serious fun: minority cultural dynamics and national integration in Thailand

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In this article, I explore local social and cultural dynamics in the context of the national integration of ethnic minorities. My case concerns a Mien population in Thailand and describes various engagements of local and national spaces that center on issues of fun. Sports competitions and culture shows resonate with other projects that reinforce the centrality of villages in contemporary social life. For the Mien, these dynamics index a shift from the household to the village as the subject of action. Fun and games are not digressions from politics but are central to the serious play of everyday life. [national integration, ethnic minorities, fun, ethnography, village, Mien (Yao), Thailand]

> In the villagers' way of thinking, no activity is really worth doing unless it has the potentiality for fun.
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> —Herbert Phillips, *Thai Peasant Personality* (1965:61)

While I was establishing, through household surveys and a study of rituals, an ethnographic footing in Pangkha, a Mien (Yao) ethnic minority village in northern Thailand,[1] I found myself at a subdistrict *(tambol)* level sports competition and fun fair held on the grounds in front of the village school. Schoolchildren from grades one to seven raced 100 meters in groups of four or five. They were dressed in sports outfits—shorts and T-shirts. I was recruited to award look-alike medals on strings to the winners of one race who stepped on podiums indicating first, second, and third place. This struck me as rather humorous at the time. The humor of the situation lay in the twist on my position as a fieldworker grounded in the ethnographic record of Thailand's upland peoples (six marginalized minority ethnic groups of which the Mien are one). By recruiting me to award the medals, the schoolteachers shook me out of a comfortable observer role and into that of a participant. The politics of my presence in local life had gone from observing the ethnic and the local to endorsing and embodying the national or the global. I wrote very little about the event in my notebook. Somehow, the Mien 100-meter race was no match for the ethnic specificity and descriptive richness of Geertz's (1973) Balinese cockfight. My participation was also quite the opposite of his, and it may be that the discomfort of finding myself on the antilocal side (as I viewed it at the time) in the early stages of fieldwork was what made me want to laugh. In other words, the humor of the event lay in its political awkwardness for me.

Geertz's justifiably famous and debated essay on "the Balinese cockfight" has been used as an example of how anthropology has been led astray. Geertz's critics allege that anthropologists have been "seduced" on an "interpretive quest" that has kept them from exploring the social and material dynamics and inequalities involved in

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culture and social action (Keesing 1987; Roseberry 1989). In his article, Geertz mentions the immediate purpose of the famous event, but neither he nor his critics consider the significance of the event's purpose. Geertz states that cockfights were for the most part illegal in Bali at the time, and in this instance, the policy of the Indonesian Republic was in agreement with that of its Dutch colonial precursor (1973:413–414). According to Geertz, villagers felt that the police had received sufficient bribes to keep them from raiding, so they held their fight in the central square of the village rather than in a secluded setting. In addition, villagers were aiming for a big crowd "because they were raising money for a school that the government was unable to give them" (Geertz 1973:414).

The Balinese villagers were unsuccessful in getting the government to provide them with a school, so they took matters into their own hands, breaking the national law in order to fund a school, thus (ultimately) connecting their community more firmly to the nation in symbolic and social terms. Geertz claims that the cockfight was somehow quintessentially Balinese and concludes that "societies . . . contain their own interpretations" (1973:452). The persistently societal or ethnic reference of culture and social action is of course not Geertz's invention but rather an ethnographic reflex common to a historically specific anthropological quest for a credible subject (Kirsch 1982). The problem, in both analytical and descriptive terms, is widely recognized in contemporary anthropology (Battaglia 1999; Clifford 1988; Herzfeld 1987). Geertz's case is productive in this regard, though not because of his premise-cum-solution that societies contain their own interpretations. Rather, his statement helps formulate the ethnographic problem: how do societies come to contain particular interpretations, and how do these interpretations relate to local agency, social dynamics, and larger projects such as national integration?[2] From this perspective, the issue is of general ethnographic relevance, regardless of one's relative interest in Bali, chickens, or interpretive anthropology.

With the anthropological move from structure to an emphasis on history, contingency, and the entanglements of local and other worlds (Kaplan 1995; Thomas 1991), previous objects of anthropological inquiry such as an ethnic group or a social category (like peasants) no longer refer to independently coherent realities. To the extent that field research takes anthropology to rural settlements, "the village" now suggests multiple intertwined trajectories of schemes of meaning and political economy. It is no longer a social entity, the parts of which add up to an ethnic group or a culture. In the process, the local and the extralocal have lost their separate componential references; one can no longer assume that "culture" or "social structure" resides in the former and "the state" or "political economy" in the latter (Gupta 1995). These reworkings of the object of anthropology leave agency at large—to be determined from the particulars of individual encounters and events rather than inferred from a preestablished analytical category such as Mien, the village, the household, or the state.

The context of the subdistrict sports competition and fun fair relates to the construction of national space and the systemic marginalization of upland populations. It also involves the role of royalty, hierarchy, and order in the reproduction of national space and the role of schools and sports in national integration. Notions of fun are somewhat antithetical to the official emphasis on discipline and hierarchy, and to some extent they evoke banal aspects of national integration that may derive a part of their resonance from the threat of settlement erasure by the state.[3] But fun also demarcates spaces of valorization in Thai social life that have particular boundaries of gender and class and are sometimes at odds with official Thai ideology and domestic Mien ideology.

The case I will make about the Mien population is thus not about the response of a society to political and economic change and national integration. There is no uniform Mien perspective on the shape of their social life, nor do contemporary cultural politics have much connection to the social dynamics in this Mien area prior to recent processes of state penetration and national integration.[4] Mien and other uplanders are collectively confronted with defining themselves in relation to various dimensions of the nation-state, but their definitions are always from particular perspectives that need not assume an ethnic or interethnic (pan-uplander) framework. People's abilities to impose their designs on the social life around them varies, as does the scope of the intended social consensus. My aim in discussing contemporary cultural politics is both to situate Mien discourses of identity and social life and to relate them to current processes of state penetration and national integration. Uplanders' varied engagements with their immediate social space need to be understood in the context of state hegemony as it curtails expressions of local (that is, non-national) cultural dynamics. The hegemony of the modern Thai nation-state suppresses particular forms of livelihood and denies uplanders a public voice except insofar as they present themselves as a kind of Thai. The contemporary alignment of nation and state in Thailand affects the kinds of social visions ethnic minority uplanders can project to themselves and others within a social space that defines them as alien threats.

I approach agency as a form of power, one that concerns people's abilities to impose particular designs on social life. In this light, agency is central to the shape of any social reality. It is what constitutes or reproduces the units of social life and how they relate, although the extent to which agency is a local feature can vary. A particular purpose such as fun or fund-raising can be as instrumental in lending a particular shape to social life as warfare, farming, feasting, and other activities can be. Like Battaglia (1997), I am concerned with the ambiguity of agency. It is somewhat curious that the inhabitants of Phachangnoi subdistrict held a fair celebrating minority ethnic identity and national integration in terms of the Thai notion of fun *(sanuk)*. What kinds of fun are people having, and how is this event resonant with the conditions of their lives on the one hand and the various tensions in state and minority relations on the other? I suggest that the politics of fun is central to some of the contemporary dynamics in minority areas concerning identity, culture, and the shape of social life. The national integration of ethnic minority populations in northern Thailand has been characterized by disciplinary force and state hegemony. Neither the ethnic identity of marginalized minorities nor the integration measures of the Thai state are topics ethnographers have associated with fun.

Fun (sanuk) is often presented as a feature of Thai life and character, but my reading of the social science literature indicates its "nervous" attributes (Taussig 1992) and situates it primarily among marginalized populations. In examining the cultural politics of a fun fair for the inhabitants of a subdistrict, I propose a contextualization of fun as well as a disentanglement of administrative units as the focus of action. Battaglia (1997:507) describes "agency's play," displacements and disconnections that ambiguate agency. Her case highlights the ethnographic challenges of collective action. As I argue below, the fun fair was a ritual statement about Phachangnoi from a particular perspective. It was a representation of a collectivity that provided many twists on its own sources, dimensions, and destinations. The fair was fashioned by schoolteachers in terms of their educated, middle-class discursive practices regarding identity, culture, and nationhood. Through their sports competitions, the students mobilized this representation. Through the dynamics of team formation, the sports reified the officially recognized settlements of Phachangnoi as the social universe and erased

the social reality of settlements that were unconnected to the state. As an event, the fair was for and about the Mien and Hmong minority inhabitants of Phachangnoi, who were literally and figuratively on the sidelines. This representation of collectivity was framed as national—it included the Thai flag, the King's Anthem, and a speech by a Member of Parliament who embodied the nation's authorities.

In his speech, the politician encouraged the ethnic minority population to "enter society." To an audience familiar with the anthropological literature on upland societies in Southeast Asia, this may sound like a suggestion informed by Leach (1954), that Mien and Hmong can "become Thai" in the same way that Kachin could become Shan. But even if couched in terms of ethnicity as a role within a network of roles (Lehman 1967; Moerman 1965), the notion that such dynamics are about ethnic frameworks misses an important and more local dimension. In terms of the mobilization of people's labor, resources, and attentions, the dynamics of the fun fair and other activities that I describe below are shifting the primary site of local (Mien) agency from households to villages at the same time that they redefine the forms action takes.

In the following section, I provide an ethnographic background to contemporary cultural dynamics in upland ethnic minority areas. The description and analysis are largely based on my work with Mien. As there is very limited material available for comparisons, I can no more than suggest that my analysis of current trends applies more generally to the upland regions of northern Thailand. There are three components to this discussion. The first is the circumscribed resonance of sanuk, the second is the place of upland peoples in the Thai public sphere, and the third is the presence of hegemonic national frameworks in everyday life in remote areas. After this background discussion, I describe the fun fair. My focus is primarily on ambiguous agency, how the fair's sports and culture reveal displacements regarding who is involved, who acts, and who the event is about. My account of the event reveals the pervasiveness of the village as the subject of action.[5] In the subsequent section, I historicize this village focus with an account of the historically specific household centrality that preceded it. Then, I return to focus on the fun people are having and how this fun involves issues of gender, class, community, and state and minority relations. I suggest that an examination of issues concerning fun is of general ethnographic relevance. People engage in sports and fun fairs because these events are enjoyable. I intend the account of fun in the hills of Thailand to suggest a reassessment of what appear to be digressions from the seriousness of political life.

ethnographic background: fun, hill tribes, and the truth of TV

Huizinga (1950) argues that play and fun are irreducible to other aspects of human life and are irrepressible. Play and fun are not something else, such as disguised politics. Nor can play and fun be completely suppressed, even by the most oppressive government (Huizinga 1950:6, 211). My case concerning sanuk and a sports competition does not deny Huizinga's insights but focuses on the social and historical specificity of particular manifestations of fun and play. In the ethnography of Thailand, sanuk has a recognized place, but, similar to the Balinese cockfight, the focus on sanuk has primarily been framed as national or pertaining to the peasantry.[6] Phillips describes it as one of the components of "Thai peasant personality":

> In the most general terms, the people of Bang Chan are like almost all ethnic Thai peasants (excepting on some counts Thai Moslems and some of the economically disenfranchised people of the Northeast) in that they have a keen sense of membership in the nation-state with a deep loyalty to the Crown, speak the Thai language, are

> Theravada Buddhists, are outwardly highly deferential to the authority of the Central government, and have a conception of the good life that stresses fun, physical comfort and security. [1965:16]

In some of the tourist literature on Thailand, references to sanuk as a feature of Thai life are common and contribute to a construction of Thailand as a pleasure space.[7] In some cases, sanuk implies not just fun but something "extremely fun." According to a recent website description of Songkran, the Thai New Year: "The most amazingly wild, wet and *sanook* [their spelling] of all Thailand's festivals in Songkran, which starts on April 13 every year and lasts for three wild, wet, and extremely fun days" (Nation Multimedia 2000). In a somewhat more serious tone, a publication from the Thai Government's National Identity Board (Prime Minister's Office 1991) similarly proclaims that being Thai equals having fun. The following is from Mulder's summary of this account: "Fun and natural gregariousness combine in the famed penchant for sanuk: the rural Thais are pleasure seeking. They like to go on a trip, to drink moonshine, to sing and court, to watch performances, and to gamble. Spectacular are the skyrocket festivals, kickball games, kite flying, and Thai boxing" (Mulder 1997:294). Beyond declaring that Thai are a happy people, such portrayals for a foreign audience may not say much. But there are indications that such accounts systemically miss some important dimensions of the social reality of sanuk in Thailand. Suntaree Komin, a Thai psychologist, suggests that sanuk indexes "defense mechanisms to maintain the 'cosmetic' cover of mutual respect and acceptance while leaving the ego untouched" (Komin 1985:185). Her analysis differs from the notion that sanuk is somehow its own reward (Phillips 1965:56) and a natural component of a Thai personality. Komin's survey on Thai values indicates that people's emphasis on sanuk is inversely related to their income (1991:193), but her work does not provide much discussion of the issue. It is primarily in the work of Phillips (1965) and Cohen (1996) that there are glimpses of how sanuk relates to social dynamics and issues of agency.

Phillips states that "the importance of *sanug* [his spelling] is that it provides the villagers with a standard of value, a measure of how much they wish to commit themselves to a particular activity" (1965:59). His discussion (1965:59–61) includes examples of how peasants would abandon a work project or quit a job on the grounds that these were not sanuk. In the context of subsequent literature on everyday forms of peasant resistance to authority (Scott 1985, 1990), it is possible to interpret ideas of fun in this context as providing a local and class-based standard for how far people are willing to go to serve someone else's purpose. This relational qualification, pointing to situations of inequality, is what separates my understanding from that of Phillips. Some support for my interpretation comes from the current "location" of sanuk in the discourses and practices of Thai women serving as the temporary partners of Western men.[8] According to Cohen's findings, if things are not sanuk, the women will leave (1996:295). These applications of sanuk do not index agency, as neither peasants nor women sex-workers have had any significant power to influence the shape of their social reality.[9] At best, each setting shows how people have used notions of sanuk in the context of minimizing the disadvantage of their subservient situation. These Thai locations of sanuk do not explain the fun fair among the ethnic minority population in northern Thailand, but they do contribute to an appreciation of the situatedness of such notions. Far from being a value that somehow characterizes life in Thailand, sanuk appears primarily as a component of situations of inequality. This reading affirms the rather cryptic statistical point of Komin's (1991) value survey, that the emphasis on sanuk among her respondents is inversely related to their incomes.

Since the 1960s, *chao khao* (hill tribes) in northern Thailand, roughly half a million people, have been incorporated into various structures of the modernizing nation-state.[10] Many of the uplanders grew opium at the time, and Thai authorities acting under international pressure to suppress poppy cultivation were responsible for some of the efforts to incorporate the hill tribes into the nation-state. Other aspects of integration measures concern "state simplifications" (Scott 1998:3–7) or, more directly, various efforts to suppress the considerable autonomy that uplanders had enjoyed regarding their own culture and livelihood. Swidden cultivation was outlawed, as was poppy growing and settlement migration. Instead, uplanders were to become like the ideal Thai lowlanders—to live in permanent settlements within administrative networks and grow rice or other crops in permanent fields.[11] Strands of the official discourse on chao khao reveal the normalizing gaze of the nation-state, for instance, the ways in which it defines uplanders' practices of difference as fundamentally unacceptable (see Jonsson 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b). It is a general view in lowland Thai society that if the hill tribes "entered society" *(khao sangkhom)* they would no longer engage in swidden cultivation, grow opium, and have dubious or subversive political leanings. From the official perspective, many aspects of uplander livelihoods and cultural autonomy have been viewed as "inappropriate to the present socioeconomic and political situation of the country" (Tribal Research Institute 1995:2). The way this is phrased, the issue is a matter of the hill tribes' ignorance and their attachment to customs, and the problem can be alleviated only to the extent that upland populations "become Thai."

There were extensive attacks by Thai military units on uplanders from the late 1960s through the 1970s. Hmong in particular were singled out for these attacks because, in the official view, Hmong were particularly subversive. While there was no particular basis for this view of Hmong, authorities acted with conviction on their fears (Smalley 1994). Hmong are generally called *Meo* in Thailand, which is a Thaization of the Chinese term *Miao* (see Diamond 1995). During the militarized era that framed systemic attacks on uplanders—the late 1960s to the early 1980s—the Hmong were known as Red Meo (Meo Daeng), which implied subversive (communist) political leanings. As an indication of Thai views of highlanders, the term *Meo* is often used as interchangeable with *chao khao*. Both terms connote various degrees of unruliness.

Among the first things I learned when I started fieldwork in October 1992 was that five villages in the subdistrict had been declared illegal settlements in terms of a new official masterplan on the environment, and the people had been told to leave the area.[12] Both local villagers and officials from the government's Tribal Research Institute told me that the villagers had agreed to relocate, but they were still waiting for word on where they could resettle. The discursive framework of this masterplan illustrates how current notions of national space leave no areas outside the state's reach. The "problem" villages were defined as illegal because they were not located near a hard-surface road, and they did not have a state school or an agricultural project. Only by connections to national space via a road, a school or other official presence, or an agricultural or other project could villages remain in place.

The marginality of upland populations has been actively brought about with laws about land use and citizenship—making swidden farming illegal and making it difficult for ethnically non-Thai uplanders to acquire the citizenship papers necessary to own land (Ganjanapan 1997). In the area where I worked, people had in general abandoned swidden farming by about 1970 and were growing corn, cotton, and ginger in permanent fields and gardens for which they had usufruct papers.[13] During my fieldwork, I went with about 30 villagers to a meeting held by the Forestry Department

for Phayao Province in the district center of Pong, where the topic was use of forest land. Most of the meeting was taken up with concerns of lowland villagers about the classification of fields. Uplanders, who were both vocal and articulate about their need for permanent claims to land, met with outright dismissal.[14]

State hegemony is in certain non-negotiable ways a fundamental feature of the social landscape of upland populations and, to the extent that it is not visible, the assumed disconnection from the state serves as grounds for the erasure of settlements.[15] Winichakul (1994) shows how notions of a mapped, bounded territory as Thailand have served to align ideas of nation and state in a discourse and practice of border security that both reflects and constructs ideas of Thai-ness. But the resonance of state hegemony in the social life of minority populations cannot necessarily be read from official-level discourse. It is an ethnographic as much as an analytical question as to how much this emphasis on Thai-ness effects social and cultural dynamics in areas that are ethnically, socially, and geographically marginal to the Thai nation-state.

One night, like so many others during my fieldwork, I sat with a Mien grandmother and other household members drinking tea, chatting, and watching TV. Just prior to the evening news, the channel we were watching aired a nightly program with the news of the Thai royal family.[16] One of the events broadcast on the program that night was a donation by a group of middle-aged Ladies *(Khun Ying)* to a royal charity. The TV showed five women deferentially on the floor, one of them handing a tray containing a check in an envelope to the Princess Mother, who sat on a chair; then, the women paid their respects to the Princess Mother with a *wai,* placing the palms of both hands together at the forehead level. As we watched this, the Mien grandmother laughed and commented between fits of laughter, *"phi' mkong (piqv mngorngv),"* or "they are cleaving their heads."[17]

Only grandmother laughed. The other members of the household are conversant and entangled in Thai realities to the point of finding glimpses of Bangkok high-society behavior neither surprising nor laughable. Making a case about Mien subversion of Thai TV and society more generally would, in this context, require assuming that grandmother somehow embodied Mien culture. This is plausible and would follow the anthropological practice of reliance on a master informant to provide a window on a culture. Grandmother's laughter was a Mien reaction to the Thai world. Her response was grounded in a cultural separation from the nation-state that is increasingly uncommon and impossible as schools, TV, meetings, and other forms of national integration drill marginal populations in the symbolic referents of nationhood—in this case, language, religion, flag, the royal family, and various interaction patterns. That grandmother laughed alone is not a reason to dismiss her reaction. There is not a shared Mien view of the Thai state, and emphasizing grandmother's lone laughter is partly to suggest that to some extent the majority of Mien in this area take the nation-state's framework for granted.

Mien and other upland people are not simply recipients of the nation-state's televised theater; they take part in it to the point of literally expecting to see themselves in it. Another night, I waited with household members in a Mien household in Phachangnoi to see ourselves on the royalty news program. That morning, hundreds of villagers from all over Phachangnoi had arrived in various vehicles at the village of Pangphrik, where a princess was scheduled to visit. There is a school in Pangphrik that is run by the Border Patrol Police (BPP), the remains of a "hearts and minds" effort to win the allegiance of upland peoples to the Thai nation-state. The princess was visiting to open a library at the school. We waited for well over two hours for her arrival, and meanwhile schoolteachers and border guards drilled schoolchildren in forming neat

lines and in the appropriate gestures for handing Her Highness gifts from the school. At about 10:30 a.m., the helicopter landed somewhere nearby, and a little before 11:00 a.m. the princess and her entourage arrived in a four wheel drive vehicle on the path leading to the school. Schoolteachers and other government officials formed neat lines on both sides of the path from the highway. The visitors proceeded to the school and were out of view for most of the time, but eventually the princess made a round and accepted well-wishes and gifts. As she left, the neat lines of teachers, students, BPP, and villagers dissolved, and we went home hoping to see ourselves on TV.

The TV feature that night was a disappointment to the people I viewed it with, as we never appeared on the screen. It showed the princess in the company of BPP officials visiting a fishpond and opening the library at the school. Apparently, the camera did not pan the crowd. One possible interpretation of this nightly program about royalty is that it is a ritual rendering of national well-being as seen through the acts of members of the royal family. According to this interpretation, the masses at home in front of their TV screens are the most important audience, far more significant than the audience that gathered at the school on the day of the event. This reading suggests that the relevant social reality is that of the mediascape (Appadurai 1996). It also suggests that this royal visit was not about the upland minorities, but about the BPP and their school. I learned from some villagers in the area that with the successful suppression of insurgency, the BPP were in danger of losing their position both in this area and more generally.[18] Thus, it was important for them to manifest their contribution to national well-being as demonstrated by their efforts to open a library at the school, which became real through the TV feature about the royal visit. The upland minorities as students of the school in Pangphrik are the reason for the continued presence of the BPP, but it was never mentioned in the feature that this was a minority area. This news of royalty was about the nation, and who was on the sidelines was clearly beside the point.

From the Mien and other villagers who attended the event and stood on the sidelines, I heard no negative commentary, only a few statements about the good connections that the BPP must have had to draw official attention to their school. If these two TV events are indicative of a national mediascape, they suggest the continued alignment of royalty with nation and national well-being, narrated through stories about how members of the royal family spend their days. These nightly features illustrate how collective visions that take the Thai nation-state as their framework are projected through narratives that define social reality while reporting on it. In the few cases in which the nightly news of royalty contains material concerning state/minority relations, these appear in terms of an official perspective and show upland people as the grateful recipients of agricultural aid from a royal project, with a brief commentary on their bright future.[19]

Uplanders have no bargaining power with the state when it comes to access to land. They are at the mercy of official definitions, and in that sense the TV portrayal is true—uplanders exist to the extent they are the recipients of favors through official channels. This predicament helps to explain why the minority peoples in Phachangnoi did not shun the royal visit to the BPP. They participated, partly in the hope of becoming visible, and spoke with some regret of the BPP's greater access to official recognition. To a degree, the uplanders have no option but to attempt to place themselves within the nation. This is my own reading of Mien engagements with these events (the royal encounters and uplanders' participation in the meeting on forest land, which I discussed earlier). In arriving at this interpretation, I draw on some of the

commentary I heard on the way home from the meeting with the Forestry Department. People were angry and frustrated over the outcome of the meeting, commenting that the officials had no interest in helping them while paying much attention to the lowland Thai farmers who did not even live within the forest and had very little to do with forest land.[20]

This apparent marginalization describes important features of the immediate reality of the nation-state with which Mien and other uplanders are faced. Laws regarding land-use leave them with tenuous claims to marginal land. Meanwhile, displays of national significance on the royalty news, at meetings, and in the dynamics of political position reinforce this marginalization. TV presents various dimensions of hierarchy and inequality as matters of fact to be celebrated. In this national space, upland populations are never more than marginal. I contend that this marginal position is fundamental to an understanding of the situatedness of the fun they offered and engaged in at their fair. As I will argue below, these dynamics are in part about ethnic minorities placing themselves within the nation. But it is equally important to pay attention to how the emphasis on Thai fun is contributing to a restructuring of Mien social relations. The dynamics are cultural as well as political and are central to a restructuring of the focus of Mien social life from households to villages.

ethnic fun

In the middle of Mien New Year festivities, in late January 1993 at the grounds of the school in Pangkha, there was a two-day event held that, to some extent, constituted a subdistrict level celebration of minority identity (see Jonsson 2000b). A banner was strung between bamboo poles on either side of the highway that runs through the village, declaring in Thai to anyone passing through:

> SANUK AGAIN, PHULANGKA FUN-FAIR 36 (2536 Buddhist Era [1993]), JANUARY 19–20. EVENINGS. DISCO, DANCE WITH BEAUTIFUL YAO AND HMONG GIRLS. TWO EXCITING MOVIES PER NIGHT. SHOWS BY YAO AND HMONG SCHOOLKIDS.

Treating this event as a ritual presentation of community, I want to extract some aspects of the contemporary situation of Mien as an ethnic minority in Thailand. To begin, the banner implies that "society" arrives on the highway. If Mien and other minority populations partake of Thai society through a national mediascape, the banner suggests that the reverse flow occurs through a rural funscape of festivals with movies, pretty dancing girls, and displays of local culture. Some of these events are clearly aimed at a male culture of drinking and flirtation (Fordham 1995, 1998), while some cater to a consumption of local culture in the countryside (O'Connor 1989). The entire event is about fun, and as such it resonates neither with the local character of each household's offerings to its ancestor spirits to renew their relationship for another year, nor with the sometimes violent but always non-negotiably Thai imposition of national structures in these minority areas. While the banner clearly declares minority ethnic identity, both with the beautiful girls as dance partners and with the schoolchildren's displays, it is noteworthy that while the statement employs the common and official label *Yao* for Mien, it does not use the term *Meo* for Hmong. This divergence in ethnic labels is a part of a common trend in northern Thailand, and concerns, at least partly, a dissociation of Hmong people (and highlanders in general) from the subversive connotations of Meo Daeng (Red Meo) and ethnic minorities collectively from the Otherness of chao khao (hill tribes).

The two-day fair provided various manifestations of a national order of things. It started with a parade to the school grounds by groups of schoolchildren in sports outfits. Each group carried a banner indicating the village-school they represented and, in cases where a school had several teams, also a number stating their division. The parade was lead by a marching band of schoolchildren (in elaborate Hmong clothes) and schoolteachers (wearing jogging suits or their official government uniforms). The Mien headmaster of the Pangkha school was an exception to this trend of extralocal dress for teachers in that he wore an embroidered Mien jacket.[21] Bringing up the rear of the parade were about two dozen adult villagers, all Mien, wearing Mien clothes. As the procession entered the field and formed lines in front of the roofed structure where the event's special guest was seated (Mr. Witthaya Srijan, a Democracy Party MP [Member of Parliament] for Phayao Province), a marching band of schoolchildren performed. Then teachers from the Pangkha school took positions in front of the lines of paraders and, facing the MP under the roofed structure with a Thai flag hoisted on top, led the participants in a song honoring the Thai King. The paraders were then replaced by a group of about thirty schoolchildren in red T-shirts (boys wearing shorts and girls wearing embroidered Mien women's pants), who performed a Mien dance to the music of a Mien band.[22] After this dance, the MP opened the event with a speech, in which he told people not to destroy the forest with slash and burn farming. Most of his speech concerned the importance of democracy and participation in the country's development, with all the customary implications about the upland ethnic minorities "entering society."

In many ways, the opening events of this two-day fair constitute a ritualized act of allegiance to the modern nation-state. Through the banner invitation and the range of events, the fair defines ethnic minority culture and identity as presentable and inside national society. The parade and the lineup of ethnic participants display orderliness and hierarchy. This production of order is framed as Thai in that it takes place under the national flag and in conjunction with the singing of the King's Anthem. The link to national society is strengthened by the presence of the national level politician, who acts his part by giving an edifying speech about a progressive national society that is democratic. He also charts some of the contours of membership in the national society with his discussion of how swidden farming is destructive of the nation's forests, all of which serves to render chao khao as antithetical to the nation. When he finished, the *kamnan* (subdistrict headman) placed a red dyed egg on a string around his neck as a Mien form of blessing and well-wishes.

The presence of the politician is a sign of the success of people in this minority area in linking themselves to the nation. They are in and of national space not only through use of the Thai flag and the King's Anthem. The sanuk events cater to members of the nation who would otherwise pass through on the highway and barely notice the village. Uplanders' presentable culture takes the forms of ethnic dress and dance—precisely what modern Thai expect from tradition, community, and culture. The visiting politician embodies and represents the nation's authorities. But more importantly, his presence and his speech indicate official attention to the inhabitants of the subdistrict. The Mien and Hmong in Phachangnoi subdistrict conveyed themselves as good Thai citizens, albeit ethnic minorities, by presenting themselves as orderly, nationalist, presentable to a generalized Thai audience, and fun to visit. This self-fashioning is somewhat analogous to the recent successful Karen presentation of themselves as good Thai who are Buddhist and concerned with the environment (Hayami 1997). In both cases, the issue concerns control over representations that are entangled in Thai stereotypes of disorderly and destructive chao khao.

But the collective and ethnic dimension of self-fashioning at the fair is only one dimension of this event. It is equally important to pay attention to what agendas it conveys, whose agency it brings out, and what alternative social visions it compromises or challenges. Most of the daytime activities were taken up with sports competitions, and during the first evening there were displays of song and dance by both schoolchildren and older villagers. The generic, Western sports (100 meter races and volleyball) do not sit easily with notions of ethnic culture, nor do the dance shows by the schoolchildren, in which they performed a repertoire of the dances Thai schoolchildren learn as a part of their national education. If these events are self-fashionings, they concern the people in this subdistrict as a kind of Thai, and this reading of the event resonates with the explicit allegiance to Thailand during the opening ceremony of the fair. But the schoolchildren's races and dances were also contests, with awards given to the winners in each category. The awards for both events drew on social distinctions between the contestants and the people who presented the prizes. Schoolteachers asked the politician, the kamnan, and me (the foreign anthropologist) to award the medals at the daytime races. At the evening dances, after the politician had left, I, the headman, and schoolteachers presented the awards.

Both the dances and the races separated the contestants by age and thus took on the grades of the school system as a model for social categorizations. In the dance contests, this ranking had an evolutionary dimension. The youngest children performed a classical Thai dance and were dressed in the stereotypical outfits of pre-20th century Thai society commonly found on TV programs. The dances and the accompanying tunes (played on a tape player) became progressively more modern as the performers' ages increased, and the contest culminated in seventh graders lip-synching to a Thai pop song, dressed in sexy outfits like those of modern pop stars.

In bringing together the inhabitants of the subdistrict, the fair conveys a social statement outward (regarding the ethnic minorities as in and of the Thai nation) and inward (regarding the subdistrict as a social entity). There are important divisions among those who fashion the fair, those who act it out, and those whom it is about. As an event, the fair manifests the ability of schoolteachers to objectify particular visions of society and to mobilize people as performers and audience. In order to compete in the dances and races, the children had to belong to a school, and this disqualifies a sizable segment of the Phachangnoi population. There are seven registered villages in Phachangnoi and various unregistered settlements that range from a couple to about twenty households. Five of the seven registered villages have a school, and of these Pangkha has the central school (the other schools are its branches). A village with a school is a product of the modern nation-state, but in terms of who could compete at the fair, attending a school became a criterion for social membership. Literally, people who do not belong to a village with a school cannot compete and are thus not part of the society the fair celebrates. In this capacity, the fair reinforces the nation-state's definition of society and localizes it through contests revolving around schoolchildren.

Although they did not become much of a presence in rural areas until about 1960 after concerted efforts toward "national development" (Chaloemtiarana 1979; Missingham 1997), schools have served as a tool of national integration in Thailand since around the turn of the 20th century (see Keyes 1987, 1991a; Vella 1978; Wyatt 1975). The role of schools in instilling national imaginaries (Mulder 1997) has been described as a process of "reshaping local worlds" (Keyes 1991b). Vaddhanaputhi (1991) has illustrated that much of what schools instill in students in the northern countryside of Thailand is a firm sense of their lowly place in a national hierarchy.

These studies reveal important aspects of what schools "do" in the countryside and apply equally to ethnic minority areas. The emphasis on re-education is fundamental to the official effort because of the official position that ethnic minority cultures are an impediment to national integration, progress, and sensible farming practices. But it would be an analytical shortcut to say that populations such as the Mien and Hmong in Phachangnoi where I worked have "become Thai" because of schools. This would imply that they were Mien and Hmong before, as if the ethnic reference provided a description of social dynamics in this "before" period. References to official integration policies, national imaginaries, and the placement of rural villagers in a national hierarchy provide only a partial understanding of the restructuring that schools contribute to in upland areas. A fuller sense of this process requires a grounding in the social and ritual dynamics through which upland peoples have produced particular localities and subjects of action.

the acting house

In contrast to the current prominence of schools and villages in upland social life, Mien social dynamics in the period immediately prior to national integration revolved around households as units of farming and rituals. Households asserted themselves socially through offerings to spirits followed by feasts for members of other households. Mien held weddings that established new household units, feasting large groups of people for up to three days. They asserted themselves through the ongoing migration, fragmentation, and consolidation of households and settlements. If a household did not have the means to conduct offerings and feasts, it did not count socially, though it could continue farming outside the framework of village life. While villages were not frameworks for concerted social action, beyond the voluntary annual offerings to a village guardian spirit, village membership brought varying levels of pressure on output in farming, feasting, and rituals (Jonsson 1998a, 1999; Kandre 1967, 1991; Miles 1974, 1990).

Making a case about Thailand's Yao (Mien), Miles (1972) describes social life in Phulangka as characterized by ongoing competition among households over available laborers in the settlement. I have argued elsewhere that these dynamics drew on historically specific inflationary pressures on farming and rituals that went along with a shift from chief and follower dynamics to a competition for household prominence in the context of uneven connections to lowland administration and a trade monopoly (Jonsson 1999, in press b). Miles offers the example of one Phulangka household with 57 members ("average" households had 6–8 members) in order to illustrate the extreme outcome of the dynamics he describes, but he does not mention how this case was entangled with lowland administration or the Opium Monopoly.[23] It turns out that 20 years prior to Miles's research, this large household contained 120 people. The household head and his father had titles given to them by lowland authorities, and they were the official connection between licensed farmers and traders for extensive opium production in a limited area. The area was made a subdistrict within the national administration in the 1940s.

In line with anthropological conventions of the time, Miles generalized about Yao society from the dynamics he observed in Phulangka. Kandre (1967), whose research two years earlier took place in another Mien village in the same province, also made a case for Mien (Yao) society based on his observations. Kandre's generalizations from Phale village indicate a very different shape to Mien society. In his work, he suggests that households have an inherent tendency to fragment into small units. This finding is the opposite of the expansionist tendencies Miles illustrated with the

Phulangka case. Residents of Phale were not involved in the Opium Monopoly, so trade relations with the outside were more limited but more evenly distributed than in Phulangka. Prior to the founding of both settlements, chiefs had considerable control over people, articulating their prominence through unique ritual links, status displays, and relations with lowland rulers.

It was not that agents of national integration after 1970 encountered an area that had previously been separate from the state. Rather, in spite of long-standing connections to agents of the state, upland social dynamics had produced a household centrality that gave anthropologists the impression that here was a traditional world that the state was about to penetrate from the outside. I suggest that various engagements with the state had for a considerable time influenced the internal workings of Mien and other upland societies and further that adaptations to the forested highlands were motivated statements about relations with the state (Jonsson 1998b, 2000a). The household centrality so apparent in ethnographic accounts of Thailand's uplanders during the 1960s and early 1970s was not a marker of traditional social organization of particular ethnic groups. More traditional, in the sense that it came first, was the chiefly control of multiethnic social life, which compromised the agency of households. Household centrality was brought about by uplanders' common focus on agency produced through farming and rituals. This focus came to the forefront of upland social dynamics only when warfare became less prominent and lowland states no longer availed the tributary links that chiefs drew on to ground their prominence in areas beyond the state's effective reach (Jonsson 1997, 1999, in press b).

Mien society has never been a collective representation. Mien social formations have expressed the social visions of particular sets of actors, such as individual householders, multi-village chiefs, and lately those who assume the village is the subject of action. Mien people's ability to impose specific designs on social life around them has varied by patterns in regional structurations and local histories, both of which involve strands of local and extralocal cultural and political economic systems. Any manifestation of Mien society—be it through chiefs, householders, or schools and villages—has always drawn on motivated action and uneven abilities to ground particular articulations of the social universe in local life. As such, most versions of Mien society have downplayed a range of alternatives through the mobilization of labor, resources, and attentions to particular channels and particular subjects of action.

merit and more fun

Mien society does not respond collectively to Thailand's national integration. Specific actors, primarily those taking on a school or a village as the subject of action, have achieved prominence because of the character of uplanders' contemporary entanglements with the state. These entanglements concern agricultural production, hegemonic portrayals of uplanders' culture, and the current predominant ways of mobilizing people's labor, resources, and attentions. Household agency has been undermined by laws concerning land use and settlement stability. It has been further decentered with the widespread notion that uplanders' traditional cultural, agricultural, and social practices are antithetical to national well-being, which serves to predetermine any form of resistance as subversion. Meanwhile, through schools and sports, Mien and other uplanders have entered into a range of networks of the modern nation-state, where they compete along with other members of the national community. In this way, schools and sports, like Buddhist temples within lowland Thai society, set up commitments to exchanges with comparable social units, thus drawing communities into a particular hierarchically ordered universe of culture, society, and politics.

These social commitments imply financial contributions that may be beyond the means of villagers. As a result of this predicament, powerful outsiders have the opportunity to impress their generosity on local communities, which is a further analogue with the role of Buddhist temples in linking villages to larger worlds. During my research in Pangkha, the school received a major gift of sports equipment from the politician who delivered the opening speech at the fair. A native of the nearby town of Chiangkham, he was actively courting votes in this area. Such displays of generosity are common just prior to election time, and outside the election context other ways of acquiring the necessary funds to maintain social membership are more prevalent. One of my visits with Pangkha people to a Mien village in the next province was expressly to support the people there. The village we visited held a one-evening fair to raise funds for their sports team. This was the ninth consecutive year of their fair, and it consisted largely of selling food and drinks. These were served mainly by young women, accompanied by Thai pop music from a cassette-player. The music and the women were an enticement to young men (with disposable income) to drink, flirt, and spend their money. In her account of the village scout movement, Bowie (1997:173–78) describes dance-girls for hire as a new feature of village fund-raising in the northern Thai lowlands during the 1970s. At that time, the dance-girls were nonlocal young women brought in whenever fairs were held. The increasingly local recruitment of women dancers is instructive concerning changes in the place of villages within the nation. Increasingly, local villagers mobilize to generate the funds needed to maintain membership in the nation-state. As with the Balinese cockfight, villagers will occasionally break national laws in order to place themselves better within the nation.

Whether the social reference of contemporary cultural dynamics in these minority areas is the normative gaze of the nation-state or the more fun-driven quest of northern Thai male culture, the social outcome tends to reinforce the village as the relevant subject of action. Various engagements with the modern nation-state contribute to the replacement of the household with the village as the subject of action. My characterization of the shape of local social dynamics is equally evident in another event that occurred in Pangkha—an event that concerns neither schools nor fun but the relevance of the Buddhist calendar and, more importantly, the village's membership in the nation-state. In July 1993, I attended a village-wide meeting in the subdistrict meeting hall. At the meeting, the headmaster explained that the day was *wan khao phansa* (the day of entering the rains retreat, or Buddhist Lent) for the majority Buddhist population of Thailand. According to the headmaster, this was a very important day for merit making (something Buddhists do for an improved position in their next lifetime) but since we, the non-Buddhist villagers, did not have a temple, we could not make merit in the usual way. He read to us in Mien from a secondary school Thai textbook on Buddhism, and having thus edified us with the Four Noble Truths he came back to the issue of making merit.[24] He suggested that we "join hands" [he used the Thai term *ruam mu*] to beautify the village by cutting back the vegetation along the road. After the meeting, the headmaster went back to his office. Apparently the collective action he had proposed did not involve his own participation. I, however, borrowed a machete and joined in, partly to overhear villagers' reactions to the activity. To my surprise, there was no grumbling among the villagers during this compulsory beautification, but some were quite amused at my participation in this event. For the villagers, I think, the humor of the event lay in my presence (a Western academic, and thus in local terms a person of high status) at this low-status task of beautification. That is, the humor of my participation lay in its political awkwardness for the villagers.

In terms of the mobilization of labor and attentions, this case points in the same direction as do schools, sports, and village fairs, toward the disappearance of the household from public life and the prominence of the village. The shape of the emerging village is clearly Thai in that the headmaster's labor recruitment was in terms of the Buddhist calendar, a compensatory gesture of non-Buddhist villagers to the nation in the form of village beautification. The event conflated the national religion (it took place in observance of a Buddhist holiday) with a national discourse on development (beautification of the village), structuring the village population in a particular way. The headmaster of the local school became the master, and he turned the rest of the village population into recruited commoners. It is only in terms of a national framework of religion and development that this temporary stratification was brought about, and this conceptual and social leap hinges on a rendering of the minority village as both in and of the Thai nation-state. This beautification also assumes, like the village fairs, that national society and attentions arrive on the highway. The rhetoric of national membership places the headmaster of the local school in a privileged position, allowing him to impose a national framework of religion and orderliness on rather compliant villagers. Having activated national hierarchy and order, he retired to his office for the day.

The resonance of this national rhetoric through the headmaster draws on decades of the Thai state's suppression of uplanders' practices of cultural autonomy and on the imposition of various national standards regarding livelihood and social life. The Thai government has met any visible resistance to the imposition of these national categories with armed suppression and the forced relocation of people. This lingering threat of violent suppression and settlement erasure is of course a part of the headmaster's success. He never brought up such threats, but his rhetoric of beautiful and orderly villages draws on a national discourse that implies this alternative in cases of noncompliance.

One aspect of this production of the beautiful countryside is competition among villages for official recognition (demonstrated by visits by royalty and politicians) and the hope of appearance on national television. Kesmanee (1992) describes one aspect of these contemporary cultural dynamics in his account of a Hmong village in Nan Province that was nominated by local government officials for recognition as a model development and defense village. The villagers acted their part by entertaining the officials with a dance show by schoolchildren and a blessing ceremony for the benefit of the officials and on later visits by entertaining the officials with food and alcohol. Kesmanee criticizes the process as a "charade" and as something that is not going to bring villagers "real community development" (1992:170, 173). His material depicts the same social dynamics as the Mien case—the increasing ability of people who assume positions as village leaders to mobilize their constituents for displays of village-level action for the purposes of official recognition. One aspect of these efforts is uplanders' concern to prove that upland populations are not chao khao or Meo Daeng, and given Thai national anxieties about the upland ethnic minorities, such displays of orderliness are a prerequisite for benign official recognition.

The strands of local agency in this modern context are more complicated. Some of uplanders' ways of drawing benefits from official channels were quite the opposite of what I have described above. The most striking case was a Hmong threat to use violence against the state. This threat was never made openly. I unknowingly participated in some of the events that served to deflate this crisis and only gradually learned about this threat after it had been averted. The background to this crisis concerns marginalized farming. Most of the Hmong settlements are not registered villages and their

inhabitants do not have land-use papers. As people described the crisis to me, it was primarily the expansion of state structures that led to the threat of violence. In particular, the expansion of roads in this hinterland region was causing alarm among the Hmong. It was never clear to me whether the new roads were a problem because they destroyed farming areas (as some people said) or (as it seemed to me) because they exposed poppy fields to official control and suppression, which might lead to the imprisonment and possibly deportation of villagers. Whichever case it was, and it may have been a mixture of both, the target of violence was to be a settlement of workers for the Royal Highway Department, located in the vicinity of one Hmong village.

I was not able to verify the details of this threat. It was conveyed to a politician, who subsequently was able to bring agricultural assistance to the Hmong villagers in the form of seedlings, which arrived six months after the politician was told of the imminent crisis. This course of events can be characterized as a novel way of applying for outside assistance, one that hinges on the insurgent tendencies attributed to Thailand's Hmong (as Meo Daeng) that are increasingly a notion of the past. By activating this notion of Meo terror for their own benefit, Hmong farmers were not only making themselves credible but also a matter for immediate action. Given their marginal status and the general dismissal by authorities of demands by better-situated Mien, nothing less than a threat of violence would have led to the assistance they needed. But any public knowledge of the threat most likely would have led to military action against the Hmong, not only in this area but in Thailand more generally, and this need for discretion explains (I think) why I was ignorant of the significance of events in which I participated and which I narrate in the following paragraphs.

A few days after he gave the opening speech at the fun fair, the politician was again in Pangkha. He had been invited to go on a trip to the site of Phulangka village, the place where the Pangkha population lived before insurgency and Thai military action made life in the mountains impossible. On this trip, he was joined by his family, a few policemen serving as bodyguards, the headmaster, headman, a few other villagers, and me. On the way to Phulangka, we stopped in a Hmong village where their headman joined us. The politician's wife and daughter picked poppies and hemp plants from nearby fields to decorate their home.[25] Then we spent hours at a waterfall, chatting and drinking some of the liquor that was brought along. The subsequent hike to the old Phulangka site was the brainchild of the headmaster. His plan, as he described it to the politician and the rest of us, was to revive the area as a resort for Thai tourists. As he envisioned it, the increasingly marginalized farming economy would benefit from the jobs that the resort would create. Also, his plans included a statue of the initial leader of the Mien population, to assert the status of ethnic minorities in this area (Jonsson 1998a, 1999). On leaving the area in the early evening, we stopped again in the Hmong village where their headman entered a long and sometimes heated discussion with about a dozen villagers. These villagers then came along to our next destination, a hut the Pangkha headmaster owns that stands a few miles east of Phulangka. There the Hmong villagers barbecued dinner for the group, and the headmaster and others taking charge supplied us with liquor and encouraged us to have fun. Late at night, after several hours of drinking and socializing, the group dispersed to its various destinations.

On the way back to the village that night, one of the villagers told me of a trip he made to the city of Chiangmai when he was a teenager. This was during Douglas Miles's research with Mien, and the trip concerned Miles's work with the Tribal Research Center. As the then-teenager came to the city, the police inspected the bus he was on. According to him, the police told him that "he had no business in the city,"

and they instructed him to "go back to the hills where he belonged." A Thai member of Miles's research party was along on the bus ride, and she showed the police the official permits for the research. After the policemen saw the permits from the Ministry that the Tribal Research Center was under, they no longer attempted to turn the young man back. Instead they escorted the two to their destination in Chiangmai. This was during the late 1960s when authorities and the Thai military were combating what they saw as a "Red Meo revolt" *(kabot Meo Daeng).* At the time, anyone wearing hill tribe clothes was politically suspect.

This reminiscence to me 25 years later was maybe no more than a late night reflection on a past reign of terror. But it is possible that the threat of a Hmong act of sabotage, that I had no knowledge of at the time, brought out local memories of what it was like to live under conditions of warfare when authorities intimidated people for their upland minority identity. It is also possible that his recollection was a commentary on subsequent changes that concern the growing national acceptance of upland ethnic minorities and the fact that locals now appear to have connections to high places. I am inclined to think that the villager's reminiscence was most likely about the benefits of connections to high places. I make this assertion based on what I learned later about what transpired between the politician and his hosts on this day.

It was half a year after the politician's visit, during another day of extended drinking, that I gradually discovered what had transpired during these encounters. I was then on my way to the village after a break in the city. The Mien and Hmong headmen from the trip to Phulangka arrived in town where I was waiting for a car to the village, and they offered to give me a ride. We first went to the liquor store and then to another subdistrict that has a Mien headman. At this man's house, the headmen began to drink, making multiple toasts, many of them in Thai since the headmen did not all know each other's languages. The occasion for this celebration was the arrival of seedlings (agricultural assistance to the Hmong from the Thai politician), and it was only at this point that I learned about the threat that had been conveyed to the politician.

It is significant that this celebration was not for or with the population in the Hmong village, or between the Mien and Hmong villages, but between their two headmen and an ethnic minority man of equal official standing in another subdistrict. The Hmong and Mien headmen toasted each other repeatedly and exchanged Thai blessings. While their positions as headmen make them intermediaries between villagers and the state, their feast ignored the villagers. This spontaneous celebration drew on Thai administrative position and localized it in a way that created an alliance among headmen and separated them, in terms of feasting and the exchange of blessings, from ordinary village populations. Because feasts and the exchange of blessings have been central to the definition of the components of Mien (and Hmong) social life, I find the event indicative of a contemporary realignment of social relations in this minority area. In both the language used and the criterion for membership, this ad hoc Mien-Hmong alliance drew on the Thai state. But even if the celebration drew on and served as a measure of the headmen's competence in national frameworks, it was equally a marker of local agency.

Contemporary ways of having fun are increasingly placing upland villagers inside a national space. This tends to exclude most ordinary villagers except to the extent they serve as recruits for projects of beautification and other village displays such as in sports and in politicking with more powerful outsiders, and then in a subservient position. For young women, contemporary fun sometimes means that they serve as an enticement for extralocal young men to drink and flirt at a village festival. In light of the fun of extralocal sexuality in national space, it appears somewhat predictable that

when the headmen decided to go home after drinking for hours with their colleague, we stopped first at a bar with decorative blinking lights, a little outside Chiangkham town. The blinking lights are a common marker of restaurants that offer alcoholic drinks and the possibility of trade in sexual favors. While we drank beer, most of the men engaged in slight flirtation with the waitresses. Some of the men's conversation was about wives, lovers, and minor wives. In the uplands, polygamy, a marker of being well-off economically,[26] implied the wives sharing a bed with their husband. Sex, like farming and feasting, reinforced a household centrality. The increasingly common extralocal character of drinking and sex are indicative of how the household as the focus of upland social life has lost its prominence as people engage with structures of the modern nation-state.[27] Those not in a position to act on such extralocal realities are increasingly silenced socially, as more and more of social life takes place beyond the household.

conclusion

Contemporary cultural dynamics in upland areas display hegemonic processes that draw on two separate strands of social life. One concerns the national gaze on uplanders' traditional culture and social life as backward and threatening to national well-being, which motivates various displays of orderliness, compliance, and presentability by upland villagers as collectivities. The other, which conjures up such collective action, draws on changes in the avenues of social action. It concerns the ability of schoolteachers, headmen, and others to assume leadership positions and mobilize villagers' labor and attentions for sports, fun, development, beautification, and environmental protection.[28] These processes come together in the shift from households to villages as the main sites of social action, as people in minority areas place themselves within a national public sphere. This shift is a fundamental feature of contemporary cultural dynamics in upland areas. Upland cultural dynamics, revolving around the shape of the social landscape and debates concerning the units of social action (Kirsch 1973), have always been active and political. It is equally important to emphasize that the state's political dynamics have always assumed a cultural framework of kinds of people and relationships that its agents have mapped on the natural landscape, and this mapping motivated as much as constrained particular kinds of action (Jonsson in press c).

The Phulangka fun fair presented Mien and Hmong as within Thai society, without implying that the population had shed its previous ethnic identity and "become Thai." National integration does not currently require ethnic change,[29] yet the way people manifested their ethnic identity at the fair was very clearly in terms of modern Thai society. But this ethnic display was not a collective effort. The fair was a motivated statement about the people of this subdistrict that was fashioned by the schoolteachers. It employed the schoolchildren to act out this social rendering in races, volleyball, and dance. The fair involved the adult population of the subdistrict largely as an audience to these statements about the administrative collectivity. The event rendered people in "marginal" settlements, those that either were not officially recognized or did not have a school, as off the social map.

The play and sanuk at the fun fair and the other events that I have described are not mere distractions from the sometimes tense and often political reality of state and minority relations. Nor has it been my aim to translate play and fun into something else, such as politics. Rather, the central point of my ethnography is an insistence on play and fun as central to agency and to the production of social realities. It is beside the point that the medals awarded for the schoolchildren's races were made locally

by schoolteachers and thus of no value beyond the awards ceremony. What matters is that through their competitions, participants acted as if the subdistrict were the social universe, composed of a particular set of units that they represented. Sports turned a rather arbitrarily defined administrative unit into a reality of contest, spectatorship, and ceremony. In much the same way, Mien religion has been central to the construction of households and other entities and to shifting definitions of how they relate. Sports contests are not a reality separate from those of "religion" and "politics." In providing a framework for the definition of social units and for the mobilization of labor, resources, and attentions, the fun and play of races and ballgames are integral to the social reality that people experience and act on. Sports, village fairs, fund raising, and competitions for awards such as "model development village" make villages into a fundamental and unquestioned reality. Villages are equally real for their inhabitants, for fun-seeking visitors, and for politicians and royalty who distribute attention and favors on them unequally. For Mien and other minority populations in modern Thailand, "being" a village is somewhat like engaging in a game, the play comes with its own rules and rewards, and the consequences of not being able to play are determined by the game in question. From this perspective, politics, in all its apparent seriousness, is a form of play.[30]

Fun needs to be taken seriously. This does not involve taking the fun out of it. The issue for anthropology is quite the opposite and concerns a realization of the agentive aspect of identification in and through fun. Trobriand Cricket (Leach and Kildea 1975) is a lot of fun. The game is also intensely political. This is not only because it inverts the intended hegemony of colonial notions of play and propriety and turns it into a play of local cultural agendas. It is also political because men's play constructs "the village" as the acting subject. The film was made in a tense political climate, and the game was staged for the film crew during a period too unstable for the regular play of the game. The purpose of the game-for-film was to reach an international audience that would support the islanders' political cause. None of this detracts from the fun of the game, but highlights the centrality of play and fun in the serious (local, national, and international) politics of everyday life. In a similarly tense political climate in 1985, the "First Annual Trobriand Yam Festival" was held in Port Moresby. Battaglia's (1995) account and analysis of this event brings out multiple twists on agency and logics as "the quest for identity in the cultural imaginary proceeded locally and nationally in tandem but at cross purposes, led on by the modest grass roots image of the yam" (1995:92).

It may well be that for the people of Bang Chan, "no activity is really worth doing unless it has the potentiality for fun" (Phillips 1965:61). I do not question the truth of this statement, but have tried to specify the reality of fun in particular settings. Addressing the fun of a fair in an ethnic minority area, I do not question that people may be oriented toward fun. A more interesting set of questions emerges once the issue is turned toward asking who has fun and how, and what social realities are involved. The fun of the fair and related events concerned issues of class, gender, ethnicity, administrative recognition, official attentions, sexuality, and threats of violence. While fun and play may be irreducible and irrepressible and thus best left as such, ethnography can benefit from paying attention to how agency, identity, and social reality are entangled in the serious play and fun of everyday life.

notes

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1. Mien are one of many ethnolinguistic groups known collectively as Yao. *Yao* is the official term in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, and draws on an Imperial Chinese term from about the 12th century (see Cushman 1970; Jonsson 2000a).

2. My reading of Geertz's case is influenced by Kirsch's (1969) analysis of the argument that Thailand is a "loosely structured society."

3. Strictly speaking, all settlement in the highlands (above 1,800 feet) requires special permission. Shifting cultivation is against national law, and since the 1960s many upland settlements have been evicted by force for this reason. Because less than half of upland ethnic minorities hold citizenship, they have even less ability to contest such evictions. As of July 2000, evictions were still being carried out, and in at least one case a village was burned down.

4. The Mien population in the area where I worked is known to anthropology through Douglas Miles's research from 1966–68 (see Miles 1972, 1973a, 1973b, 1974, 1990. Other ethnography on Thailand's Mien includes Hanks et al. 1965; Hubert 1985; Kacha-Ananda 1997; Kandre 1967; and Yoshino 1995). Miles's fieldwork in Phulangka village came to an end in February 1968, during a war between the Thai military and units of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and assumed CPT sympathizers. For the purposes of this article, what matters about the Phulangka case is that the social, cultural, and agricultural framework Miles describes collapsed in the late 1960s as this highland area was declared a free-fire zone and the villagers took shelter in the lowlands. The Phulangka population lived for two years in temporary shelters in the lowlands and was attacked at least once by a Thai army unit that burned down their shelters. Then they settled at a new village site adjacent to lowland areas, and there they still live, in a village called Pangkha that lies several miles away from their former settlement on Phulangka Mountain.

Pangkha became the administrative center of Phachangnoi subdistrict. The village has a school, a post office, three sundry stores, a noodle shop, and a subdistrict meeting hall. In 1994, it was still the only village in the subdistrict that had electricity. Several households own rice cookers, refrigerators, and TV sets. Villagers grow primarily cash crops, such as ginger, cotton, and corn, and buy their rice from the town of Chiangkham. Villagers have usufruct papers to their plots, which they have used for over twenty years. These plots require herbicide, fertilizer, and tractor ploughing to sustain yields. The village lies on both sides of a hard surface road, and has the general appearance of a rather poor lowland Thai village in terms of housing styles, official buildings, stores, TV antennas, and people's dress.

5. My notion of subjects of action comes from Rousseau's (1995) discussion of the "trans-individual subject" and from Gearing's (1958, 1962) account of 18th-century Cherokee politics in terms of "structural poses." In Rousseau's terms, "subject" refers to "the entity which engages in an activity" (1995:290). He suggests that individuals be viewed not as "organized totalities, but the locus of various structures, which are trans-individual" (1995:298). Any social action involves trans-individual subjects, and this discussion is helpful for highlighting the kinds of shifts that have occurred in Mien social action and organization over time. Gearing's case proposes that "the social structure of a human community is not a single set of roles and organized groups, but is rather a series of several sets of roles and groups which appear and disappear according to the tasks at hand" (1958:1148). He outlines four structural poses that characterized Cherokee social life, the different structurings implied in householding, lineage matters, warfare, and ceremonials and agriculture (1962:13–29). Rousseau's and Gearing's discussions contribute to an ethnographic specification of how particular activities contribute to the making of collectivities, but neither addresses the kinds of politicking involved in (ambiguous) agency.

6. This discussion of sanuk draws in part on my engagement with the writings of A. Thomas Kirsch (Jonsson in press a).

7. A recent and thorough overview of brochures, guide books, and other literature that conveys Thailand to foreign tourists (Bishop and Robinson 1998:60–91) yields no mention of sanuk, however.

8. This is not to say that prostitutes are the only Thai to speak of sanuk, only to stress that in the recent social science literature, this is where the notion shows up. Given the previous grounding in social science literature on the peasantry, this move is significant. But sanuk may be a significant notion among any marginalized population in modern Thailand, and the location of sanuk among a particular population may primarily index the gaze of foreign social scientists.

9. Askew (1999) makes the case that Thai prostitutes acquire agency through their dealings with foreign men. Given his definition, one can also talk about the agency of peasants, their "capacities to originate, shape, and improvise strategies in their life-courses and day-to-day encounters in order to gain desired and meaningful outcomes" (Askew 1999:110).

10. Shifting cultivation is also known as swiddening and "slash and burn." The most common English term for upland ethnic minorities is *hill tribes,* while in Thai the standard term is *chao khao* (mountain people).

11. For discussions by foreign anthropologists who advised the Thai government, see Geddes 1967 and Manndorff 1967.

12. This masterplan was introduced to Mien villagers with a slick video production that the coordinator of one of two rival umbrella organizations for rural development nongovernmental organizations (NGO) in northern Thailand brought to Pangkha. When villagers questioned him on the plan and criticized its construction of reality (specifically its classification of villages and land use that justified the planned erasure of several settlements), he responded by stating that all he was asking was that villagers cooperate with the government in protecting the environment. When this did not silence the villagers' criticisms, the man responded by asking them how well they really knew the situation. Could they, say, give the accurate number of Mien people and Mien settlements in Thailand? This gave him some control of the discussion and is instructive about strands of governmentality in this area (though the man is ostensibly working with and for NGOs). The "accurate" numbers of people and settlements, which he teased villagers for not knowing and which he supplied, were from a 1988 survey. The social fact of this encounter is that government statistics, no matter how questionable or out dated, define local realities. Forced relocation of uplanders has continued for longer than the military attacks, lately in the name of watershed and forest protection (see Chotichaipiboon 1997; McKinnon 1989).

13. This assessment is based on my surveys in 1990, when I visited 13 Mien settlements in four northern provinces: Nan, Phayao, Lampang, and Chiangrai.

14. The head of the Forestry Department stated that the usufruct papers that they had were only intended for an eight-year transitional period while people were turning to lowland farming. There is no land available for expansion of lowland farming in this area. People had been using their upland fields for over twenty years already. In an attempt to sustain cultivation in these fields, most people have resorted to tractor ploughing. This issue did not come up at the meeting, and the farmers would not have brought it up because it is strictly illegal in terms of how their land is classified. At this meeting, a further dismissal of uplanders' needs came from a Member of Parliament for the province, Ms. Laddawan Wongsriwong, who had entered politics after a successful career as a TV reporter, particularly concerned with environmental issues. Some of the uplanders, both ordinary farmers and those with official positions, pressed her on the need for a reworking of the land classification to accommodate upland people living in the area. She replied that uplanders were so numerically insignificant (barely one percent of the nation's population) that there was no reason to modify the national law. She hinted that if authorities would give in to the demands of such a minuscule portion of the nation's population, this would set a precedent that would bring about absolute chaos.

15. These contemporary processes in Thailand have much in common with colonial and postcolonial reworkings of social, agricultural, and cultural spaces elsewhere (Gupta 1998; Kapferer 1995).

16. Media in Thailand are under strict official control, and the televised news feature about the royal family is a mandated nightly feature (see Hamilton 1993).

17. The former transliteration is my approximation of an International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) rendering that leaves out tonemarks. The latter (in parenthesis) is the current form of romanized Mien (see Court 1985).

18. A further reason for the feared loss of BPP control of the school was the ongoing restructuring of national education. For decades, education has been simultaneously under many government ministries and departments of ministries.

19. The one feature of this sort that I saw on TV concerned another upland group, Karen.

20. Also, they said, the head of the Provincial Forestry Department did not have any sense of the issues involved. He had been an official in another department and became the head of the Forestry Department a month earlier, only to hold this position for eight months prior to reaching retirement age. Mien villagers told me that he was given his position to increase his prestige in retirement.

21. His jacket is a modification of the common design for Mien male jackets. It was made about a decade earlier by one of his relatives, before a royal visit. Being more modern, the jacket indicates changes in textiles that occurred because of two factors relevant to my case. One is the stereotyping of chao khao. The other is the contextual shift for ethnic dress from the local context of farming and feasting to the public sphere of the nation. In both cut and color, the headmaster's jacket looked "tailored" and thus in and of "modern" society. Beyond remote villages, traditional clothes are widely viewed as signs of ignorance about modern society.

22. The performance was in important ways a reworking of a local dance for a generalized Thai audience (see Jonsson 2000b). I should note that, contrary to my experiences with Mien, the entry for the Yao of Thailand in a recent *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* states that "dancing is never seen" (Kacha-Ananda 1993:293).

23. On the Opium Monopoly, see McCoy 1991. Opium was declared illegal in 1958, and the trade shifted underground.

24. Buddhism has been used as a tool for the national integration of ethnic minorities (see Keyes 1971; Tambiah 1976; Wongprasert 1988). Historically, some Karen and Lua' settlements adhered to Buddhism (see Renard 1980), and some had sizable followings of "messianic" Buddhist leaders (see Hinton 1979, 1983). In reference to the Karen followings of two such leaders, Keyes remarks, rather normatively, that "a superficial understanding of Buddhism is potentially more threatening to the aims of the government as regards the tribal peoples than no understanding at all" (1971:565).

25. The hemp is grown for weaving. The poppies might have brought serious trouble for the Hmong if the visit had not been a family outing for the politician. Dried illicit plants on display in an upper middle class Thai home suggest a national appropriation of the projected "naughtiness" of the ethnic minority Other. Such appropriations are gendered. While Thai women acquire upland artifacts in order to decorate their living rooms, Thai men's appropriations largely concern the sexuality of upland women. For similar appropriations in China, see Gladney 1994 and Schein 2000.

26. Both prosperity and polygamy are largely things of the past. This is not to suggest the opposite, that the past was a period of prosperity and polygamy. Polygamy was most likely a historically and socially uneven practice.

27. See Symonds 1998 for aspects of male and female uplanders' participation in national orbits of sex.

28. Tsing's (1993, 1999) work on an "out-of-the-way place" in Indonesia provides many parallels to these dynamics in northern Thailand.

29. At several times during the 20th century, there were periods of intense Thai nationalism that involved antagonism against ethnically non-Thai people (see Barme 1993; Reynolds 1993; Vella 1978).

30. This assertion supports Huizinga's (1950) point that culture is a subset of play.

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