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# *Review Article*

# *Encyclopedic Yao in Thailand*

**Somchot Ongsakul**, 'Yao', in *Saranukrom Watthanatham Thai, Lem 11, Phak Neua* (*Encyclopedia of Thai Culture, vol. 11, The North*), The Thai Culture Encyclopedia Foundation and Siam Commercial Bank, Bangkok, 2452 (1999), illustrated, pp. 5,532–7.

**Natthawi Thosarot** and **Wiraphong Misathan**, *Saranukrom Klum Chatphan: Mien (Yao)* (*Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups in Thailand: Mien [Yao]*), Mahidol University, Institute for Research on Linguistics and Culture for Rural Development, Nakhorn Pathom, 2540 (1997), illustrated, 32 pp.

Not so long ago, the mention of highland peoples in Thailand's north served to conjure up images of political insubordination, drug production and border crossings, which fuelled various anxieties about national security. The following statement from a book published in 1986 is indicative of previously common characterisations: '[Hilltribe] society is grounded in a firm reliance on local customs. Many problems arise from this situation, such as forest destruction from the making of swidden fields, security problems, and a drug problem'.[1] But recent publications that are aimed at a general Thai readership suggest that highland peoples such as Mien (Yao) have come to be viewed as a component of the nation; they are, for instance, included in the recent *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture*. If so, then the days of viewing *chaokhao* ('hilltribes') as an alien menace may be over. The recent accounts of Mien, for instance, focus on culture, social organisation and indigenous medicine as features of local life rather than as a source of Thailand's problems.

Encyclopedias carry various connotations of scientific factuality and comprehensive, authoritative knowledge. But, like any other form of writing, they contain various implicit assumptions about the subject and about the interests of the readers. It is worth exploring some dimensions of the recent Thai-language encyclopedia portrayals for contemporary Thai notions about highland ethnic minority peoples. My reading of the two encyclopedia features on Mien suggests that highland peoples have come to be included in new kinds of narratives about modern Thailand, and that this new focus is grounded in Thai concerns with modernity and national identity. Ethnic and cultural diversity, it seems, are embraced for a fundamentally Thai project of reflection. I maintain that the roots of the recent encyclopedia projects lie in various implicit concerns with Thai modernity. The publications on highland ethnic minorities within Thailand tend to exaggerate highlanders' contemporary difference from Thai people. At the same time, they steer systemically away from any discussion of the kinds of changes that have taken place in highland societies and cultures as a result of engagements with Thai society (including government, economy and military) during the twentieth century.

In his chapter on Yao in the recent *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture*, Somchot states that Yao originated in Yunnan, and that they over time differed by occupation and dress. 'Phan Yao make a living from woodcarving, Hung Yao wrap the head with red cloth, and Nan Ting Yao wear blue clothes' (p. 5532).[2] This statement about the different kinds of Yao does not make sense in reference

1 Saimuang Wirayasiri, *Chaokhao nai prathet Thai* (*Hilltribes in Thailand*) (Khurusapha, Bangkok, 2529 [1986]), p. 48.

2 Phan Yao is a recognised Yao sub-group in China, and Hung Yao is a Chinese term for a subset of Phan Yao in Guangxi. Nan Ting Yao is a garbled reference, either to Lan Tien Yao or to what some Chinese sources call Nan Tung Yao, who are Yao associated with 'a stockade in the mountains of Chao p'ing, Kwangsi'. Richard D. Cushman, 'Rebel Haunts and Lotus Huts: Problems in the Ethnohistory of the Yao' (PhD dissertation, 2 volumes, Cornell University), vol. 2, p. 78. Cushman's dissertation is by far the most sophisticated treatment of the issue

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to clothing or livelihood, nor is Yunnan Province the ancient homeland of Yao people. The author says that the Yao in Thailand are Hung Yao, and that they live in various parts of Chiangrai Province, including Chiangkham. Chiangkham became part of Phayao Province in 1978, and for the author to make this mistake in the recent *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture*, he must never have left Bangkok. But the adventure continues when the author describes roofing materials of Yao houses; cogon grass, pomegranate leaves and palm leaves (p. 5,533). For anyone who has been to Mien villages in the last 20 years, this is a peculiar and anachronistic characterisation.

The only reference to any specific Yao in Thailand in this account concerns what plants they were growing in Phulangka village of Pong District in 1950. It turns out that the whole entry on Yao in this new *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture* is summarised, and often reproduced word for word, from Bunchuai Srisawasdi's *30 Nationalities of Chiangrai*[3] from 50 years earlier. Even Bunchuai's misspellings in his glossary of Mien words (e.g. *dui* for *lui*, 'shirt', *raang* for *laang*, 'village', *huap* for *hop*, 'to drink') are replicated by Somchot. The only exception to the reproduction of Bunchuai's report is the curious notion of the three kinds of Yao. Somchot's recycling of an apparently authoritative notion about kinds of Yao that turns out to have no basis in fact suggests that he himself has no knowledge about Mien or other Yao people, and his revamping of Bunchuai's account reinforces that notion.

The three photos that accompany the *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture* article suggest that no one involved ever went to a Mien village. Two of the pictures are from the Old Chiangmai Cultural Center and show Mien women walking around a fake bonfire.[4] I assume that the point of these photos is the dress. The third photo has the caption 'Yao women in ethnic dress at a festival'. It shows two women, at least one of whom is paying respect with a *wai*, Thai style. In the blurry foreground, framing the two women, a man is walking by with a gong on a shoulder-pole. This is not a sight from a Mien village. The gong-procession and the *wai*-gesture suggest that Buddhist monks were the focus of the occasion. Mien are not Buddhists, but they take part in Thai ceremonies and social life to an increasing extent.

The *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture* statements about Yao roofing materials and what Yao feed their horses evoke Yao essences that are disconnected from the lives of Thailand's Mien people. Along with the supposedly ethnic dances at the Old Chiangmai Cultural Center, these are signifiers that match the expectations of the producers and the audience (or readers) about an essentially strange people whose strangeness is approachable through a list of traits, features of dress and specific forms of dance. It is only by assuming such essential strangeness that Somchot is justified in ignoring what has happened in the lives of Thailand's Mien people and in the scholarship on Mien by Thai and Western researchers during the last 50 years.[5] As such, his contribution suggests a national

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*Footnote Continued*

of Yao origins and identity. He lists 522 different ethnic references to Yao. There are no simple answers to who the Yao are and where they are from, though it is safe to say that they have a much longer history in Guangxi and Guangdong than in Yunnan. Searching the Thai literature on Yao, I found the same notion of three kinds of Yao (Phan, Hung and Nan Tung) and their characteristics by dress and livelihood, in an earlier publication, Khajadphai Burusaphatana's *Chaokhao* (*Hilltribes*) (Phraephittaya, Bangkok, 2528 [1985]), p. 53. In a footnote, he attributes this to Chob Kacha-Ananda's *Khwamru thuapai kiawkap chaokhao phao ygfao* (*General Information about the Yao Hilltribe*) (mimeographed, no publisher 2513 [1970]), which I have not seen. Chob does not mention this characterisation in either his 'Etude Ethnographique du Groupe Ethnique Yao en Thailande du Nord' (Doctoral thesis, l'Université de Paris, 1976) or in his *Thailand Yao: Past, Present, and Future* (Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures on Asia and Africa, Tokyo, 1997). While the source of the dubious tripartite division of Yao is a mystery, the notion serves Somchot as an authoritative declaration about the Yao in general.

3 Bunchuai Srisawasdi, *30 Chat Nai Chiang Rai* (*Thirty Nationalities of Chiang Rai*) (Odeon, Bangkok, 2493 [1950]).

4 At the Old Chiangmai Cultural Center, where two of the photos are from, visitors are treated to the sight of several traditional Mien dances. Each of the dances lasts for less than a minute. But none of them is a Mien dance. When I watched the show during 2000, I recognised the steps from particular rituals. Having seen the rituals and taken part in some of them, I know that these are not performed as ethnic dances, but steps one takes for particular spirits at specific ritual occasions. But at the Old Chiangmai Cultural Center, it is assumed that each ethnic group has several dances, and it is to this end that the women performers have borrowed steps from Mien rituals.

5 For examples of the Thai-language works on Yao that are more current than Bunchuai's account, there was a Yao project by Chulalongkorn University researchers that published four books on Yao in Thailand and China in the early 1990s. These were accounts of the research team's visit to Guangxi in 1991: Suvanna Kriengkraipetch, *Yeuan*

exoticisation of highland peoples that may be acceptable in Thailand, and certainly is not new, but raises doubts about the quality of the *Encyclopedia* more generally.

Mien are the subject of an illustrated, 32-page volume in another encyclopedia project, *The Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups in Thailand*, published by Mahidol University's Institute for Research on Linguistics and Culture for Rural Development. The two authors lived for some time in Mien villages (or at least visited), and they are familiar with some of the literature on Mien, and this is a welcome change from the entry in the *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture*. But the authors' preface indicates that all is still seen from the environs of Bangkok. 'We Thai (*chao rao*) are familiar with the people who build their houses on the mountain, whose women wear big turbans and coats with red ruffs that look like flower garlands, and their multi-coloured embroidered pants that look so strange, as Yao' (3). After stating that they will go by Mien practice and refer to the people as Mien rather than Yao, they go on: 'Mien people are very clever, they love peace and quiet (*rak sangop*), and they are industrious in making a living' (p. 3).

I may be reading too much into their remarks, but it seems to me that, after evoking the image of the strange-looking people on the mountain, they are surprised to find that Mien are not ignorant, that they are not troublemakers, and that they are not lazy. If the attributes (cleverness, peacefulness and industriousness) are meant as complimentary, they also come across as condescending about Mien and highlanders more generally, and draw presumably on Thai stereotypes about *chaokhao* as an alien threat to the nation. The statement that Mien *rak sangop* struck me as peculiar, and I wondered if it was related to recent Thai media portrayals of irresponsible teenagers as fun-loving (*rak sanuk*). If so, Mien could be a responsible alternative to what was happening in the cities. But equally, the statement can be viewed in relation to recent cross-border trade in amphetamines, with almost daily front-page headlines in the media (Chiangmai newspapers, at least) about hill-tribe people involved in the drug trade and related violence.[6] But the authors do not comment on any wider context of their remarks. For all I know, they may have been borrowing from Bunchuai Srisawasdi. He states that Yao are a friendly and hospitable people, and adds that 'they love orderliness and peace and quiet'.[7]

Many of the photos in Natthawi and Wiraphong's book are suggestive about contemporary issues of economic, cultural and religious change, but there is no mention of these topics in their text. Some aspects of their book are quite informative, such as their account of ritual practice (e.g. offerings to village owner spirits and the gathering of soldier spirits, pp. 20–2). But the authors do not appear to have much interest in engaging with Mien lives as increasingly in terms of Thai society. Their volume on Mien is essentially a list of things that are attributed to this ethnic group. It gives a brief statement about the term Yao, where they have lived in China, when they came to Thailand and current population figures by province. Then it goes on to describe where they live; that they prefer to live

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*Footnote Continued*

*Thin Yao, Monthon Kwangsi* (*A Short Visit to the Yao Communities in Guangxi*) (Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Arts, Linguistics Research Unit, Bangkok, 2535 [1992]); a linguistic and cognitive analysis of colour terms in Mien, Theraphan L. Thongkum, *Kham Riak Si Nai Phasa Yao (Mien)* (*Color Terms in Yao [Mien]*) (Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Arts, Linguistics Research Unit, Bangkok, 2535 [1992]); a comparison and contrast of Yao clothing and ornaments in Thailand and southern China, Mongkhol Chanbamrung, *Yao Thai—Yao Kwangsi: Seuapha Lae Khreuangpradab* (*Thailand Yao—Guangxi Yao: Costumes and Ornaments*) (Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Arts, Linguistics Research Unit, Bangkok, 2534 [1991]); and a Thai and English translation of Kia Shen Pong, an Imperial Edict granted to Yao by Chinese authorities centuries ago, Theraphan L. Thongkum, *Kia Sen Pong: Nangsue Doen Thang Khaam Khet Phukhao* (*Passport for Traveling in the Hills*), in Thai and English, Introduction, in Thai, by Theraphan L. Thongkum (Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Arts, Linguistics Research Unit, Bangkok, 2534 [1991]). Earlier, the Teacher's Committee of the Non-Formal Education Project published quite an informative overview of Mien society and culture, Khana Khru (Teachers' Committee, Non-Formal Education Project, Khun Haeng Village, Ngao District, Lampang Province), *Yao* (Non-Formal Education Center for North Thailand, Lampang, n.d.).

6 A Thai policeman has written a 'true story' of the heroin production and trade in Chiangrai that focuses on a Mien man, see Somkiat Phuangsap, Police Major General, *Lao San: Patibat Kan-thalai Rong-ngan Phong Narok* (*Lao San: The Destruction of a Heroin Factory*) (Na Ban Wannakam, Bangkok, 2535 [1992]). The characterisation of Mien as 'peace-and-quiet-loving' may be influenced by this context of violence and illicit trade. Equally, it may be an attempt to steer away from lowland Thai stereotypes of hilltribes as unruly in another way, that is, as somehow oversexed. A good example of that genre is Sangkhit Chanthanaphoti, *Saneh Sao Phukhao* (*The Charm of Mountain Girls*) (Saengdao, Bangkok, 2540 [1997]).

7 '*rak khwam pen rabiab riabroy khwam sangop*', Bunchuai, *30 Chat*, p. 372.

at an altitude of 1,000 to 1,500 metres, but that nowadays some of them live in the lowlands. Nowhere is there any mention of the official campaigns against shifting cultivation or poppy growing that destroyed previous forms of livelihood. There is no mention of national integration policies, limited access to land, problems with acquiring citizenship documents, or other aspects of the context of contemporary Mien lives.

The entries on 'clothing', 'language', 'character' (clever, good traders, clean, hospitable, drink alcohol in moderation), 'family and kinship', 'beliefs, customs, and ceremonies', 'livelihood' and 'health and healthcare' come across as a willed disappearance of the contemporary situation of any marginalised farming population, not only that of Mien.[8] The book ends abruptly, with no summary, conclusions or discussion of contemporary realities. It is impossible to say whether the lack of a concluding commentary is a decision of the authors or the editor, but to me it comes across as a form of time-politics which locates the ethnic Other (Mien in this case) as traditional and in the past. This rhetorical strategy implicitly defines the ethnic Self (the Thai readers) as modern.

An unwillingness to confront contemporary realities may also explain Somchot's summary of Bunchuai's old account; the 'real' Yao that these works convey are not actual people in contemporary circumstances, but essences of ancient and strange people against whom one can reflect on modern Thai in an equally essentialist fashion. From this perspective, one may speculate that the contributions on Yao/Mien in both encyclopedia projects are motivated by something besides a quest to understand Thailand's Mien. One possibility is that, behind the encyclopedias lies a concern with the apparent homogenisation of Thai society, where highland ethnic minorities' dress and the look of their villages have become largely indistinguishable from those of lowland Thai. That is, the blurring of distinctions between Thai and highland people may drive this encyclopedic quest for the essences of each 'people'. If so, the encyclopedias operate somewhat similar to Erik Seidenfaden's attempt to assemble the unique dresses of each of Thailand's varied peoples, for a museum display, before all markers of difference disappeared.[9]

That was in 1937, and Seidenfaden's worry was the spread of 'international fashion'.[10] Currently, over 60 years after Seidenfaden's display of difference, various intellectual currents in Thailand indicate an anxiety over globalisation and its impact on Thai culture and identity. Craig Reynolds has written about the recent Thai interest in the Tai groups in Burma, China and Vietnam 'as a kind of ethnic nostalgia, a reclamation of identity that resides in the yet-to-be-globalized Tai minority peoples in the region'.[11] In this context of an ethnic nostalgia for Tai essences, I see the encyclopedia accounts of Yao as about a related concern. Recent accounts of Black Tai, Zhuang and other Tai-speaking groups reach into the past to suggest cultural affinities, while there are few contemporary commonalities in social life, cultural practices and political organisation.[12] The two encyclopedia accounts of Mien in Thailand suggest the opposite concern, of sustaining a sense of difference. The reach into the

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8 I found no mention of the contemporary situation in the volume on Hmong in this series, Sujaritlak Diphadung, *Saranukrom Klum Chatphan: Mong* (Mahidol University, Institute for Research on Linguistics and Culture for Rural Development, Nakhorn Pathom, 2538 [1995]). The volume on Lahu is the only exception I know of, in that the author discusses national integration policies and some of the impact of capitalism on highland cultures, Solot Sirisai, *Saranukrom Klum Chatphan: Lahu* (Mahidol University, Institute for Research on Linguistics and Culture for Rural Development, Nakhorn Pathom, 2539 [1996]), pp. 29–30. There have been interesting developments in recent Thai writings on rural people, including highlanders, that display stimulating perspectives on contemporary realities. A good example is the recent book, *Marginalized Voices*, which focuses on Lisu, Thawit Jatuworapruk, *Siang Jak Khon Chaikhawb* (Faculty of Social Science, Chiangmai University, Chiangmai, 2541 [1998]). The lack of attention to contemporary realities that the encyclopedia entries on Yao manifest is thus not a statement about Thai writings on highland peoples or other rural populations in general.

9 For a discussion of this display, see Hjorleifur Jonsson, 'Yao Collectibles', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 88, no. 1 (2000), pp. 222–31.

10 Erik Seidenfaden, 'Siam's Tribal Dresses', *Selected Articles from the Siam Society Journal, vol. 2, 1929–1953*, pp. 84–94, The Siam Society, Bangkok, 1954, originally published in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 31, no. 2, p. 84.

11 Craig J. Reynolds, 'Globalization and Cultural Nationalism in Modern Thailand', in Joel S. Kahn (ed.), *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1998), p. 138.

12 One example is Srisakra Vallibhotama and Pranee Wongthes, *Juang: Phi-Nong Thai Kaokae Thi Sut* (*Zhuang: The Oldest Tai*) (Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 2536 [1993]).

past in the two works serves to draw up differences, where in fact the nation state has brought about a fundamental unity in social life, culture and political reality. In this perspective, the accounts of Yao are informative, even if they have little to offer about Yao themselves. The encyclopedia projects and related publications are, instead, about reflections on Thai identity within Thailand, through the alternate paths of assumed sameness in southern China and northern Vietnam and assumed difference in the hills of northern Thailand.

As such, this is not new. The first explorers' account specifically about Thailand's Mien was published in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1925. It states, among other things:

> They [Yao] 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 the 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.[13]

This report was in reply to a questionnaire sent out by the Siam Society that aimed to assemble knowledge about all the peoples of the land.[14] The tone of this report is within the parameters of Thai travel writing at the time, of exotic and uncivilisable villagers in the hills.[15] The Yao are conveyed as fundamentally strange, and the description of their dress serves as the equivalent of a birdwatcher's guide; this is what the strange people dress like.

A photograph accompanies the 1925 *JSS* article on the Yao. The two men and seven women are identified only as 'A Group of Yao', and the caption indicates that dress and jewellery is the point of the picture. It 'shows the style of dress of both sexes, and in particular the silver torque round the neck, with the silver plaques hanging from it'.[16] The caption and the article do not identify the people, but the man in the centre was the leader of the Mien population in Nan. His name was Tang Tsan Khwoen, and he had both a title and a family name (Phaya Khiri, Srisombat) from the king of Nan. This leader brought taxes to the king of Nan from the Mien and Hmong villagers under his command, and they had a permit to grow opium for the Royal Opium Monopoly dating to the early 1900s. The Mien were anonymous and exotic only to someone from Bangkok; they traded frequently in Nan, and dealt with local authorities, Thai military posts and western missionaries.[17]

But in the context of the exoticisation of Yao, it bears mention that at this time the general population in Nan was equally exotic to Bangkokians. In a book on Nan that was published in 1933, the author of a chapter on 'The Condition of the Ethnic Groups' goes to some lengths to argue that the local lowlanders are 'real Thai' (*Thai thae*) and absolutely not 'Lao'.[18] The non-Thai groups that he describes are Meo, Yao, Khmu, Thin and Phi Tong Leuang, and he also includes Lue in this assembly. He describes Meo and Yao as very similar, and that their physical characteristics are very much like that of Chinese. The account of Meo and Yao is basically a list of traits ('customs', 'food', 'houses', 'dress' and 'occupations'). Among Yao, he states, 'men buy women as wives, and the status

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13 Nai Chan Rangsiyanan and Luang Bamrung Naowakarn, trans. E.G. Sebastian, 'The Yao', *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1925), pp. 84–5. The full article is pp. 83–128.

14 The report was written at a time of national integration, when Thai officials had recently acquired the bureaucratic means of taxing and conscripting highland peoples. These efforts were not always successful. In Maehongson, Mien and Hmong (Yao and Meo) resisted such attempts in 1921: '[They revolted] and several skirmishes broke out. A leading central Thai official recommended chasing the non-Thai groups out of the country by burning their villages, but higher authorities suggested that a policy of benign neglect would be more productive'. Ronald D. Renard, *Changes in the Northern Thai Hills: An Examination of the Impact of Hilltribe Development Work, 1957–1987* (Research and Development Center, Phayap University, Chiangmai, 1988), pp. 41–2.

15 Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects, 1885–1910', in Andrew Turton (ed.), *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (Curzon, London, 2000), pp. 38–62.

16 *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1925), p. 82.

17 Hjorleifur Jonsson, 'Moving House: Migration and the Place of the Household in the Thai Periphery', *Journal of the Siam* Society, vol. 87, nos 1 & 2 (1999), pp. 99–118.

18 Siri Phetprasert, 'Saphap Chon Chat' ('The Condition of the Ethnic Groups'), in *Nakhorn Nan Chabab Pathomrik* (*An Introduction to Nan*) (Bamrungnukulkit and Thaphrajan Publishing Houses, Bangkok, 2476 [1933]), pp. 272–3. The full article is pp. 272–85.

of women is almost that of slaves'. In the brief account of Meo 'occupations', the author states that 'growing opium is an important occupation, that causes much work for the [lowland] officials'.[19] While some of the Mien and Hmong were officially licensed growers, others were not, and the enforcing of the trade monopoly involved the arrest of any non-licensed grower or trader. Uplanders' poppy growing did not 'cause work' for the officials; the state's monitoring of licensed fields and the arrest of unlicensed growers were the source of the officials' frequent duties.

One of the underlying themes of this account of peoples concerns races. Meo and Yao resemble and are related to Chinese. Khmu and Thin have Khmer blood. Also included are Lue, who are a Tai-speaking group. The racial account of their assumed difference is worth quoting: 'Lue are of the same race as Thai, but since ancient times their blood has been mixed much with that of Lawa, and therefore they differ in many ways from Thai'. Phi Tong Leuang (now called Mlabri) 'are the most savage of all races' (*pen manut-chat diaw thi pa-theuan thi sut*).[20]

Thus one can view this account of the peoples of Nan as a field for Thai reflection on Thai as a race of civilised people, through the description of the various others who are less so.[21] In this light, one can postulate a certain continuity in how accounts of highland peoples such as Mien have served as a field for reflecting on Thai identity, culture and nationhood from the 1920s and to the present. The summary of Bunchuai's 50-year-old account and the cursory overview of the 'peace-and-quiet-loving' Mien are revealing narratives. Their revelations lie, not in the printed accounts of Mien, but in the implicit assumptions about how to describe highland peoples to a contemporary Thai readership.

The encyclopedia projects contribute to contemporary Thai public ideas on nation and culture in separate ways. *The Encyclopedia of Thai Culture* has assembled all of Thailand in a multi-volume set, while Mahidol University's *Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups* publishes individual volumes on various marginal groups.[22] The focus on minority peoples such as Mien never emerges as more than a vehicle for reflections on identity and difference, it does not, for instance, serve as a basis for a commentary on Thai society. The encyclopedia appropriations of marginalised peoples for projects of national reflection and self-fashioning have parallels in many other settings of internal colonialism.[23] The active intervention by Thai agents of national security, integration and development in the local lives of highland peoples over the last 40 years has eroded many of the supposedly timeless practices described as particular to highland ethnic groups such as Mien.

The 'timelessness' of the encyclopedia entries, their description of Mien as people of the past, can be seen in this context. They convey an image of highland peoples as of no relevance in modern Thai

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19 Siri, 'Saphap Chon Chat', pp. 278–9.

20 Siri, 'Saphap Chon Chat', pp. 281–2. This characterisation of Mlabri has been revamped in a recent book, where it says that 'they do not have their own culture, tradition, religion and race history', Muen Wali, *Phi Tong Leuang* (Ruamsan, Bangkok, 2537 [1994]), p. 5. As this is a bilingual publication, it is clear that this is not a statement imposed by a translator. The Thai says: 'pen manut klum thi mai mi watthanatham lae prapheni pen khong ton aeng. Mai mi sasana, mai mi prawatisat khong phao phan' (p. 4). On the increasingly racialised understandings of ethnicity and ethnic difference in early twentieth-century Siam, see David Streckfuss, 'The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racialist Thought, 1890–1910', in Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John W. Smail* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1993).

21 See Thongchai, 'The Others Within'.

22 The volumes in the Mah.idol series, as of 1998, are on Kui (Suay), Sgaw Karen, Khmer in Thailand, Mong, Phuan, Lawa, Lua, Lahu, Lisu, Thai Song, Kong (U-Kong), Mien, Pwo Karen, Khmu, Nya Kur (Chao Dong), and Thai Lue.

23 Proto-ethnographic descriptions on topics of identity and difference multiplied during the colonial era, when they served as a site for reflecting on nationhood, civilisation and savagery, see George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (Free Press, New York, 1987). During the subsequent period of nation building, ethnographic descriptions articulated similar concerns, and examples include Bunchuai's *30 Chat* as well as American accounts of local Indian populations, see Curtis Hinsley, *The Smithsonian and the American Indian* (Smithsonian, Washington, DC, 1994). Through copiously illustrated articles, *National Geographic Magazine* has conveyed the various peoples of the world for an American and global audience in a way that reinforces specific urban and middle-class American notions, fears, and fascinations concerning the rest of the world, see Catherine Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993). Natthawi and Wiraphong's characterisation of Mien as industrious, clever and peace-and-quiet-loving can be seen in this light as addressing specific Thai fears about ethnically non-Thai highland peoples. Their preface can thus be viewed as reassuring Thai readers about Mien and other highland peoples as exotic but not dangerous.

society, and raise no issues concerning the role of Thai society in transforming upland livelihood, societies or cultures. Those interventions have largely been based on the assumption that highlanders' practices of livelihood, society and culture were in and of the past, and thus unsuited to modern Thailand.[24] In such implicit understandings concerning highland peoples and their larger context, the encyclopedias share much with general efforts toward national integration in Thailand.

To some extent, the encyclopedia interest in ethnic minority peoples is also an aspect of the current general appreciation of 'local culture' in the Thai countryside, where dress and dance serve to display the cultural diversity of the nation. Such performances derive much of their power from the notion that an increasingly global modernity erases the local particulars of identity and dress. It is in terms of such national reflections on modernity and its predicaments that I situate the tendency to describe highland peoples as of another time. The cultural and ethnic encyclopedias are aspects of nostalgia projects that belong to, and contribute to, contemporary Thai views of their own modern world.

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24 'There are many hill tribe problems as identified by Thai authorities. Most of these problems are related to some aspects of the hill tribes' way of life which are considered to be inappropriate to the present socio-economic and political situation of the country'. Technical Service Club, Tribal Research Institute, *The Hill Tribes of Thailand*, 4th edn (Tribal Research Institute, Chiangmai, 1995), p. 2.