2001: 44–46]. Ethnic identification became politicized, due to the politicization of space, in which the notion of the bounded territorial nation-state and supposed cultural homogeneity within the territory problematized the border-dwelling hill minorities. The political implications of ethnic categories and representations may not have led to armed struggle in Thailand as they did in Burma, yet they have been no less profound in their effects.

Throughout this process, in spite of Hinton’s questioning of a cultural and ethnic entity called “Karen” and his profound critique of the tribalist notion of ethnicity, the layering of discourse on the Karen and their ethnic attributes has seen no end. Both in Burma and Thailand, the layering of discourse on the minorities as “others” has been ongoing for over two centuries of evolving political situation, from the kingdoms to the modernizing nation state and towards globalization. In the process, tribalist notion of ethnicity and stereotypical characterizations have evolved in correspondence with the political situation.

In Thailand, recent changes in the positioning of the “hill tribes” have been accompanied by significant changes in cultural understanding and representation of these hill tribe “others,” and in the ways in which the “others” themselves participate in this discourse. Since the late 1980s, hill-dwellers have gained visibility amid social movements surrounding dam construction, environmental conservation, community forest rights, and the appeal for citizenship. In this process they have gained a stage and a voice to represent themselves to a considerable degree. The discourse and representation pertaining to the hill-dwellers are becoming an arena of negotiation, where the hill-

dwellers themselves are active participants. Here, we see that all participants in the discourse adopt varied elements of the existing layers of discourse that have been built up over the centuries. The discourse on “Karen Consensus” which I discuss below is a case in point. For the marginalized in a hegemonic state, the only way to talk back effectively has been to take up the discourse of the dominant, and by doing so, the marginalized have increasingly found space for negotiation.

There have been layers of discourse regarding the Karen, which have evolved along with the changing socio-political context in Burma and Thailand. Whether in a positive light as the pre-modern nature-loving Karen of the forest, or, in a negative light as the closed and backward people who are slow to take up any opportunity given by development agencies, the layers of discourse by travelers, missionaries, academics, administrators and NGOs have contributed to the stereotype of the Karen as the meek and submissive hill-dwellers.

With such attributes, forest-dwelling Karen have become desirable targets of eco-tourism in Thailand, where urbanite tourists seek the romance of alternative life in the hill forests. Eco-tourism especially provides a pertinent arena for the negotiation of self/other representation, where certain aspects of their “culture as practice” have been consumed by the lowland and foreign outsiders, written up as Karen culture, then re-adopted as “culture as spectacle” by others, and then, by Karen themselves [Acciaioli 1985].

In the first part of the paper, I pursue the evolving discourse on the Karen, from Karen (*yaang*) as forest people (*chaw paa*) to Karen (*Kariang*) as hill tribe (*chaw khaw*), then to Karen (*pga k'nyau*) as indigenous people. In the latter half of the paper, I take up a case of a recent eco-tourism venture in Chiang Mai Province, and analyze how villagers whose existence has been precarious for decades due to its position on the edge of a National Park since 1972, have chosen to represent themselves in the venture.²⁾ Within evolving inter-ethnic relationships and state involvement with the cultures of “others,” existing layers of discourse have affected the ways in which Karen choose to represent themselves in a pressured situation.

The diversity in Karen modes of livelihood, economic conditions and ecological situation denies any monolithic definition, yet the Karen communities in all their individuality, are finding paths to make statements of their own through idioms borrowed from the mainstream discourse. Now that the Karen villages are participating in this ongoing formation of discourse, we should go back to the villages from where people

2) This ethnographic part of the paper is based on fieldwork carried out in Chiang Mai Province in July 2003 for two weeks, with the support of Nissei Foundation, and presented in brief in the International Workshop on Forest Ecology in Thailand (Kyoto, October 2003). The JSPS Core University Program also allowed me to travel and gather information in Thailand on several occasions.

are talking back to the kinds of discourses established through the interaction of scholarly as well as state, administrative, and activist discourse.

Early Discourse: *Chaw Paa Yaang*

I would first like to trace the modernist style of discourse and stereotypes that emerged regarding the Karen in the early stages of consolidating ethnic classification.³⁾ I will briefly touch upon the earlier process in Burma. Not only in the modernist style of ethnic categorization, but also in the ethnic stereotypes themselves, there is much in common between the discourses that evolved in Thailand and those of colonial Burma.

A prototype of ethnic literature could be traced back to the encyclopedic attempt by the American Baptist missionary Mason, in which he described and categorized the “tribes” in Burma by possible origins, location of habitat, language, and costume [Mason 1860: 71]. It is worth noting that he included many “races” such as Chin (Kyen), Ying-Bau, etc. in his classification of the Karen. Mason wrote encyclopedic treatises as his own missionary endeavor succeeded in forming Karen churches. It was the time between the second and third Anglo-Burmese War, when the British were seeking to incorporate Upper Burma which included such peoples as the Chin and Ying-Bau. He defined “Karen” as “a Burmese word applied to most of the mountaineers of Pegu and Southern Burmah. There were White Karens, Red Karens, and Black Karens, so designated from the prevailing colour of the dress; Burmese Karens and Talaing Karens, from the nations with which they are associated.” Mason’s writings were well-cited and influential in later colonial writings [for example, Scott and Hardimann 1900–01].

Between missionaries and colonialists during the nineteenth century, we see a gradual consolidation of categories, as the mission and colonial administration matured. Prior to this, “others” from the point of view of the Burmans were locally defined based on face to face interaction. Mason’s earlier scheme of understanding intermixed a collection of such local definitions with the European bent towards a more systematic categorization and arguments regarding origins and ethnic characteristics. A century later, Mason’s speculations “took on the status of a ‘culturally’ based political doctrine” as the official views for the Karen nationalists/separatists themselves providing validation of the existence of their separate state [Rajah 1990: 115]. Ethnic characterizations that were imposed by outsiders (in this case western missionaries and administrators) are taken up by the people thus designated themselves.

Full ethnographic description in the modern sense began to appear in the twentieth

3) The term “Karen” is today used to refer generally to most Karennic language speakers, and derives from terms used by their neighbors (the Burmese term is *Kayin*). The self-designation by Karen-speakers differ from one linguistic sub-group to another (*pga k’nyau* in Sgaw Karen, and *phloun* in Pwo Karen, etc.).

century. Marshall [1922], ethnographer cum missionary, characterized the Karen in Burma as one “who draw[s] the blinds over the windows of his heart and leaves one to wonder what goes on within,” and as timid, and desirous of avoiding trouble with others, resulting in shyness, caution, and concealment. He reiterated preceding accounts that described them as “peaceable, honest and good,” and remarkable for their chastity. By the twentieth century, Karen in Burma seemed to have a reputation as morally upright, reserved and shy people, rather lacking in humor.

The tacit understanding that Hinton points out for Karen in Thailand characterizes the relationship between the ruling peoples of the polities, and the people in the outlying peripheries both in Burma and Thailand in pre-modern times. The forest-dwellers maintained autonomy and symbiotic relationships with the people of the polities. While the relationship was certainly not symmetrical, there was no top-down ethnic classification. People were classified in terms of their relationship to the polity, payment of tax or tribute, rather than by language and culture as in the modern ethnic classification. Ethnic labels derived from face-to-face relationships. This is why in Mason’s early classification, we see a variety of Karen designations that is not based on any overarching standard or system.

It was after the territorial boundary negotiation with the colonial neighbors that attempts towards administrative centralization and investigation of the peoples in the peripheries began in Thailand. The effort to survey the limits of their land to negotiate territorial boundaries in 1890 accompanied survey of the ethno-linguistic features of the uncivilized forest-dwellers, the *chaw paa*, inhabiting those lands.⁴⁾ Systematic survey of the tribes in the peripheries was taken up by the Siam Society in the 1920s.⁵⁾ This was a period in the formation of the modern nation state in which the monarchy was intent on defining the Thai nation as culturally homogeneous as against their “others,” especially

4) At the time when the banks of the Salween were still contested territory between the newly installed British and the Thai (Siamese), in the attempt to claim the eastern bank, the Siamese court sent an official to survey the territory. This official, Nai Banchaphumsathan who may have been a professional surveyor trained in the Survey Department wrote a report in 1890 [Wilson and Hanks 1985]. Much of the account is a narrative of the topographical, demographic, economic and political situation of the Salween, but towards the end, the surveyor includes some ethnographic information of the Lawa and the White Karen: hair style; costume; houses; worship and the chicken bone oracle; and characteristics such as hospitality, honesty, diligence and language. There was of course much contact between Karen and the Thai or the Burmese especially in the border regions. Siamese officials association with the Karen is depicted by Suraphong [1988]. These contacts did not accompany systematic attempts to understand the other.

5) The Siam Society issued a “questionnaire” in 1921, asking for particular information regarding the manners and customs of the “obscure tribes in Siam,” to which replies came for “White Karen (*yaang kaleuy*), Red Karen (*yaang daeng*), Meao, Leu, Shans and Yao” from Northern Thailand. The questionnaire covered such items as physical characteristics, costumes, social organization, religion and glossary.

at this time, the Chinese, a period of nationalistic self-reflection and self-definition of Thainess [Loos 2006].

In writings up to the first half of the twentieth century, the predominant terms used for the people in the hills and forests were *khon paa* (or *chaw paa*) and *kha*. They were referred to as natives of the forest, in ranked order from civilized to wild from Lawa, Yaang (Northern Thai and Shan term for the Karen speaking peoples they found in their locale, which seem to include all kinds of Karen speakers) and Kha.⁶⁾ Yaang were classified among the forest-dwellers, and characterized as *khon chaw paa*, wearing top-knots and dress like the Mon, deemed superior to the truly wild *kha*, but nonetheless, as people of the forest (*paa*) as opposed to people of the city-state (*muang*).

A comparison of the works of Bunchuai Srisawat, before and after the instigation of various hill-tribe policies in the 1960s is quite illuminating. In *30 chaat nai Chiangrai* [1950], the Karen were referred to as *yaang*, who were deemed earlier settlers in the area than the Tais. The sub-categories of *yaang* are rather a strange mixture of category by location, by place of derivation, and by color of costume: *Yaang doi* (mountain *yaang*), *yaang naam* (water *yaang*), *yaang suai kaban* (*yaang* from the Zwei Kabin mountain in Karen State, Burma), *yaang khaaw* (white Karen). This is because they were terms taken from local usage in different parts of the north, without any attempt to unify and categorize. Northern Thai peoples had their respective designation for their neighboring strangers, which were never coordinated by a centralized ruling system. Discourse of cleanliness was also used to determine the degree of civilization so that even among the *yaang*, the *yaang naam* were cleanly and loved to bathe, whereas the *yaang doi* were filthy and disliked bathing, were mobile, held fast to their customs, were closed to outsiders. *Yaang khaaw* were kind and filled with hospitality. Visitors were welcomed into the leader's house and generously provided with betel and tobacco. The *yaang khaaw* were modest, reserved, unambitious, "lovers of nature." They formed a tightly-knit group and will not mix with lowlanders. Elders were respected, community governance was orderly and they were morally upright. *Yaang kaleu* were lovers of peace. Already in these characterizations, we find most of the notable features of the characteristic attributed to the Karen today. It is striking to note Bunchuai referring to the Karen as lovers of nature, half a century before the discourse on environmental conservation in which the Karen found a footing in arguing for themselves as people who have long coexisted with the forest and nature. This undoubtedly accompanied a change in the meaning of nature itself for the Thai lowlanders, from *paa*, the wild forests beyond the civilized world of the *muang*, to a valuable national resource that needs to be tamed, delineated and preserved (*thammachat*).

6) Within Kha were counted the Khatin, Khamu, Khamet as well as sometimes Kha Meo, Kha Kui, Kha Musu, and Kha Tong Luang [Bunchuai 1950].

Discourse under Hill Tribe Policy: *Chaw Khaw Kariang*

The term *chaw khaw* came into official usage in 1959 with the beginnings of hill tribe policy. As regards the Karen, the shifts in their designation from *chaw paa* to *chaw khaw* coincided roughly with the shift from the haphazard quasi-classification according to local terms, to the rigid top-down monolithic classification. In 1963, Bunchuai published *Chaw khaw nai Thai* where the term *Kariang* is used for Karen in place of the previous *yaang*. At the very end of the book, Bunchuai was reluctant to categorize the Karen along with others as *chaw khaw* since they lived nearer to the lowlands, or on very low hill-tops.⁷⁾ In any case, after the 1960s, the terms *chaw paa*, *yaang*, was replaced by the official designation *chaw khaw Kariang*, and with this, the “tacit understanding” was overwritten.⁸⁾ In the state discourse *chaw paa* a term that “assumed a ... spatial and civilizational hierarchy that was premised on Bangkok as the pinnacle of civilization, Thainess, and normalcy” [Jonsson 2005] was replaced by *chaw khaw* as the official category with the foundation of institutions and policies geared towards these people who were deemed a threat to the Thai nation. The designation of *chaw paa*, and *chaw khaw*, which “indexed unruliness, illicit practices and threats to the country’s borders” [*ibid.*] co-existed with ambiguous overlaps. In this process, the *yaang* or *Kariang* had somehow shifted from being forest-dwellers in the outlying margins of the kingdom, to official hill-tribes, joining the ranks of the trouble-makers in the ecologically valuable but precarious, strategically vulnerable region. In the process of national integration of the modern nation state and the efforts towards national development since the 1950s, for those people locals referred to as *chaw paa* and *yaang* in their respective regions, the state called into effect monolithic classification *chaw khaw* and *Kariang* as objects of rule and intervention.

Writings from the 1960s and 1970s set the tone for later representation of the hill-dwellers. The style of ethnic description used here was similar to those already set in

7) The others, along with the Karen are Sakai, Semang, Phii Tong Luang, and *kha* (which includes Khamu, Lamet, Thin). For their costumes they use “blackish colors” and the people themselves originate from within Thailand. Bunchuai wanted to distinguish these somberly dressed *chaw paa* from the brightly colorful *chaw khaw*. Those inhabiting areas with higher elevation such as Musoe (Lahu), Lisaw (Lisu), Maeo (Hmong), Yao (Mien), Kaw (Akha), these people originate from China and wear costumes with bright colors, and very strange ornaments. They plant opium to sell or consume, and plant swidden rice and corn. They prefer to live on hilltops and perform shifting cultivation near the water sources. They move around seeking new locations for their swiddens. These, according to Bunchuai, were properly the *chaw khaw* [Bunchuai 1963: 460–461].

8) The officially designated *chaw khaw* are the nine groups, Karen, Hmong, Lisu, Akha, Lahu, Yao, Lawa, Khamu, and Htin, although the last two or three are dropped in certain official policies or in documents.

nineteenth century Burma mentioned above. Young [1962] described each group by possible origins, racial affiliation, migration routes, population, linguistic affiliation, religious beliefs, village location, physical appearances and cultural features. In line with the tradition set by missionaries and administrators in Burma, he placed great emphasis on the difference in costume as the distinguishing features among the sub-groups. Also, at the time when the culture and personality school was the prevalent trend in anthropology in the U. S., he pointed out ethnic characteristics for each group. The Karen were characterized by lack of thrift and energy in subsistence activities, steadfastness to customs, moral character, peace-loving and orderly but closed communities.

Academic (mostly anthropological) writings on the *chaw khaw* since the 1970s and into the 1980s tend to emphasize the cultural coherence and distinctiveness of each group. This is as much in response to the tendencies of contemporary anthropological discipline, as against the discourse of *chaw khaw* which problematized the hill population in monolithic terms. Cultural relativism was a needed antidote, and anthropologists were obliged to interpret and represent each ethnic group in its own essentialist terms.

If varied cultures were acknowledged by the authorities, it was towards the need to assimilate. The 1973 publication by Thailand's Library Association titled *Pii nong chaw khaw* (Our Brothers and Sisters, the Hill Tribes) emphasized that *chaw khaw* are migrants into Thailand from neighboring territories, who maintain distinct culture, custom and identity, wearing their own costumes. Their development is deemed one of the most important policies of the state. As they are most vulnerable to the influence of communists, in order for them to become real brothers and sisters to Thai citizens, "we must make them loyal participants in protecting (our) nation" [1973: 9]. In this volume, Karen are introduced as elephant mahouts who are extremely superstitious, lovers of peace, enjoying solitude and seclusion, and remaining steadfast to their customs. In writings reflecting strong state interest, the Karen score high on the scale of meekness and governability just as their counterparts were characterized in Burma.

Insofar as the Karen met this description, maintaining their submissiveness to the state, they were benign, and perhaps to a much larger extent than most other hill tribe groups, the "tacit understanding" could be maintained. At the same time that they were deemed meek and governable, yet for development workers, they were the most inscrutable group. While they were not unruly, they were difficult to incorporate in the ongoing developmental mode of the nation. Development workers I encountered in the hills would tell me how difficult it was to work with the Karen who were slow to take up opportunities and new ventures, whereas with the Hmong, they could just introduce something and they will be off making the most out of it and finding further paths by themselves. Chupinit mentions a nickname given to the Karen by a development worker "yaang-ma-toi" (meaning hot asphalt, sticky and slow moving), a pun on *yaang* [1989: 79]. Thus ethnic stereotypes were rampant among administrators and development workers who entered the hills.

As communist insurgency, violence, and state surveillance over the hills subsided, a wave of fieldworkers (including myself) and development agencies entered the hills in the 1980s, each focusing on one or the other of the groups. The depiction of each group of hill tribe and reification of its colorfully distinctive cultures by anthropologists matched well the demands of the tourist boom in the 1980s. Postcards of hill-tribes in their colorful costumes appeared on every street corner in Chiang Mai. The well-illustrated coffee-table book by Paul and Elaine Lewis was published in 1984, in numerous languages. The book spends many pages on well-collected photographs of costumes, ornaments and various artifacts from each group as well as persuasively written stereotyped characterization of each group. In this book, the Lewises represent the Karen with the phrase “desire for harmony.” They depict the Karen as people who live in “awe of authority and desire for harmony,” as submissive, hospitable and morally righteous people. It is this same representation of the Karen which has been repeated over and over in discourses pertaining to Karen.

In a book published in the 30th year of the foundation of the Tribal Research Institute (founded as the Tribal Research Centre), the Karen specialist and zealous spokesperson for the Karen, Prawit Pothart wrote in poetic language the beauty of Karen culture, “Karen are submissive and gentle, polite, warm and non-aggressive, and they would never show any bad feelings to others. If there is anything that is not pleasing to them, they would not let a hint of it appear on the surface: tidal waves on the inside, yet clear water on the outside” [Prawit 1995, my translation]. Also, he mentions rich ecological knowledge among the Karen, in cultivation, in foraging food and herbs, etc. from the forest which have been handed down to them from their ancestors in line with the rising interest in indigenous knowledge I mention below.

Of course, Karen are themselves not unaware of such discourse which developed over two centuries. I would hear self-made commentaries by Karen villagers in the hills about the slowness of Karen in adopting anything new and foreign, or their superstitiousness, either in self-derogatory tone or conversely, in denigrating development efforts. In a tour of the Karen Baptist youth group among their newly converted Christian villages in Omkoi District in 1987, the leader, Pati Khru Sant, eminent Christian leader and former manager of the Bangkok branch of Siam Commercial Bank, made speeches in several villages repeating “I always tell the Thai people around me, we Karen are slow and not very smart, but we are honest and trustworthy.”

The Recent Turn: *Pga K'nyau*

From the 1990s, Thai language material on the *chaw khaw*, especially the Karen increased. Publication on Karen ranged from the university publications such as Mahidol [Suriyaa and Somthrong 1995], the Tribal Research Institute publications, NGO publications some

of which are based on sound ethnographic research [Pinkaw 1996] others on narratives and songs collected from Karen elders [The Foundation of Education for Life and Society 2002; Phau Lee Paa and Kalayaa Weerasakdi 1987; 1996; Kannikar and Bencha 1997], and some by Karen writers [Beu Phau 1997].

On the one hand, contents and quality of information in some of these publications have drastically changed. Undoubtedly, the general knowledge base on the hill Karen population among lowlanders have expanded. Yet, at the same time the sheer accumulation of printed pages seem to merely add layers on the existing description that have produced the stereotypes. In the Mahidol series on the minority groups, the 30 some pages of detailed description of linguistic, social and cultural aspects concluded with a description of the Karen as “an unambitious people who prefer seclusion, who keep their feelings to themselves, dislike aggressive or sarcastic manners and speech, tending to evade contradicting or demonstrating dissatisfaction by backing away from a situation. Another important characteristic is the unwillingness to receive any influence from other peoples and to change themselves accordingly” [1995: 35, my translation]. The Thai Culture Encyclopedia that came out in 1999 had entries on the Karen under the title “Yaang,” “Yaang Kaleu,” “Yaang Khaw” and “Yaang Daeng,” mostly taken from Bunchuai’s earlier writing in 1950 [Somchot 1999].⁹⁾ While state agencies, NGOs and Karen themselves are all participant to the proliferation of information, their notion of “culture” as well as their understanding of “difference” itself seem to stay wide apart.

The increase in the voices from among the Karen people themselves came concomitant with the emphasis on indigenous knowledge and life in the forest, spurred by acutely politicized debates on environmental conservation and the position of *chaw khaw*. For concerned citizens in Thailand, Karen are now better known as *pga k’nyau* (the Skaw Karen¹⁰⁾ term for their own people) a label that goes hand in hand with understanding of them as people who have lived in the forests. It was in the 1990s with increasing media attention and politicization of ethnic culture in relation to the debates over forest conservation that this self-designation has gained wider usage in place of the previous “yaang” or “kariang” [Hayami 1997]. This was discourse that emerged between NGOs, concerned lowland citizens as well as Karen leaders, strategically as a way for Karen in hill communities to claim the right to maintain their livelihood in the forests.

The UN designated the year 1993 the year of Indigenous Peoples, and the following decade, the Indigenous Peoples Decade. Prior to this, in 1988, there was a meeting of Asian Indigenous Peoples in Chiang Mai, where Karen representatives were also present. Participants agreed on a common definition of indigenous peoples as “people indigenous

9) See Jonsson [2003] for a review article on the Yao sections of this encyclopedia, written by the same author.

10) The Karen language group includes numerous subcategories of languages. In Thailand, Skaw Karen and Pwo Karen are the two largest language groups.

to conquered territory, and who differentiate themselves from other sectors of the ruling class, and who maintain their own language, religion, customs and worldview.” Given that in the historical consciousness of elite Thai people, it has been taken for granted that Karen people in general preceded the Tais in the present Thai territory, and Karen were preceded in turn by Mon-Khmer speaking peoples, the designation of Karen as indigenous peoples did not go against official Thai history. The global interest in indigenous peoples and their rights (especially rights to land) added a political edge to this historical claim. Karen gained the terms in which to represent themselves and to claim their rights to the forest.

With increasing emphasis on indigenous knowledge of forests, the Karen have come full circle from the denigration as the uncivilized “other” in the forest in pre-modern Thailand, to the designation as forest wardens with rich knowledge of the forest that the lowlanders lack. This is knowledge that is nonetheless, based on their quaint life in the forests. Some of the interest in the hills, and specifically on the Karen, can be seen against the background of global interest in biological diversity and conservation of indigenous knowledge¹¹⁾ towards sustainable development on the one hand, and the rights of indigenous peoples on the other. It was against this global trend of the environmental debate as well as the situation specific to Thailand, the logging ban in 1989, and issues related to rights of the hill-dwelling minority that much of the literature in the 1990s appeared.

Knowledge about the Karen that became quite widely held in the 1990s presents the Karen rather monolithically as the people who live in the forest with rich knowledge and wisdom about nature, whose communities are tightly consolidated. They were characterized as inscrutable to influence from the outside, and their modes of livelihood based on swidden cultivation as being unaggressive, and their tradition and rituals are rife with notions that make possible their resource management [Walker 2001]. As *yaang* they were the wild and uncivilized *chaw paa*. Then as *Kariang* they were the unruly intruders *chaw khaw*, and are now depicted as the forest-dwelling indigenous nature lovers *pga k'nyau*. Inhabitants of the wild forests have now become wardens of precious environment and holders of ecological knowledge to which urban Thai lowlanders unabashedly

11) In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was held, promoting protection of the earth's biological diversity and the need to conserve the knowledge in the local communities towards sustainable development. Indigenous knowledge in this context, was defined as follows: “The unique, traditional and local knowledge existing within and developed around specific conditions of people indigenous to a particular geographic area. The development of such knowledge systems, covering all aspects of life, including management of the natural environment, has been a matter of survival to the peoples who generated this system. They are also dynamic, as new knowledge is continuously added. It is often contrasted with the systematic knowledge generated within the international academic and research institutes. It is therefore unsystematic, undocumented knowledge of the powerless.”

claim ignorance. Karen provide an alternative way of life, diametrically opposed to their own, idealized, maybe, but never envied.

The monolithic representation has been critiqued as the discourse of “Karen Consensus.” The critique is that it may deter a finer understanding of the richly varied modes of subsistence and adaptation found among the widely dispersed Karen areas, and constrain Karen to singular mode of subsistence, and further close them off from opportunities in development schemes. The view of Karen as benign non-aggressive people with little interest in development may actually be detrimental to their development [Walker 2001; Hayami 2000].

Yet, in the debates surrounding the rights of the people in the forest, it is also important to note that existing stereotypes gave them voices to claim their own livelihood. Karen villagers found that the emphasis on their indigenous knowledge and modes of livelihood was strategic defense against the pre-existing view of hill-dwellers and swidden practitioners as being destroyers of forest, irresponsible non-citizens.

Karen leaders took up the discourse, even as they were aware of the extremely varied subsistence practices. It was also a reaction to pre-existing even more detrimental images of hill tribes that might have brought measures devastating to their livelihood in the hills. The discourse was effective in that it was put forward as a creative strategy of defense towards hegemonic discourse that defined the Karen as destructive forest encroachers [Yos 2004; Sunaga 2004].

We now need further ethnographic understanding of the varied ways in which the Karen in the hill are coping in this situation, including the emerging local attempts at self-representation. The emerging local self-representation itself draws upon, emulates, refutes, and talks back to existing representations which I have outlined up to now, which has been woven by administrators and missionaries, not to mention academics who have talked and written about the Karen against the background of the history and politics of the states as well as the academic traditions of the times. Placed in a position where they cannot refuse policies that give them the name of hill tribes, the Karen villagers find ways by which to talk back from those very discourse of those in power. It is in this context that I here focus on the case of an eco-tourism venture in one Karen village.

Tourism in the Thai Hills

Jungle tourism, as the hill-tribe tourism was often referred to, had been left in the hands of small private enterprises until quite recently. With the flourish of this industry, trekking tour agencies competed among themselves by advertising remote, untouched places, thereby spreading their maps further into the hills, which had also been made easier by improved infrastructure in the 1980s. Such hill-tribe tourism was not officially

promoted in the Thai state-policy on tourism. While on the one hand the state policy was towards assimilation of hill minorities, on the other hand, certain representation of the hill cultures as consumer items became a vital part of the international tourist industry. As Michaud points out, there was great disjunction between international tourism where hill-tribe trekking was a well-advertised attraction, and the absence of national discourse on hill-tribe tourism [1997: 129]. State attitude to tribal tourism was *laissez-faire*, and regulation of hill-tribe trekking was left primarily to private entrepreneurs until the early 1990s. Cultural diversity was not among the state's tourist agendas. From the hill village point of view, the economic effect of tribal tourism was negligible, it had become prevalent both in its geographical distribution as well as sheer quantity. Only meager and temporary profits were enjoyed by a few villagers in each of the widely dispersed trekking villages.

In the 1980s, eco-tourism emerged as a solution to the global search for alternative tourism. In Thailand too, it had become the magic word in the 1990s, and all kinds of tourism came to be represented under the word "eco-tourism." The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), which promoted eco-tourism since the mid-1990s defined it as "a visit to any particular tourism area with purpose to study, enjoy, and appreciate the scenery — natural and social — as well as the life style of the local people, based on the knowledge about the responsibility for the ecological system of the area." Thus widely defined, it could embrace any form of tourism into the hill villages, ranging from the existing trekking tours as well as some brands of mass tourism which ventured into forested areas or national parks.

Meanwhile, with closing forest frontiers, the contestation over forested land became intensified. A major factor in this was state delineation of land after 1985, one of the most drastic for the hill-dwellers being the founding of national parks. For the state, eco-tourism could provide a formula for making economic use of the national parks, finding a way to appease the villagers, and giving pretext for orienting development in the areas in certain directions. The forest-dwelling people have gained a new place in the context of eco-tourism and the general interest in nature by lowlanders.

The interest in eco-tourism was concomitant with the rising interest among urban Thai people towards "nature" in the environmental debate already discussed above. Tourist activities were no longer primarily for foreigners, but for Thai urbanites as well. With increasing contestation over forested land and resources in the hills, and state involvement in the hills, tourism became one path for state intrusion into the forest in the 1990s. Behind this was the global as well as national enthusiasm for eco-tourism. Into the late 1990s, state policy promoted eco-tourism, especially in national parks.

The 1960s and 70s was a time when the problem of the hills was primarily one of internal security, as communist insurgency was a real threat. Into the peaceful 1980s, the hill minorities were still primarily targets for assimilation. Now into the 1990s, as the population in the hills themselves began to show willingness to connect with lowland

culture and society to gain citizenship and rights as citizens, paradoxically, it has become possible for the state to recognize certain modes of differences among them. This was the background for promotion of eco-tourism in the hills, where difference has become cultural resource.

Community-based eco-tourism was hailed as a problem solver to be promoted in 15,223 villages all over the country. Despite its original appeal as alternative tourism, there has already been enough experience in Thailand that locals as well as environmentalists are not outright positive about eco-tourism. Some have pointed it out as being “merely a ploy to open up ecologically sensitive areas to tourists.” In this view, eco-tourism is a way for the cash-strapped government to open up Thailand’s precious national parks to environmentally destructive investment that might bring badly needed foreign exchange after the financial crisis. Even what seemed to be the better part of eco-tourism which encouraged local communities to participate in sustainable tourism, had gradually come to be questioned already towards the late 1990s. Ventures started by organizations that aimed for quality-eco-tourism such as NGO-REST (Responsible, Ecological, Social Tour program, established in 1994, during the high tide of eco-tourism) met dissatisfaction from environmentalists on the one hand and local communities on the other. Another issue that was debated in the REST case was that villagers’ efforts to dress in traditional costume, play musical instruments and have their women weave cloths in their houses for the visitors would be commercialization of their own culture, making a show case of their own culture, rather than reviving their traditional culture.

An example of local antagonism to state-initiated eco-tourism efforts is my own field site. In an earlier paper, I analyzed the social movements and resulting failure of a pine forest logging project by the Forest Industry Organization (FIO) supported by an international conglomerate. Local inhabitants successfully drew a close to the project by claiming their own forests and their own successful co-existence with the forest. This had been successful by recourse to their own tradition blended with adoption of Buddhist practices and a discourse of alternative environmental conservation based on indigenous knowledge [Hayami 1997]. Having failed in its pine forest project in the early 1990s, FIO returned with a new project promoting eco-tourism in the same area, this time funded by Japanese Bank for International Cooperation. Another protest movement arose from the locals. In the former protest against the logging venture, villagers had emphasized their Karen tradition, and marched in Karen costume. This time, however, in protesting the eco-tourism venture in which their visible ethnic traditions would become spectacles of tourism, they avoided the outright use of such ethnic symbolism and marched in jeans and Thai attire. Rather than to submit to the designs of the authorities promoting tourism by making a spectacle of themselves as the “ethnic others,” they chose to look like any other Thai citizen.

Thus eco-tourism itself remains debated. My intention here is not to address the debate regarding eco-tourism, but to consider how villagers in Doi Inthanon use the

state-imposed opportunity of eco-tourism in defining and representing themselves and how in the process, they draw upon or deny existing representation. In the activities surrounding the eco-tourism, we see negotiations of ethnic representations by participating actors from all sides.

The Doi Inthanon Eco-Tourism

It is in the 1970s that government intervention began in a way that directly affected village livelihood in M village.¹²⁾ The Royal Project arrived in 1970, promoting coffee and other vegetables, building a school, and in 1972, the area was enclosed as Doi Inthanon National Park, the first national park in the Northern Region. Roads were built drastically improving access from the nearby market town of Chom Thong, bringing in projects and traders into the area. According to Roland Mischung who began anthropological research here in 1983, it was around the same decade that villagers began to abandon some of their rituals. Swidden cultivation was terminated, and land certificates (N. S. 3) were issued for irrigated rice fields.¹³⁾ Opium cultivation was terminated around the time that the Royal Project began agricultural extension work. Life began to change pace rapidly. Throughout the 1980s, there had been constant conflicts between the villagers and the national park office. While the park brought improved infrastructure such as roads and therefore a new mode of lifestyle, older practices such as hunting and swiddening became impossible. Villagers relied on irrigated rice fields and cash crop cultivation in their surroundings. In 2003, the main cash crops were coffee, daisies, garbellas, strawberries, and cabbage.

The initiative for the eco-tourism project came from the National Park in 1999. In its promotion of tourism in the Doi Inthanon National Park in general, and after decades of conflicting relationship with the villagers, the deputy director of the park initiated

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- 12) The ancestors of the present inhabitants of the five Karen villages including M were six families that had arrived from Papun, Burma in the last decade of the 19th century. In early years of settlement, they paid taxes to Lawa inhabitants, and gained permission from the Court in Chiang Mai (by paying an elephant) to cultivate in this area, and subsequently paid annual tribute. They opened swidden fields in virgin primary forest and in the 1920s began cultivating rice in irrigated rice fields, which became increasingly dominant. In 1925, a Hmong settlement was founded in the same region, cultivating opium, and Karen soon followed on a much smaller scale. Village M in the present location was founded in 1947. It was a day's march to the nearest *khon muang* village. There was a local network of exchange between the *khon muang*, Karen, Hmong, and Lawa villages in the area, from Chom Thong to Mae Chaem (Interviews conducted in 2003, and Mischung [1986]).
- 13) At the time, Mischung counted 200 *rai* of irrigated rice fields, 28 of swidden, and 15 of poppy fields, over 200 cattle and water buffalos, and three elephants. Today there are perhaps 50 draft animals altogether and the last of the elephants were sold off when the area was designated national park [Mischung 1986].

this project. The National Park supported the formation of the village Tourism Alliance with the alleged objective of 1) providing supplementary income to the villagers 2) reducing illegal use of forest resource especially land encroachment and wild animal hunting 3) providing genuine knowledge about the Karen people and rectifying misunderstanding about the Karen to the outsiders 4) building environmental awareness to local Karen people and visitors. It was to become a showcase of community-based tourism. The park gave administrative support, especially the consent to operate sustainable tourism in the park. Behind this move was the TAT's targeting of the country's 81 national parks for new tourism projects in the late 1990s. The park office also began training guides, supporting study tours in the Park, while the local branch of the Royal Project also cooperated, making this a joint effort of state agencies involved in the area and the villagers.

For the village eco-tourism project, they targeted M village which was closest to the main road. M village is located at the southeastern entering point of Doi Inthanon National Park along a highway, which will bring tourists from Chiang Mai in two hours convenient drive. It is one of a cluster of several villages, mostly Karen but also a few Hmong. There is a National Park office across the highway. The Tourist Guide's association sent a delegate to explain how to promote eco-tourism, and nine villagers were sent to study another eco-tourism venture in a village in Mae Hongson.

When the park officials brought the plan to the villagers, enthusiastic response came from two younger men, both of whom had married in from neighboring Mae Sariang district. S, a well-educated and energetic man, was the former Tambon Council representative. He is an eloquent man with good networks in the region. His primary business partner, C, is the manager of the business, receiving a salary from the eco-tourism account. They have the support of the village headman, and the project began with a thirteen-member committee, consisting of the headmen from four villages, tambon council members and a few villagers. The design of the business was primarily drawn by C and S, with advice from the park officials. There are villagers who are well-versed in the traditional lore, such as the 70-year-old the ritual leader (*sa pgha hi kho*) who, without a son as heir to his position, will probably be the last ritual leader in the village, or a medicine man who is knowledgeable in the forests, herbs, and magical incantations. These and other respected elders, however, kept distance from this new eco-tourism venture. The business was started by the above mentioned two in-marrying young men, with the backing of the headman and the park office. S claims, villagers were not initially enthusiastic with any venture promoted by the park. There were constant conflicts between the National Park and the villagers, and there has been much skepticism on both sides. However, the headman was in no position to refuse the proposal from the park office.

As one descends the dirt road from the main highway, between the running stream and rice fields, several rustic-looking bungalows have been built for the tourists, ar-

ranged on a grassy mound along the river and tree shades.¹⁴⁾ The initial investment was made by the Royal Forest Department, the Doi Inthanon National Park (400,000 baht), and a few villagers who put down 400 baht each. This was used for the land rent, bungalow construction, purchase of goods to prepare the bungalows. From the second year, several villagers participated by paying 400 baht investment per household and now into the fourth year, there were 10 investing members.

S, who spins out most of the ideas of the business, explained that the eco-tourism is educational for the villagers. He selected a formerly renowned hunter who knew the hills and streams like his backyard, as one of the guides, hoping that he would become a good example for the villagers to take interest. A man who had lost the means to put his ecological knowledge to practice due to the intervention of the National Park could now find a new way of making use of his knowledge, putting it to practice under the project initiated by the National Park. The initial investment for building bungalows and preparing necessities for guests cost 400,000 baht, of which in the fourth year 80,000 debt remained. Once all debts are returned, S said, he will gather all interested villagers and decide how to distribute the profits from then on.

In addition, with the help of his neighbors, S built a village museum next to his own house. The museum is a one-room house with a hearth, terrace, and shelves along the inner wall. Over the hearth is an earthenware urn for liquor-making. Besides the hearth is a earthenware water-boiling pot, which are nowadays extremely rare in Karen villages. The other objects on exhibit here are: an elephant harness, plough used on water buffaloes, fishing nets, a spinning wheel, hunting weapons, lacquer containers for betel-chewing kits, spoons and plates carved from wood, baskets, and a winnowing fan. Asked if the artifacts on display were from this village, S responded “no, the villagers here don’t understand that their tools are worth exhibiting, and were too shy to provide me with their things. Most of them I got from other villages.” Tourists spend some time in this one-room museum listening to S as he proudly presents the traditional lifestyle of his own people, pointing out how the Karen used to ride elephants, how they used to use earthenware pots, etc.

On the other side of the museum is a small thatched canteen where he serves freshly brewed coffee to the tourists. This is another business he is promoting in his village. As he serves the coffee,¹⁵⁾ he explains to his guests, his coffee is free of chemicals, and he

14) The land upon which these bungalows stand belongs to two persons: one is S himself, and the other, a former villager who has now married out to a neighboring village. The rent for this latter man for the first year was 6,000 baht for 3 *rai*. After the second year, it will be a five-year contract with a 10,000 baht rent per year. However, the contract included the condition that no perennial trees would be planted. The owner wanted to be able to resume irrigated rice fields if the venture turned out unsuccessful. S provides his land for free.

15) Coffee is not consumed by villagers in this region.

roasts his coffee using bamboo charcoal, emphasizing environment-friendly production and processing. He explains how villagers are now growing coffee, which is sold some to the Royal Project, some to a region-wide network of a coffee co-op that trades with companies from Ubon, Bangkok and Chiangmai, including Lanna Coffee in Chiang Mai, and Starbucks Thailand.

During my stay, a study tour arrived with a bus-load of participants. Study tours organized by NGOs on such topics as sustainable land-use was a frequent customer in the village. They were first welcomed at the eco-tour headquarters, where the village headman welcomed them, introducing the village. In his speech in Thai, he said, “The Thai people think that we who live in the hills, the *chaw khaw* encroach and destroy the forest. I beg you to take a walk in our village and forest, and see for yourselves if this is true. This is why we began this eco-tourism. We wanted to show you how we Karen live. . . . The most important thing is that more people know about how Karen live.”

The tours vary from a one day trip to the hilltops, a half a day walk to the waterfall, or a half a day in the village to observe Karen village life.¹⁶⁾ A tourist can choose to stay in the bungalow, or to “home-stay” in the village. Village households who are registered members will take their turn in accommodating a tourist. Several villagers are involved in cooking and preparing meals for the bungalow guests. During the tour of the village,



Fig. 1 Visiting the Village Museum



Fig. 2 Bungalow for Eco-tourists

16) The half a day course to the water fall was 200 baht per group, the one day course to the hill top, 300 baht, one night stay with both these courses would be 600 baht, a tour within the village was 100 baht, a tour of the village fields, 100 baht. A night stay in a four-person's bungalow was 400 baht per bungalow per night in the rainy season, and 800 baht in the dry season. Meals were 50 to 80 baht per meal. Villagers, on the other hand were paid 120 baht per labor day. To rent a car 800 to 1,000 baht for a day, 400 baht for driving to Chom Thong. A motorbike rented for a day was 200 baht. The unified charge rate for home-stay in the village would be 100 baht per person per night plus 50 baht per meal. If several tourists stayed in one house, the house would pay 70 baht per night to the committee, and kept the rest. For example, if there is one tourist, the household would gain 200 baht for the one-night stay and two meals, of which they would keep 130 baht.



Fig. 3 A View of the Village and Beyond



Fig. 4 Inside the Village Museum

the guides would explain to the tourists, how fish and forest returned after opium and swidden was abolished, showing a photograph from the early 1980s with scars on the mountain slopes made by opium swiddens, comparing it with the mountain in front of them which showed a lush green hillside on exactly the same spot. The tour takes them to the coffee gardens and cash-crop fields, explaining the chemical-free cash-producing efforts of the villagers.

There seem to be elements of agro-tourism in such aspects of the tour design in M village. While the fine points of the difference between eco-tourism and agro-tourism are of no concern to us here, it is significant that the villagers themselves included such elements in what they term their eco-tourism. Such elements of agro-tourism would be observed in other modernized lowland Thai villages with forward notions of agriculture.

On another occasion, a village meeting was held, presided by the Director of the National Park. The meeting began in Thai with 50 or so villagers from 3 villages. While

waiting for the arrival of the director, some notices from the district administration were announced: one was to do with a rally at the district office to which villagers were asked to attend, especially young women were to wear the white Karen tunic. Another announcement was made regarding land registration. Those villagers who wished to register their land must present the application. At this point, the National Park Director arrived, clad in the red Karen tunic shirt and turban. Some villagers asked him about the land registration, and in response he began a speech. "The responsibility of the national park is to make you recognize the boundaries of the national park and not to encroach on park territory. It is not within my responsibility to give you land rights. However, you must understand that individual land rights would be difficult to grant now. If such rights were granted, the area will be packed with resort hotels in no time. Issuing of N. S. 3 titles cannot be expected." Having said this, he began to promote tourism. "In the past year, tourists to the Doi Inthanon National Park numbered 700,000. The deadline for application to the tour guides closed today. I am disappointed that there were very few applicants from these three villages. We must all participate in improving the tourist service. Here, the Hmong are quite visible from the main road and have contributed to the tourism in this area by their visibility, but regarding the Karen, tourists will not know there were Karen around unless they came down as far as the village. You must heighten your visibility by increasing publicity. In N village, they sell handicrafts, but who will buy these things if you keep the shops in these secluded villages away from the road? Go out on the main roads and sell. You Karen have weaving, your own writing, and a high level of culture. You must show them. Also, nature conservation is important. If you conserve nature, more people will come. Because there is such a rich variety of birds here, tourists come to watch the birds. Teach your children to watch and enjoy them rather than hunt and eat them. This coming weekend, we will have a bird-watching seminar for you and the children. There will be a slide show and lessons on the birds. Then on Sunday, there will be a seminar specifically for children of these villages, which will end with a graded test. There will be more and more Thai tourists coming this way in the future. You must teach your children to conserve nature."

Then, one villager asked when electricity will come to the village, and the director answered they were looking into the matter. In fact, even as most of the other villages in the same area, as well as far less accessible villages further up had been provided with electricity, M village had been left out, precisely because of the eco-tourism. The National Park was not about to damage the rustic traditional life of the nature-loving Karen by allowing electricity. In the park officials' minds, that is not what tourists are looking for in the Karen village.

Later that week, a seminar was held for the villagers, where a visiting Thai nature specialist at the park gave lessons on the birds in Doi Inthanon. With slides (using an electric generator) showing the birds, she explained each bird species by Thai name, its habitat, feeding ground, etc. entreating villagers to enjoy the birds as they fly and sing,

not to do harm. Announcements had been made in the village well in advance by the headman through the morning loudspeaker, and at least one person per household had to be present, although most of these household representatives were children or younger housewives. They were curious to watch the slides, but most of the birds they knew very well by Karen name, and knew their habitats and feeding habits well from their childhood. Some youths, however, were busy taking notes, since knowing the Thai names for these birds would help them become good tour-guides and give better chances to be hired at the Park also. At the time the park had 50 registered guides, only 3 of whom were local Karen. Local Karen knowledge of birds and of any aspect of their ecological knowledge regarding the surrounding environment are known to most villagers but never verbalized. By “teaching them” the knowledge in the Thai language, in effect, Karen knowledge is overwritten and loses its voice, to be taken over by knowledge as defined by Thai modern nature-lovers. C, the manager of M village eco-tourism, had collected and printed a booklet of Karen folktales on the birds translated into Thai. He told me they were very popular among the visiting Thai bird-watchers and nature-lovers. The folktales as elements of Karen cultural tradition added charm to their adventures and the joy of bird-watching.

Discussion

The launching of the eco-tourism in the area by initiative of the National Park office can be understood as appropriation of ethnic culture by a local state agency. The park sets the conditions by which the eco-tourism is to be carried out, and it makes suggestions about the ways in which the Karen should make a show of their culture, which they should be proud of. What constitutes culture to be proud of, to make a show of, is determined by the state agency. Villagers in turn, cannot but take up the given suggestions, and use the terms set by the authorities. Elements of “Karen culture” have been hand-picked by the park officials in making an appropriate show within the National Park setting. In doing so, Karen indigenous knowledge of nature and forest is completely re-written as is apparent in the bird-watching session given in Thai. Karen are taught how to love birds (rather than hunt them as edibles), and how to love nature.

However, villagers are also taking initiative in designing their eco-tourism. The museum or the bird booklet are villagers’ response to the eyes of the tourists who come to find the rustic life of the “other” in the hills. The objects on display in the museum are pieces from their daily village life, which, to villagers of the younger generation like S, have become objects of the recent past. He objectifies certain parts of his village life by putting them on show to outsiders as pieces of Karen village life. In the “tribal” museums in the urban centers which display the tribal essences of *chaw khaw* and the success of developmental efforts as manifestation of state power [Jonsson 2005: 64–69], culture is

objectified as collection of artifacts. Acciaoli [1985: 160–162] and Volkman [1984: 166] discuss cases in Toraja where culture is “misrecognized” by the practitioners themselves, as the people themselves “come to view their own tradition as a collection of the concrete.” Acciaoli points out, “dialogue is possible only in the terms imposed from without” [*ibid.*: 158]. In the Toraja case, the people’s own notion of “culture” itself is re-written and the terms of representation are entirely set by the state notion of culture as art. Unlike what the tribal museum or the Toraja case suggests, in the Karen eco-tourism in Doi Inthanon, by framing the “traditional life” in the material presentation in the village museum, or by translating certain parts of their folk tradition in a booklet on birds, and further, by demonstrating the present economic activities in the village to the visitors, the villagers are presenting a far more complex notion of culture and view of life in the hills than that imposed by the authorities. They are certainly adopting the terms imposed on them, but by doing so, they are storing up space for themselves to negotiate and challenge the imposed notions. The museum as a frame draws attention to the continuity and difference between what it represents and what goes on in the space outside the frame. Life in the hills is changing, and villagers are finding ways to cope, and are re-presenting their own tradition as tradition to outsiders while also adopting elements from current modern practices. Through such manipulation of both the “traditional” and the modern in material culture, agricultural technology, and lifestyle, “identity negotiation” [Adams 1998] is possible.

These are elements of Karen “culture” and daily life that they prepare for others to see. In Northern Thailand more widely too, there is ongoing creation and recognition of Karen culture which seem to be popular both among appreciative Thai audience as well as among Karen themselves. An indispensable figure in the Karen self-representation in this region was the local-born singer Thu Pho, who has creatively used the Karen musical instrument “*tena*” (a harp) to sing both traditional genre as well as his own new songs, and of whom the villagers boasted, that the Thai Queen was a great fan and invited him over to sing whenever she was in the nearby palace. Creative re-configuration of Karen-ness is ongoing just as it has always been, but with an added reflexivity of villagers who are now keenly aware of those “Other’s” eyes capitalizing on the presence of those very eyes that denigrate them.

Eco-tourism in the area is undoubtedly brought in by the initiative of the authorities, and at the time of my visit, only less than half of the villagers had taken it seriously. Those who refuse it are resisting to adopt what the National Park is trying to promote, yet they cannot deny their co-villagers’ participation because they know their position vis-à-vis the state. Those who have taken it up have used it as a way of representing themselves with messages that override the “rustic hill tribe” image that the official view is trying to promote, and at the same time are attempting to make some profit. Thus, the accumulation of Karen-ness as has been defined by others over more than a century, the peace-loving, elephant-loving, nature-loving, forest-dwelling, non-aggressive, easily satis-

fied, self-sufficient, and backward Karen, is played upon in presenting themselves under the constraint of a state-promoted eco-tourism.

Conclusion

The “others” will follow the definitions and discourse imposed upon them, submitting to the modernist impositions yet at the same time rendering their daily life possible and meaningful by making use of the institutions and representations prepared by the authorities. Indigenous knowledge can be either claimed as a centerpiece in a movement demanding rights, or, can be concealed in claiming their readiness to adopt new activities. Various haphazard pieces are put together in a spontaneous conglomeration of hybrid representation and the end product is never exactly what the authorities envisioned. Within the space that has been taken over by modernity, still attempt is made to embed their own terms within this modernist discourse, and take on elements of the majority culture and society, in order to continue their daily lives in their own terms. If the authorities appropriate others’ ethnic cultures, then the others appropriate the very terms in which the authorities define them. Whether they are defined as wild forest people, as hill tribe intruders, or as indigenous people, their only way to cope is to appropriate those very terms. When “others” are called in derogatory terms, they are not merely consolidated in those terms, but rather, the denigrating terms open up a possibility. By being called in derogatory terms, paradoxically, “others” are given a position from which to talk back. The denigrated “other” begins to use the same language of denigration in response to the call, and here emerges a subject that begins to use those terms in its own utterance [Butler 1997].

From the pre-modern tacit understanding as mentioned by Hinton, to the rigid ethnic categorization of the hill-tribe policy era, now it seems the hill-valley relationship has entered a new stage of negotiation. It is still true that the state holds the unquestionable power in the asymmetrical relationship, yet, the accumulation of past discourse provides various possibilities for the hill-dwellers themselves, to add their voices in constructing the future. Even if their living conditions are unquestionably defined by the authorities, the hill-dwellers may choose to talk back using the same terms that have been applied to them, from pre-modern tacit understanding to modernist ethnic classification.

Even if it is on a stage set by the authorities, and even if they are delimited by the terms imposed upon them by those in power, it is significant that the local voices are becoming more varied and widely dispersed in their sources, because, as Hinton points out, the terms that define them have far-reaching political, social and economic consequences.

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