Mien Alter-Natives in Thai Modernity

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Abstract

This article discusses the repeated framing of Mien ethnic minority highland people as unmodern in relation to projects of modernity and modernization in Thailand. As upland livelihood has become increasingly precarious and entangled with state regulation, Mien people are engaging with national modernity and modernization through public displays that variously highlight their tradition or modernity or creatively combine the two. In this national space, modernization has hegemonic force and serves as the anchor to varied projects of self-fashioning in relation to modernity, including those of tradition. Articulations of tradition are one aspect of modernity, and the notion of ethnic groups as the carriers of tradition may be equally specific to modernity's conceptual schemes. [modernity, modernization, culture, identity, Mien, Thailand]

Issues of modernity have increasingly captured anthropological attention. As with other key notions of ethnography and theory such as culture, identity, and gender, there is no particular agreement among anthropologists about the defining elements of the matter in question. Modernity may ultimately not

have any defining elements (cf. Friedman 2002). While not analogous to "culture" or other basic notions of ethnography and theory, matters of modernity have some similarity with those of identity and gender. These categories have no fixed defining features, but that is not to say that they are vacuous or descriptively invalid. These are relational terms that are equally central to the practices of everyday life and to the ethnographic description of social life. Gender and (other) identity place people in particular networks of roles and relationships that often revolve around rights and differentiation. How they do so is not fixed, these identifications are often matters of contention and they are also entangled with various schemes of culture and political economy that may affect their implications even in the absence of local contestations.

Modernization, argues Trouillot (2002), "has everything to do with political economy, with a geography of management that creates places: a place called France, a place called the third world, a place called the market, a place called the factory or, indeed, a workplace." One of the central elements of modernity has been the creation of modern subjects, individuals versed in "the management of capital [and] the planning of family production for individual purposes" (2002:223, 229). Modernity implies this new form of subject-hood, that is as connected to state regulation as are the dynamics of modernization (cf. Biolsi 1995). Modernity and modernization, like the notions of tradition and the local, characterize people and places in terms of their opposites. Each implies processes of engagement and differentiation. While any ethnographic definition of modernity and modernization may be contested, I will argue that in the case of Thailand their defining features are all entangled with state regulation. Furthermore, the state's hegemonic deployment of modernity and modernization, that has marginalized various rural and urban populations, appears to replicate the marginalization of Thailand at the turn of the twentieth century that accompanied the country's entanglement with increasingly-global regimes of administration, trade, and the classification of peoples and places.

This article focuses on the Mien, one of the ethnic minority highland peoples in the country's north. In the national public sphere, the highland minorities are modernity's opposites. Over time, there have been variations in how this alterity has been understood. Up until the 1980s it implied backwardness that was seen as equally rooted in their culture and ethnic identity, so that any amelioration of this impediment to national progress was seen as necessarily involving that the ethnic minorities became more "Thai." In recent years there has been increasing acceptance of ethnic minority people's cultur-

al practices, but the parameters of this accommodation are similar to the previous period in that they revolve around the Thai nation as modern and progressive. Depictions of ethnic minority peoples during the 1990s, on television and in museums, emphasized their traditions, particularly in ritual and dress. While the growing recognition of minority people's identities was a welcome change to many, it carried the implicit stigma of defining them as of another time and out of synch with contemporary life in the country.

These dynamics in contemporary Thailand have important similarities with the "Western" depiction of non-Western countries at the World's Fairs of a century ago, in that they revolve around the ranking of peoples and places from a specific vantage point of progress and differentiation. Siamese authorities participated in such fairs with displays of their traditions and also the measures of the country's progress, and simultaneously drew on notions of civilization to refashion the elite's privileged position within the country (see below). Siam (later Thailand) was never simply the object of externally-imposed hegemonic categorizations, the country was simultaneously fashioned and internally differentiated through the same notions. At both the global and the national/local levels, the fashioning of identity in relation to modernity was tied to official recognition by nation states in a global colonial context.

Tooker's (2004) recent study of Akha ethnic minority highlanders in Thailand draws a contrast between their previous "comprehensive/integrated" identity and a current "modular/compartmentalized" form (2004:244). Her argument is resonant with the general tendency to view modernity as dissolving previous ("traditional") cultural and social forms (Berman 1982), and does not question the descriptive value of the key notions; tradition and modernity. Tooker does not suggest that modernity homogenizes identity or social and cultural practice among the Akha. Rather, she highlights emerging disjunctures (cf. Appadurai 1996) such as the relegation of Akha-ness to a limited set of ideas and practices, that have accompanied an increasing dissociation of identity and cultural practice from the dynamics of everyday village life (cf. Kipp 1993 for Indonesia). Such studies suggest the potential of modernity to dissolve past coherence of social and cultural forms.[1] This notion of the past as characterized by integrated cultures and coherent identities may not be empirically verifiable.[2] In the ethnography of the so-called hill tribes of northern Thailand that was conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists generalized for ethnic groups in terms of features that they assumed were traditional but which turn out to have been part and parcel of twentieth century articulations of cultural practice and political economy at local as

much as regional levels (Walker 1975, McKinnon and Wanat 1983, Jonsson 2001a, cf. Wolf 1982 for the assumed lack of history among "tribal" peoples).

Thailand's ethnic minority "mountain peoples" ("hill tribes"), to the extent that they still live in the rural highlands, are faced with a number of dilemmas that involve national modernity and state control—their farming is in many places illegal; only about half of them hold citizenship papers, the prerequisite to legally owning land; and the expansion of protected forests and nature reserves has jeopardized farming in many places. In this setting, any display of difference from the state's vision of national society is a potential provocation that might result in settlement erasure and other violence. That is the context for my case. My aim is not to establish that Mien are modern. Modernity is in many ways an empty term, but it acquires significance in contestations over the coordinates of time, space, and identity that often imply contrast with an assumed state of tradition. Mien and other hill tribes in Thailand may be the unmodern in the Thai mind (the national public sphere), but they are engaged in various forms of modern self-fashionings that creatively combine notions of tradition and modernity.

Unlike Tooker's case regarding the Akha, I do not assume that Mien tradition precedes their modernity. Rather, tradition is engendered through engagements with modernity and modernization. Nor is Mien tradition simply a projection of hegemonic Thai classifications of peoples and places. A range of elements inform Mien people's notions of their traditional ways, and there is considerable variety by class, location, external connections, and gender in how they engage with these notions. Such diversity is not a new feature, there has long been significant inequality by wealth, power, gender, and location in individual Mien people's ability to act on their understandings of the ways of the ethnic group (Jonsson in press).

In the following section I establish the context for the notion of ethnic minority highland peoples as Thai modernity's opposites. This engagement with history is necessary for showing that uplanders' assumed un-modernity is not a recent phenomenon. This classification of modernity's Others has roots in the colonial-era fashioning of Siam/Thailand. That is, it was among the key elements of place-making associated with nation-building and globalization. It is equally important to establish that common understandings of modernity and modernization have been deeply entangled with the dynamics of state control, regulated trade, and the quest for (capitalist) profit. This is particularly clear in the writings of Western observers who conflated filth and self-sufficiency in their descriptions of highland peoples and also complained

about local rulers who were not committed to the principles of modernization. Such understandings of modernity and modernization were later articulated in relation to Thailand's national integration, which reinforced the understanding of highland peoples as modernity's Other.

Alter-Natives in the Wasteland of No Profit

In twentieth-century Thailand, the social embedding of Modernity mimicked older forms of public spectacle and differentiation that repeatedly established the agency and superiority of the state and the upper class as they marked the social membership and subordination of villages.[3] Especially after the 1950s, Thai society was consolidated around issues of nation (Thai-ness) and progress. Thailand's ethnic minority hill tribes (*chao khao*, "mountain peoples") are the country's unmodern, their identity in the public sphere has been that of uneducated non-nationals who have illegally entered the nation's terrain and whose agricultural practices, political leanings, and ethnic cultures are somewhere between being obstacles to progress and a deliberate threat to national wellbeing. This image conveys modern Thai as educated citizens committed to national wellbeing, progress, social stability, and border control. Translated into social practice, this rhetoric of national modernity has correlated with the expansion of schools, agricultural regulation, settlement evacuation, deportations, and armed violence. These dynamics in Thailand have various parallels in the global processes of modernity and modernization that started during the colonial era and are still unfolding.

Thai campaigns for modernization regarding ethnic minority highlanders have systemically integrated these otherwise marginal populations into a national political economy where their lives and livelihood can be taxed and regulated. By the 1960s, the integration of the northern highlands into national orbits of modernity/civility and regulated commerce increasingly employed violence. Villages came under attack for their shifting cultivation, opium growing, or non-Thai ethnic identities; it is in many cases impossible to assign a simple cause for such attacks. Matters of state-regulated farming and trade were as significant in motivating the violence against highland settlements as were nationalist anxieties regarding ethnic difference and communism and concerns over forests and watersheds.[4] Thai modernity, violent or not, has been about the creation of particular kinds of subjects, who are not only administrable but also desiring of improvement through education, commerce, and democracy, each of which indexes an aspect of state control.

Because of their assumed lack of some crucial elements of "Thai-ness," ethnic minority highland peoples and places have provided a major field for projects of Thai modernity and modernization. Such projects have not only constructed Others, they have simultaneously established the agency and superiority of those acting in the name of national identity and well-being. Various rural and urban Thai peoples, particularly but not exclusively lower class, have repeatedly been the focus of similar projects and prejudice that have sporadically involved force and violence (see Bowie 1997; Askew 2002; Klima 2002; Fordham 2004).

A perusal of writings on the ethnic minority fringes of Thailand in the early twentieth century is suggestive of the landscape of modernity—social fields defined in terms of the related orbits of capitalist production/exchange and state control; regulation, taxation, and a desire for progress (via education, trade, hygiene, etc.). Explorers and other commentators, Thai and Western, tended to depict Mien (Yao) and other highland peoples as stuck in the isolation and filth that came with self-sufficiency. That is, these were peoples cut off from all the benefits of the modern world because they appeared to be able to support themselves beyond the orbits of the state. The pressure to redeem people from the deplorable condition of isolation and filth was a call to make them legible to the state, for registration, administration, appropriation, and intervention (cf. Scott 1998).

The first explorers' account specifically about Thailand's Mien was published in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1925. It stated, among other things, "They are stupid and rough, and they do not know the customs of other races… Their ideas of cleanliness are very vague" (Rangsiyanan and Naowakarn 1925: 84-5). Virginia Thompson (1941), an academic without firsthand knowledge of the highlands, wrote that "[Yao (Mien)] are perhaps even dirtier and more self-sufficing than the Miaos (Hmong), and more at a loss to use the little money they receive from the sale of their opium" (1941:12). In all likelihood, Thompson's source was the British Consul in Chiangmai, W.A.R. Wood. In his memoir, Wood (1935) remarked, in contrast to Thompson later, that "Meows [Miao] and Yaos…wax rich by cultivating opium." But he described both peoples as "self-sufficing" and stated that "they don't need the money they get for their opium." He then described Lahu (Musus) as "much less interesting than the Meows and Yaos. They live at lower altitudes, and are just as dirty without being nearly so good-looking, lively or intelligent. In fact, they are not a very high type of humanity" (1935:128-133). If not the desolate landscape of isolation, then at least this manifested a wasteland of self-suffi-

ciency, where any profit/investment disappeared because of a lack of desire for the things money could buy at regulated markets (cf. Maurer 2000 on capitalist imagery). Filth, savagery, stupidity, and self-sufficiency came together in these images, a stalled "prospecting" for Thai/modern subjects in the hinterland (cf. Pratt 1992:60-64). Nation and modernity were joined, in part through the envisioning of their alternatives among highland peoples.

This process was not simply about mapping modernity's opposites on "remote" populations. Colonial-era Western observers also commented on some local authorities as unfit to rule. Examples include the missionary Johnson Curtis (1903), who remarked that "the ruling class of [northern Thailand] have a dignity and refinement of manner that would be for them a passport into the elegant society of any capital city," but added that "they are a selfish, self-seeking class and have not the interest of their people at heart…The parasitical life of the [rulers] is the cause of a state of stagnation" (1903:122-23). Holt Hallett, a British explorer, remarked that; "Each Kha [highlander] has to pay tribute to his Laos or Siamese master. Without the Khas, their lazy, pleasure-loving, opium-smoking masters would have to work, or die of hunger. The extortion practiced upon these kindly-dispositioned people has frequently driven them into revolt (1890:22). This outsiders' commentary on unworthy rulers—authorities who stood in the way of industriousness and profit—was written in the context of colonial takeovers of all of Siam's neighboring states; Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia (by France), Burma, and Malaya (by the British Empire). It was not simply Orientalist rhetoric. Rather, it was embedded in a hegemonic framework that combined violence, commerce, and ideas of modernity in a systemic delegitimation of previously common tributary schemes.[5]

Unlike the rulers of neighboring domains, the Siamese elite was not deposed. But many of its actions were informed by colonial-era pressures for specific changes of economy and society and drew on hegemonic, "Western" concepts. Historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994; 2000a; 2000b) has shown how this elite fashioned itself and its domain through engagements with ideas of civilization as much as through mapping and new frameworks of administration and taxation. Significantly, the refashioning of Siam involved considerable ethnographic writing, in terms of a then-novel tripartite classification of civilized towns, backward villages, and uncivilizable highland peoples in the forests (2000a; 2000b). This refashioning of the country's interiors was a process of self-making that assumed global inequalities but engaged with them in a way that propped the elite above their peasants and the eth-

nic minority "Others within" (2000a). Along with administrative changes and a revamping of the military, ethnography constituted the elite's "passport into the elegant society" of the colonial-era. While Siam was not formally colonized, the cultural and social changes that took place at the turn of the twentieth century show many aspects of what Herzfeld (2002) has aptly labeled "crypto-colonialism;" "ways in which crypto-colonies respond to [a global cultural hierarchy] by deploying a world-dominating discourse about 'culture' in defense of their perceived national interests and specificity" (2002:903). Ideologies of modernity and development have been central to nation-building campaigns that have undermined local practices of livelihood, culture, and social life among ethnic minority highland peoples. Ideological notions of tradition have also contributed to the reworking of social life, both within rural communities and in the selective appropriation of local practices for projects of nation- and state building.

I now turn to Mien realities and their contexts. The next section suggests that Thai notions of modernity-cum-development have become deeply rooted in highland communities as the standard for an adequate life. The remainder of the section describes an ethnographic trip for the purpose of making video recordings of exemplary Mien tradition. The state-employed Thai ethnographers were not simply codifying certain practices as the traditional ways of the ethnic group. At the same time, they were involved in an active intervention in Mien realities. The different strategies of documentation and intervention rest on a particular distinction between culture and politics that to some extent has roots in colonial-era globalization but is also a significant component of the nation state's command over social life, and draws on the modern state's position as the arbiter and guardian of cultural heritage. Manifestations of tradition and modernity both point to the state's power to classify and regulate social life within its orbits.

Locating Modernity and its Opposites

During my fieldwork with Thailand's Mien in 1992-1994, it was clear that government interventions in highland farming made local livelihood rather precarious. Sometimes I would ask people why they did not attempt to move across the border to Laos, where I assumed government intervention in farmer livelihood was more limited. The most common answer to this query was that there was "no progress" there, which implied roads, markets, schools, health care, and the like. Progress here is in some sense the local measure of

modernity. To hear from older people that "progress" (Thai, *jaroen*, often used interchangeably with *phatthana*, "development") made their difficulties bearable was something of a puzzle. In conversations with me some of them also made this contrast regarding life in the past, the 1960s of classical ethnography. This was a puzzle to me, possibly because, at the time, I still thought there were "peoples" in the hills, meaning ethnic groups with distinct cultures that older people (at least) were nostalgic for to the extent that the social and cultural frameworks had eroded. Maybe I was expecting the un-modern, and maybe the failure of reality to live up to my expectations was more a matter of hegemony, the successful insertion of the Thai ideology of modernity into the fabric of everyday life among the Mien—through schools, media (newspapers, radio, and television), and meetings. Meanwhile, official notions wed nation (Thai) and modernity (progress) through the image of the hill tribe Other as the source of the country's problems (cf. Laungaramsri 2001, 2002). What is the resonance of this hegemonic view in the countryside? Are there alternatives to this official modernity, are the hill tribes modernity's alternatives by causing the nation problems with their backward ways and views, or by developing their own understanding of modernity?

"They don't like to grow rice, so they look for work in towns and also abroad." This statement came from Dr. Chob Kacha-Ananda (hereafter Chob),[6] an expert on Mien at Thailand's Tribal Research Institute (TRI, *sathaban wijai chao khao*, lit. "Institute [for] Research [regarding] Mountain Peoples"), that is an arm of the government's administration. In October 1992, Chob had kindly invited me to join him and his colleagues on their trip to see and document a Mien wedding in the village of Rom Yen, near the town of Chiangkham in Phayao Province. As I was making arrangements to start field research and had yet to decide where I would base my research, this seemed a good opportunity to visit some villages. Rom Yen village is a five-hour drive from the city of Chiangmai, the administrative center of northern Thailand, where I was then based and where the Tribal Research Institute is located.

On our way to Rom Yen, we first went to the Mien village of Pangkha where we spent the night. Chob had connections among the people of Pangkha, having first been with them as the Thai trainee-assistant to Australian anthropologist Douglas Miles who studied Thailand's Mien during 1966-1968. While in Pangkha, Chob told me that the Royal Forestry Department of the Thai Government had ordered six villages in the Pangkha area to move out of the region, and that they had agreed to move. One of the six would most likely be allowed to stay, he added, since the king's mother (the Princess Mother, *Mae*

Fa Luang) had donated a big school to the people there. This was the village of Pangphrik, the one where he said the people "don't like to grow rice."

The Pangphrik school was and is run by Thailand's Border Patrol Police (BPP), a remainder and reminder of a war of Thai military and mercenary forces with American support against units of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and their sympathizers who took to the jungle after severe violence on the streets, squares, and university campuses in Bangkok, and had later made alliances with various settlements of ethnic minority highlanders. In this context, during the 1960s and 1970s, ethnic minority highlanders were viewed as of uncertain political allegiance at best, and communists at worst, and active fighting lasted until 1982. A decade later, the BPP was still involved in instilling a sense of national belonging and indebtedness among Mien and Hmong ethnic minority peoples. Their mission is equally to guard the borders of nationhood as those of the physical terrain (cf. Winichakul 1994:170).

Chob described the planned eviction of settlements as a matter of fact that was of little concern, but became quite animated when describing his plans for democracy in Mien villages. He said that there was much clan favoritism in traditional village life, where the members of a single clan (lineage, kin-group) could largely run the affairs of a village. Chob had suggested that the village committee should have representatives from each of the clans present, and more than one representative if the clan had over five households in the village. He advocated this scheme to the villagers in both Pangkha and Rom Yen, and in the latter village he did so in the context of an election for the position of village headman.

What Chob described as clan favoritism was from his perspective an undemocratic practice, and his concern was to introduce democracy into the dynamics of Mien villages. In this imagery, clan is the equivalent of an interest group seeking to monopolize resources, and Chob's democratic intervention consisted of a mechanism for making access to resources (the decisions affecting villagers) proportionate to the presence and relative strength of each interest group, so that they would be more evenly distributed. National political trends thus facilitated a particular, Thai understanding of certain Mien practices as favoritism; as a corrupt practice that may once have been common in Thai social life but was now, it was assumed, fast disappearing because of a wave of democratic reform. The democratic future, in other words, would erase the undemocratic past. Modernity was happening, as a process of change from an undesirable condition to a desirable one. The site for these reforms among the Mien was the locally elected Village Committee, an insti-

tution mandated by national law and created in Mien villages in line with the state's modernizing agenda in the countryside. A Mobile Development Worker, a Thai man whom Chob had known for a long time, had arrived in Rom Yen to oversee the elections. This and various other aspects of the modern state and nation link Mien villages to larger social fields. Many of the connections assume a binary opposition between tradition and modernity. While the terms themselves are empty, they are repeatedly plotted on a range of issues that motivate action, variously for the preservation or eradication of whatever becomes classified as traditional. The image of tradition engenders the agency of the modern state, its sovereign power over the coordinates of social life and cultural practice.

I was in Rom Yen with a team of government officials (the TRI ethnographers) whose goal was to document a Mien wedding. It seems that what gets labeled ethnic culture is appropriate for ceremonial purposes, while it needs to be uprooted when it influences what has come to be defined as politics. These are some of the coordinates of the Mien field, as seen through the lens of government officials whose task is equally to classify and document ethnically specific practices and to contribute to the national integration of peoples classified as ethnic minorities. The assumed division between culture and politics draws on a compartmentalization of social experience and action that is by no means specific to Thailand. Historically, this notion goes back to the colonial era and the consolidation of nation states, and it has taken increasingly global dimensions (Handler 1985). The same historical specificity and global dimensions apply to the concurrent notion of "politics" proper as about the destiny and the will of "the people" and the distribution of resources, and to the distinction between a national majority and minorities within bounded terrains of administration and identification.

The case now moves to the differentiation that is involved in the state's command over culture and heritage. Defining what constitutes tradition is partly about establishing the coordinates of identity and history as within the state's realm. In Thailand since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest in non-mainstream Thai/Tai ethnic groups, including those living in nearby countries.[7] This manifests cultural ferment that is redrawing the ethnic landscape of the region, but in ways that reinforce the paradigmatic status of Thai modernity. One aspect of this concern with Thai modernity is a growing emphasis on displaying the unmodernity of ethnic minority highland peoples in museums and the national media, that is a national project at the same time as it is deeply entwined with globalization; the marketing of the country

to international tourists (cf. Cohen 2000). These Thai processes resonate with the more general dynamics described as the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). But such studies tend to leave little room for local agency in the contemporary world of nation states. Some of Mien people's engagements with these dynamics show their complicity in the process and/or their interest in fashioning a neotradition that serves to rank Mien above other highland minority groups. The wedding that was documented by the Thai state's ethnographers was also a local, Mien project. I describe the wedding in some detail in order to establish this local dimension and also to highlight that the event was not so much Mien tradition as cultural practice accessible to wealthy households only and thus part and parcel of the differentiation inherent in the ways of Mien as an ethnic group. Knauft's (2002) discussion of alternative modernities emphasizes the "relationship between modernity and tradition as these are locally and nationally perceived and configured, [locally and regionally mediated] tropes and meanings of what indicates authenticity and what indicates development and progress" (2002:25). Modernity does not so much replace tradition as define and situate the features that come to be attached to the notion. That is, modernity engenders tradition, and the two get played out in a complex relationship to the politics of cultural practice.

Culture-work

The forging of culture as a particular, bounded domain and as apolitical is equally about the state's control over identity and livelihood in the name of national interest and about national (-ist) engagements with the defining features of identity (Pemberton 1994). Current understandings of modernity (*than-samay*) and development-cum-progress (*phatthana, jaroen*) in Thailand[8] have recently produced a national culture effect that is expressed in the quest for manifestations of ethnically specific practices that are of the past.[9] That is, national engagements with modernity trigger a motivated search for past ways and various celebratory expressions of tradition (cf. Ivy 1995), such as in the work of the Thai government's National Identity Board and its National Culture Commission (Mulder 1997). In relation to ethnic minority farming populations in the northern highlands, this is a very recent and limited occurrence. For decades, Thai authorities and Thai society at large had viewed "hill tribe customs" as something to be eliminated because it was not only an impediment to progress but also a threat to the nation.

In contemporary Thailand, the work of tradition appears to have two strands, which assume and project a fundamental difference between Thai and their Others. Thai and (ethnolinguistically) related peoples are in history, whereas the Others, particularly highland ethnic minorities, are of the past. This is manifest in the celebration and revival of Thai traditions as a collective, national heritage, and in the mapping of the past on to non-Thai ethnic minorities, as manifest in museums, television documentaries, coffee-table books such as the Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups (see Jonsson 2003a), and the documentation of the traditional Mien wedding in Rom Yen. The latter effort is often (implicitly) about Thai society as modern, where images of the non-Thai Other serve as a vehicle for the self-fashioning of a modern, Thai subject. That is, the work of culture, tradition, and identity facilitates the establishment of particular, ethnic and national landscapes.

One example of this culture/identity work is a television documentary about Mien (Yao, as they are officially known) from early 1992, that showed the narrator arriving in his modern four-wheel-drive vehicle to a forest covered setting, dressed in expensive-looking, safari-style clothing. He made a few introductory remarks about the ancient history of the Yao people and about their ancient Daoist ritual practices, and the rest of the roughly half-hour documentary featured a staged *kwa-tang* ordination ritual with an occasional voiceover explanatory comment about the meaning of the action.[10] I viewed this video at the home of Le Tsan Kwe, a spirit medium and a well-known Mien man, in the village of Phale (Pha Dua). He had been paid Baht 10,000 ($400 US)[11] for the performance and was given a video copy of the program. Thus at least some Mien people had participated in the forging of their (Thai) image as of the past, for good payment in this case.

Interpreted in this context, the exemplary Mien tradition that I saw in Rom Yen was squarely within the realm of state control and the national currents of Thai modernity. But it was simultaneously a local event that made particular, Mien statements. The household had a spirit medium perform a ritual of appeasing the ancestors (*awn zo*), which took place during preparations for the wedding ceremony. The ritual went on for about four hours in the evening of October 13, while household members and their relatives prepared for the guests. At least four adult pigs were killed and prepared, and up against one wall were about fifty cases of soft drinks and bottled water that had been purchased for the event. During the *awn zo*, which honored the male household head's ancestors, the medium chanted from memory and from text. He drew the spirits in with the smoke from burning incense, blew into a hollowed-out

buffalo horn, rattled his spirit-knife, and occasionally threw down divining sticks. One segment of the ritual had him, along with the groom and the groom's father, offer spirit money to the ancestors, where they kneeled down and held over their heads trays wherein burned bills of spirit-money on a bed of corn. When the spirits had partaken of the offering, and had indicated their approval via the divining sticks, they were sent off.

These are exchanges with ancestor spirits that bring honor and wealth into the spirit world and call on blessings and wealth (the latter a manifestation of the former) for the household. The more wealth a household has, the more it can oblige ancestors and other spirits. This ritual was only for the groom's household and lineage, the event's hosts. The bride's side stood to arrive the following day. On the morning of the 14th, a Mien band playing a double-reed oboe, drum, gong, and cymbals went out along the road to receive the guest and to bring them in the direction of the house. The host-side guests were already seated, males and females forming two halves of a circle, and were being offered tea and cigarettes when the bride's group arrived at about 11am. There was much ceremonial bowing between the sides of the groom and the bride, hosts and guests. By 5pm, the band led the guests, almost a hundred people, to the dinner tables. The number of guests was such that the meat from four adult pigs would not suffice, and the household had rushed to buy a cow from a Thai villager to add to the food, which cost them about Thai Baht 7,000 ($280 US). From the food and drink assembled for the wedding, and the number of guests, this was a well-off household.

Behind the scenes at the formal presentation of the two kin-groups to one another, the couple to the guests, the householders to the ancestor spirits, and the Mien ethnic group to the video crew from the Tribal Research Institute, there was an on-going practical joke in the kitchen involving each of the four pigs. Whoever entered the kitchen was asked to wield the knife to kill the pig, while several men held it steady on a bench and were ready with a bowl to catch the blood. The knife they gave out was blunt and never pierced the pig's skin. After a few frustrated attempts, the joke's victim was let in on the fun, everyone laughed, and the pig was killed with a better knife and then prepared for the somewhat anxious hosts and their numerous guests.

The bride finally entered the groom's house at about 4am on the 15th of October, and she and her kin-group were fed sticky rice, a reference to the will that the relations stick together. By this point, the Tribal Research Institute's video recording had started. Around breakfast-time, the guests "washed the face" of the bride. She and her assistant went around the tables with a bowl

of water and a washcloth, and the guests exchanged some money for handling the cloth, usually in the range of Baht 20-50 (USD .80-2). People did not literally wash the bride's face, or in many cases even touch the cloth. Their exchange of money was the equivalent of a washing, a statement about the bride as having honor and proper conduct. After the assembled were fed lunch, the bride and groom together went around the tables with two assistants, offering people cigarettes, tea, and liquor, and in exchange the guests gave money, in the range of Baht 20-100 ($.80-$4 US). This time the exchange marked the honor of their union.

Then the video crew again set up their gear as the band led the groom and bride inside, where they bowed in front of the altar to the ancestors. They were barefoot and decked out in elaborate, embroidered Mien clothing. Each was accompanied by one assistant. *Khru* (Thai, "teacher") Khe Win, the headmaster of the Pangkha school, gave a speech in Thai through a microphone, and he spoke about marriage customs. Each tribe has their own, special customs, he said, but weddings are most elaborate among the Mien, and he described some of the key elements. He then gave the microphone to another Mien man, who spoke in the Mien language, that I did not yet understand or speak. The band played their music, another Mien man spoke, and he addressed primarily the couple. They, particularly the groom, bowed in a very elaborate fashion in front of the altar to the ancestors, variously kneeling and standing up. Decked out in their finery, they made a good show, for the household as much as for the Tribal Research Institute, and the visitors sounded impressed.

The two aspects of the event are exemplary of a contest over the meaning of Mien culture. The household based ritual to the ancestors, coupled with a feast for the bride's lineage and other guests, constitutes one part of the equation. It establishes the honor of the couple and their new household and thus enters Mien discourses about weddings, households, honor, and feasting. The other side of this is the objectification of culture, via the medium of video, through the actions of the staff of the Tribal Research Institute, which is under the Department of Welfare that is a branch of the national government's Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare. This contrast evokes notions of culture versus power, an ethnic minority and its traditions being engulfed by the machinery of the modern state. This trope has been roundly criticized as reducing complex social realities to overdrawn contrasts between hegemony and resistance (Ortner 1995), and my case attempts to convey a more complex scenario.

The contrast between the state and the minority ethnic group is not unfounded. But like the notion that Thailand was not colonized, it risks an

oversimplification of social realities as it delimits specific ethnographic or historical objects. The following section is concerned with some of the contradictory aspects of the current concern with culture and tradition among Mien peoples. Outsiders' interest in Mien as a traditional people rests on a time-space politics that is premised on their distance from modernity. Mien people's engagements tend to fall outside this framework, except in the sense that they have taken to staging aspects of their traditions in ways that suggest compatibility with national definitions of heritage as the property of ethnic groups. More significantly, Mien people have formed an ethnic-group association that seeks to articulate their identity in relation to culture and development. That is, Mien people appear to seek to combine tradition and modernity as they fashion themselves in relation to the nation. The dynamics are contradictory, in that the effort to emphasize the local and traditional appears to facilitate Mien entanglements with aspects of state control and the regulation of identity and social life.

This is not to suggest that Mien agency has been erased with their integration into the orbits of the modern nation state. But as the following section suggests, the quest for "Mien" as a particular ethnographic object may be misguided. As with modernity or gender, the notion does not point to an ethnographic object but rather to a site for the articulation of identity, rights, and difference. In spite of the state's centrality to the definition of modernity and heritage, there are still Mien agendas as well as inequalities, and even deliberate complicity with the state's modernization agendas may serve to bring Mien people legitimacy in their dealings with the authorities (Jonsson 2003b).

Locating Culture

It is in some ways an urban, upper- and middle class Thai fantasy that the countryside is the place of colorful ceremonies by contented farmers, people who "like to grow rice." This notion, which then leads to disappointment over farmers' discontent or their quest for more rewarding wage work, is part of a national and global discourse on the coordinates of culture, space, identity, and work. The image, that appears, for instance, in the recent Thai cultural encyclopedia entry on Mien as an industrious people (Jonsson 2003a), concerns the politics of defining the relations between cities and the countryside. Simultaneously, it connects to some of the state's projects of violence, propaganda, legislation, and education that variously assume or produce docile subjects. Both discursive practices, those of the nation and the state, take

place in the context of capitalist transformations that have significantly undermined the ability and willingness of rural peoples to sustain themselves from the proceeds of their farms.[12]

The middle class in Thailand, as much as elsewhere, shares many basic assumptions with Western-educated academics, such as anthropologists, in its focus on education and democratic reform for the construction of modern subjects, contemporary national communities, and a global order. Anthropology's orientation toward culture and tradition as pertaining to the ancient and remote (in the present) has contributed greatly to the time-space formulations that posit the countryside as modernity's antithesis; a place of contented peoples who are caught up in elaborate, traditional ceremonies and deep, articulate worldviews that unite them as ethnic groups (cf. Sapir 1924; Geertz 1972).

What constitutes tradition and Mien and how unevenly situated Mien people engage with their culture are more complicated issues than what expectations of the un-modern would suggest. Just a few days after the wedding in Rom Yen, I was in the village of Pangkha for a meeting that concerned Mien and their relations to "development and the preservation of culture" (Thai, *iu mien kap kan phatthana lae anurak watthanatham*, this phrase is from the event's welcome-banner). The main organizers took a broad view of culture, that it included issues of livelihood and ways of dealing with the government along with the more commonly assumed ingredients of customs and traditional practices. The issues of the meeting ranged widely. Curiously but significantly, one of the speakers mentioned that according to Dr. Chob of the Tribal Research Institute, Mien were the most progressive of the hill tribes, they had the most *phatthana* (development) and *khwam sa-at* (cleanliness). This formulation assumes the condition of un-modernity (tradition) as one of filth.[13]

Development, progress, and cleanliness as markers of modernity and modernization were thus being wielded locally as a sign of the achievements of Mien people as an ethnic group in the context of other ethnic minority highland peoples. It was somehow a good sign that the state's ethnographers found the villages of other ethnic groups filthier than those of the Mien. The dynamics of modernity invite frequent measurements of progress, and the statement at the Rom Yen wedding that Mien wedding customs were the most elaborate among all the hill tribes is a variation on this pattern. The resemblance of these Mien statements to the rhetorics of colonialism and modernization complicates any attempt to delineate "the Mien" ethnographically or to locate their culture as distinct from these regional/global dynamics.

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The initial meetings to establish an ethnic association manifest a range of views, including a disapproval of the commoditization of culture. Privately during break, critique was raised concerning Le Tsan Kwe's staging of a *kwa-tang* ritual for the Thai television crew. Mien acquaintances said that he had fallen seriously ill within months of staging the ritual, and that there was a direct connection. People should not call on spirits in jest or for trivial purposes. If they did, the spirits would strike back and cause them illness or death, and this had happened to Le Tsan Kwe. "See!" Critical voices variously assumed or questioned the previous framework of Mien relations with spirits, and there were many other voices of concern.

Even if there were some voices of criticism, the shared concern of forming an organization around matters of identity and culture played into the hands of a particular segment of Mien social life, those best connected to outside agents such as the state (village headmen and schoolteachers) and nongovernmental organizations (IMPECT representatives). The apparently collective effort served to mute a range of Mien agendas, particularly those assuming the primacy of households in social life. The Tribal Research Institute's documentation of the Mien wedding expressed the same redefinition of the parameters of social life. An expensive, household-based wedding was captured as representative of the ways of the ethnic group. In public view via a documentary video for the TRI's Tribal Museum there were no local agendas, simply the ways of traditional peoples.

The meeting in Pangkha established a Mien Association as an organization, an interest group that centered on matters of their identity and culture and the defense of their rights in the context of state control and various issues of development. As a vehicle for the identification of a marginalized people and with various implied links to national and international organizational and funding bodies, the Mien Association has many parallels within an increasingly global world of indigenous peoples.[14] The Association expresses a local response to modernity-cum-modernization, though local is a problematic term with reference to IMPECT and other non-governmental organizations, for instance.[15] While the Mien Association was formed between late 1992 and early 1993, their first event was held only in 2001; a sports and culture festival that brought together teams from 17 out of 200 Mien villages in Thailand to compete in soccer and other "modern" sports that are associated with Thai schools (Jonsson 2003b, c).

For two evenings during the four days of the fair there was entertainment that combined traditional song and dance, history/heritage in the form of an

old, handwritten and illustrated scroll that describes Yao origins and their situation to Imperial Chinese society, and a combination of quiz shows and pop songs that emulated national television. The event shared elements with village- and sub-district festivals that I had seen in the early 1990s, such as a gender division between the organizing Village Committee and the Village Housewives' Group that cooked and served lunch for the participants (Jonsson 2000; 2001b). Both the Village Committee and the Housewives' Group are institutions that derive from the state's modernization agenda for the countryside. The sports events that were somewhat common in the early 1990s appropriated much national imagery, often featuring a speech by an invited politician, and always a flag-raising and the singing of either the national anthem or a song honoring the Thai king. The assumed universe of these fairs consisted of a collection of the minimal administrative entities of the nation state as the units of competition; registered villages. At the fair in 2001, the social universe was demarcated by Mien ethnicity within the boundaries of the nation state. As an explicit celebration of Mien tradition and culture, the fair contributed to the more widespread alignment of nation and modernity in the public sphere and blurred whatever boundaries there were between the domains of Mien and the Thai state and nation.

Alternatives in Modernity and Modernization?

Elsewhere I discuss these new trends in social life and contrast them with a spectacular protest by Mien farmers against a wildlife sanctuary, that never once brought up Mien identity and was all in terms of their position as citizens who had the right to progress. There I also contrast these dynamics of sports and culture with the agendas of Mien activists within IMPECT that concern drawing up particular Mien eco-wisdom that might serve them in contestations regarding land rights (Jonsson 2005). Where does one draw the distinction between the ethnic minority and the state in this case, if for instance the Village Committee and the Village Housewives' Group that are central to how people are organizing themselves in the countryside are aspects of the state's modernizing presence in local social life? How does one define ethnic minorities such as Mien in relation to modernity and its alternatives if Mien people variously seek to situate themselves through indigenous eco-wisdom, a combination of school sports and ethnic heritage, and their commitment to national modernization? What comes of the project to represent these dynamics as somehow "Mien" if they do not add up to a coherent vision of who/what

Mien are? The recent efforts to express Mien culture have little connection to the concerns of older people, for whom the point of making offerings to spirits was to secure a prosperous household (cf. Jonsson 2001a). The household as an organizational focus has largely disappeared through the efforts to become ethnic, in terms of villages and the ethnic group association. The kinds of changes taking place do not suggest a clear-cut distinction between the domains of culture, social relations, political economy, or national politics, but they do reveal tensions regarding Mien people's understandings of their culture and its relations to identity.

In contemporary Thailand, only a few people can speak for "the ethnic group" and its culture; the majority of Mien people are shut up implicitly or explicitly, by fellow Mien or by agents of the Thai state. Even the few that can claim a voice on these issues are generally not heard unless they are on a national stage. On this national stage, Mien people tend to be characterized or even celebrated as the nation's unmodern alternative, such as in the television documentary about their ancient ritual traditions and in the Tribal Research Institute's documentation of a traditional wedding. This mapping of the unmodern involves a selective appropriation of practices that have been the prerogative of better-off Mien people. Poor people, as farmers or wageworkers, tend to be precluded from a voice regarding ethnic cultures. This bias toward the practices of wealthy people, even if about the modern nation through depictions of its unmodern Others, may represent an attempt to erase any traces of poverty from public view. Like people who "don't like to grow rice," poor farmers and wageworkers are apparently not worthy of the attentions of urbanites who venture into the countryside to document thriving cultures and industrious farmers. Seen in this light, the Thai emphasis on documenting rural worlds is very much about the contrast between city and country, in a way that depicts the countryside as the site of pleasant excursions. That is, modernity and modernization are celebrated even when they are deliberately out of documentary view.[16]

Recent Mien engagements with their own identity and culture reinforce the agency of a new elite in local affairs, particularly village headmen and schoolteachers (Jonsson 2003b). In this setting, modernization and modernity have provided a range of contact zones (Pratt 1992: 6-7) for defining communities and ethnic identity in relation to state control at the same time as they have contributed to an emphasis on villages as the focus of social life. Villages are the smallest administrative units of the Thai state, and in Mien social life they have emerged as the focus of sports competitions and culture shows. As the

focal units of social mobilization and self-fashioning, such as in the quest for official favors and recognition as "model development village" and the like, villages routinize modernization in local social relations. Villages have emerged as an acting subject as leaders recruit the labor, attentions, and financial contributions of household members, whose engagement with modernization rests on modernity, the fashioning of modern subjects through the capital proceeds of farming and wage labor. Emphasizing people's Mien-ness in this setting draws attention to particular attributes that may obfuscate the pervasive entanglements of rural ethnic minorities with these national and global processes, as even the deliberate engagements with culture and eco-wisdom concern self-fashionings in relation to the nation and state of Thailand.

It is increasingly clear that modernity and modernization are far from monolithic processes (Gaonkar 2001; Knauft 2002). The examination of alternative modernities does not deny commonalities, but highlights variation in relation to culture, region, and other contextual factors. Each ethnographic case study is potentially unique, but this acknowledgement may import a particular descriptive bias in drawing on the most vocal segment of local social life—better off Mien people, in my case. Paying attention to alternative modernities is an important step toward nuanced ethnographies of the modern world, where local realities are deeply embedded in national frameworks and simultaneously entangled with global descriptive conventions and political economies.

The identity work of rural villages is in many ways tied to official recognition; schools, roads, electricity, projects, etc., for which there is often competition in marginal areas. The quest for recognition activates the state in the village. Also, the state makes itself through the recognition of people and settlements. In one of the households where I stayed during research in Thailand, there is a plaque from the Provincial Health Authorities. It was granted to a headman to commemorate the achievement that each household in the sub-district had a toilet. Even if this basis for recognition was something of an exaggeration, as I found out during the ups and downs of research, it is indicative of the political culture of modernity in the hinterlands. The prospecting for modern Thai subjects still rests on the imagery of isolation and filth from which people are rescued through the dynamics of modernization and state control.

While one may find various alternative engagements with and/or manifestations of modernity, the dynamics of state control in the context of globalization appear to have defined modernization's alternatives as illegal or worse.

The continued practices of evacuating highland minority peoples from their land and in some cases deporting them from the country (Ganjanapan 2000: 215-217; Gillogly 2004:141), on the grounds of their illegality and/or the threat they supposedly pose to national wellbeing, demonstrate that there are no alternatives to modernization. This everyday fact has made highland ethnic minority peoples' public displays of their "safe" modernity and tradition compelling, which in turn has invited various inequality regarding whose version of local culture is represented and by whom.

Situating Heritage

The dynamics of situating Mien heritage in the rural past express a time-politics that has been of much importance to practices of ethnography (Fabian 1983). Whatever qualitative differences there have been in social, cultural, and economic life have been rendered as quantitative on the axes of rural-urban and traditional-modern. The fashioning of cities as the paradigm of modernity creates a tradition-effect that is selectively mapped on the countryside (and inside museums). It also imports a conflation of space and time that assumes spatial distance from the city as simultaneously temoral—the further you go from the city, the more you leave the present and the modern behind. This process is commonly associated with colonial era evolutionism, but its roots can be traced much further in the past (Herzfeld 1987).[17]

The notion that tradition, rusticity, and un-modernity reside among peoples of the mountains dates back at least to the philosophers of Ancient Greece. This formulation plots peoples as social types on a landscape that fuses time and space, with ancient and simple peoples up high and modern and complex peoples down low (Caro-Baroja 1963). This assertion about archaic peoples in the mountains and other "remote" places informed much anthropological work in the twentieth century, as well as its late-nineteenth century precursors. This idea reemerged in the twentieth century notion of traditional hill tribes in contemporary Thailand. It informed romanticist cultural travel to the last outposts of un-modernity; anthropological studies of adaptations to the environment as well as of traditional, non-state political and social formations; and governmental and international attempts to modernize the hill peoples through democracy, agricultural reform, and education. The expectation of the un-modern in the countryside and even more so in mountain communities has reified social types and temporality at the same time as it has systemically mis-characterized the social world.

The quest to document unmodern heritage among ethnic minorities in the Thai countryside is not simply about modernity and its opposites. More importantly, it concerns the nation state as the arbiter and guardian of heritage and identity. In contemporary Thailand, campaigns for national and sub-national culture and heritage have systemically discredited a range of social, cultural, and economic practices that have had a long history of acceptance among lower class peoples in rural as much as urban areas (Fordham 1998; Ockey 2001). The consolidation of Siam as a nation state involved for instance the systemic erasure of regional variants of Buddhism which had been rather independent of the Bangkok regime, including those practiced in northern Thailand (Keyes 1971; Tiyavanich 1997). Not only was the religion folded into the administrative hierarchy of the modern state, it was later also wielded to make ethnic minority highlanders into proper members of Thai society through a missionary project. Given these dynamics, it is particularly telling that at a Buddhist ordination ceremony for ethnic minority men in the northern city of Chiangmai in 1994 that marked the 30th anniversary of this missionary project, members of the parade held a banner that declared *pheua anurak prapheni lanna thai*; "for the preservation of northern Thai customs." This may express the ultimate irony of heritage-work as internal colonialism; national modernization and state control were projected as the preservation of "local" and/or "ethnic" culture (cf. Jonsson and Taylor 2003:179-181)—the missionary project accommodates neither northern Thai nor ethnic minority traditions. These dynamics are not specific to rural areas, there are many equally glaring contradictions between lived realities and the focus of heritage- and identity-work in the city of Bangkok (Askew 2002,; Klima 2002).

Contemporary identity work is deeply entangled with the dynamics of official recognition (cf. Greenwood 1985). One recent example from a lowland peasant area of Chiangmai Province in northern Thailand concerns the revival of a blessing ceremony aimed at securing village prosperity, where a male and a female buffalo are married. As it was reported in a national newspaper in early June, 2004, the ceremony "was one of the village's long-standing traditional events before it faded away for a long time, only to be revived about four years ago." The revived event was to be "presided over by the sheriff and a provincial-livestock official [and] the marriage will also be registered" (*The Nation,* June 9, 2004). That is, even explicitly local and un-modern practices involve agents of the state and seek state-legitimation through registration. But to state that certain practices are invented and thus entangled in process-

es of political manipulation (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) may invite an assumed contrast of "spectacle" with authentic practice (cf. Acciaioli 1985). The issue is not the authenticity or manipulation of cultural practice but the particular dynamics of engendering subjects and of consolidating particular fields of social interaction, such as the apparent shift in Mien social life from normative households to normative villages. All traditions must be reproduced in social life, within larger settings that impact how they are carried out. The question whether certain traditions are invented fails to deliver much insight into cultural dynamics as any reproduction can ultimately be considered an invention.

In a study that concerns in part the (re-) emergence of Andalusian culture, Collier (1997) argues that tradition is not "modernity's opposite [but that it] is modern as well…It is modernity itself that makes tradition a crucial resource for modern subjects in their struggles to preserve 'self-respect, autonomy, and a life with meaning'" (1997:215, quoting Jean Jackson). There is some irony in contemporary Andalusians' path to their traditions: "However lively and intelligent Esteban's mother might have been, Esteban and his wife could not ask her to teach her grandchildren about their Andalusian heritage. They had to buy the *Gran Enciclopedia de Andalusia* instead" (1997:217). The process that Jane Collier describes, of the systemic undermining of ordinary people's practices and of their knowledge in favor of the written work of intellectuals, is characteristic of contemporary identity work beyond the cases of Thailand and Spain. It is also exemplary of the common conflation of state control with matters of heritage, where museums provide some of the most symbolically and politically loaded sites for various rituals concerning modern nations and their citizens (Duncan 1995).

Museum and encyclopedias embody official truths and/or claims to official recognition. In Thailand as much as in Vietnam, for instance, museum displays center on notions of national historicity; the kinds of objects, encounters, and actors that engender a link between people, land, and history, and which lend a particular shape to how nations are imagined and experienced (Jonsson 2002; Jonsson and Taylor 2003; cf. Handler and Gable 1997 for the US). In these museum spaces, commemorated heritage is a combination of national grandeur and rural people's traditions, which accentuates the spatial and temporal binary of modernity and tradition and obliterates any articulations of identity and heritage that do not match these state projects. Outside of this museum context, but in tandem, the Mien Association has recently produced a handbook of Mien culture for younger people to be in touch with

their roots and for which they interviewed various older people as "resource persons" (Jonsson 2003b, 2003c). For modernity's alter-natives in Thailand, as elsewhere, the path to their roots is paved with claims to legibility and official recognition. Tradition is, in other words, a modernist project and this Mien auto-ethnography may serve as a "passport into the elegant society" of contemporary Thailand in a way that renders obsolete a range of Mien agendas, voices, and lived realities.[18]

An ethnographic quest for Mien traditions is likely to simply reproduce the biases inherent in the Thai public sphere regarding tradition as either officially recognized heritage or as an impediment to national well being that must be eradicated via modernization. This is not to say that modernity and/or modernization inherently homogenize social worlds. If they did, Mien people would be collectively engaged in their exemplary traditions, for instance, or would come together for sports contests and not combine athletic competitions with older forms of music and dance and/or with eco-wisdom as a cultural and political front in their quest for rights and recognition. If the actions of contemporary Thailand's Mien people are an indication of modernity's alter-natives more generally, they stand as a reminder that in spite of the the force of the state's modernization projects and in spite of globalization's impact, the homogenization inherent in these dynamics has not been particularly successful.

For over a decade, Thailand's Mien have organized to articulate matters of culture and development, features that replicate the contrast between tradition and modernity. This is a relatively new development, and one may follow Kipp (1993) and Tooker (2004) in seeing this as a manifestation of how identities have become dissociated and/or compartmentalized in the contemporary world. But it is an ethnohistorical as much as an analytical question whether the identities and cultures of contemporary ethnic groups were in fact integrated with livelihood and other aspects of everyday life in ways that reinforced the lived experience of the members of these ethnic groups. Judging from the Mien case, where pre-national identities were articulated in relation to tributary schemes, ethnicity was about rank and rights and there were significant differences in status, power, and cultural practice between chiefs and commoners. What hinterland chiefs and commoners shared was a differentiated position within a regional network of rights and duties that drew on and referred to lowland kings and other rulers. It was only with the colonial-era undoing of these tributary schemes that ethnicity went from indexing rank to becoming, with the consolidation of nation states, the carrier of tradition as

heritage-cum-property (Jonsson in press). This shift has neither been uniform nor wholesale. Still, this trend suggests that not only are the notions of tradition and modernity very much a product of modernity, ethnic groups as the containers of tradition may be equally historically specific to this particular condition. The anthropological expectation that ethnic groups were or are the carriers of tradition may derive from the same cultural framework as the notion that modernity erodes tradition, namely that of modernity itself. Because the social sciences have been entangled with modernity from their inception, our studies of modernity and its impact always carry the risk of replicating its conceptual logic (cf. Hayami 2003:237-239).

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ENDNOTES

[1]Englund and Leach (2000) problematize modernity's assumed break with the past, and suggest that contrasts between premodern and modern realities have often been overdrawn. In a somewhat similar fashion, Tsing (2000) suggests that studies of globalization have tended to assume that a given set of features characterized the so-known process, in ways that neglected a significant range of continuities and complexities. The naming of phenomena constructs as it identifies, and this of course holds equally for such notions as gender and ethnic groups.

[2]Tooker's time-frame is 1982-1985 for the "traditional" period, and 1985-1998 for the post-traditional setting. The study village consisted of Akha who had fled persistent warfare in Burma and settled on the Thai side in 1982.

[3]Buddhism served as the fundamental vehicle of/for societal integration, differentiation, and spectacle.

[4]For violence in the highlands, see Hearn 1974; Race 1974; for the lowlands, Bowie 1997.

[5]While colonial take-overs in the region were often violent, Western writers tended to depict colonial rule, as much as capitalist economic relations, as a blessing. One explicit example is Francis Garnier's account of the French exploration of the Mekong River in 1866-68, where he remarks that the local peoples in northern Thailand and Laos had experienced much warfare from Burmese and Thai forces: "The locals deeply desired a less violent state of affairs, more regular and stable, and this aspiration, which was general, would be singularly favorable to the attempts of a European power, should it interest itself in the affairs of the region" (Garnier 1996:56). Within three decades of this account, French colonial authorities ruled all of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam as their Indochina.

[6]Here I follow Thai convention, where people are identified by their first name, but use last name in citations and the bibliography.

[7]Following academic conventions, I use the ethnolinguistic term Tai in reference to northern Thai, Lao, Shan, and Lue peoples and traditions, and Thai for Siamese (Central Thai).

This is not an exhaustive list of the relevant Tai "peoples", nor is the Thai/Tai distinction unproblematic or politically neutral.

[8]Relevant discussion includes Demaine 1986 on Thai understandings of development; Winichakul (2000a, 2000b) on civilizational discourses in the contact zones of Siamese upper-class self fashioning during the colonial era and in their proto-ethnographies of the lowland and highland countryside; and Mills 1999 on how lower class and rural labor migrants engage with "modernity" through consumption.

[9]There is no single date for the emergence of this trend in Thai national life, but in many ways it only goes back to the 1980s. To those who see history happening from above, the Thai Queen's efforts to revive previously-regionally-specific weaving traditions have been of fundamental importance. An alternative perspective on the dynamics of history would emphasize the nostalgic quest for true essences that to some degree expresses a modernist worldview, cf. Morris 2000. While there are examples of such a view in Thailand from the early twentieth century, it was not widespread until the 1980s, cf. Reynolds 1998. My concern is with the social phenomenon more than its "origins."

[10]*Kwa-tang* refers to the first of three levels of Daoist ordination rituals which give men rank in the spirit world. These rituals, that have been the prerogative of better-off households, preclude men's change in kin-group affiliation. Only wealthy households could afford to fix their members' allegiance in this way (see Yoshino 1995). With political economic and other changes, there is less of a motivation to take on these expensive rituals. But there has also been a change in ritual/ethnic orientation, manifest for instance in a *kwa-tang* ordination that was sponsored by the headmaster of the school in Pangkha village in the late 1980s and held, as he stated it to me in 1993, for the purpose of preserving Mien culture.

[11]The exchange rate at the time was Baht 25 to $1 US. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the Baht was devalued to 50 to the dollar, and since then the exchange rate has settled at about Baht 40 to the dollar.

[12]The issue concerns state-sponsored capitalist transformation of the countryside that destroys farmers' livelihood while often benefitting the rich in the cities and the countryside. Moralist commentary on this process essentializes farming populations and laments their uprooting, often assuming a "pristine" condition of subsistence farming and unique ties to the land. The implications of such transformations, and the interpretation of the flow of history, is clearest in the most generalized cases, e.g. Wolf 1982, that tend to gloss over local continuities and complexities. For more complex renderings of transformations of the countryside in Southeast Asia, see Scott 1985; Eder 1999; and Ganjanapan 2000.

[13]The association of highland peoples and places with filth was common in Thailand at least until the early 1990s. One example is a newspaper column in Thai Rath from the early 1980s that characterized highland places as "dull and dark houses," and the people as "still not liking to take a bath" and clinging to their "animist beliefs." In spite of the ten-year presence of the government's Hill Tribe Center for Development and Welfare, the people "still remain *chao khao* [mountain peoples]" (quoted in Laungaramsri 2001:46). That is, ethnicity and cleanliness are two sides of the same coin, where Thai is the positive marker and "mountain peoples" the negative.

[14]See for instance Barnes, Gray, and Kingsbury 1995 for Asia, and Warren and Jackson 2002 for Latin America.

[15]IMPECT (Inter Mountain People's Culture, Education, and Development in Thailand) was formed in about 1990, as a splinter-group from MPCDE (Mountain People's Culture, Development, and Education) that dates to roughly the mid 1980s. MPCD (later an E was added) was formed by a Dutch anthropologist working with the Akha, and the organization's funding was largely or exclusively international, available because of a Western ("global") concern with traditional cultures and peoples as endangered. MPCD was modern and transnational, the subsequent IMPECT was equally modern but more national. Some of the difference

concerns leadership (Dutch versus ethnic minority people with Thai citizenship) and other the national political climate, particularly the increasing proliferation of NGO groups.

[16]Jatuworapruk's (1998) ethnography of Lisu, one of the ethnic minority groups in Thailand's north, is a notable exception to this trend in its focus on contemporary marginalization in rural communities in relation to political economy, religious practice, and identity work. Ganjanapan (2000) and Laungaramsri (2001) exemplify a growing critical attention among Thai academics to issues of modernity and marginality.

[17]In Book III of his *Leges* (*The Laws*), Plato employs a dialogue between two named men and an "Athenian stranger" to suggest "the first origin and transformation of political regimes" (676c; Pangle 1980:59). One premise of the discourse is that repeatedly, disasters "have destroyed human beings and left only a tiny remnant of the human race." When the disaster was a flood that "[utterly destroyed] cities settled in the plains and along the sea," the survivors "would almost all be mountain herdsmen [free of] the contrivances that city dwellers use against one another, [and not] motivated by the desire to have more, the love of victory, and all the other mischief [that city people] think up against each other" (677a-c; Pangle 1980:59). As Caro-Baroja (1963) renders the dialogue; "after the deluge only three political orders were established in all the known world: the simplest and most rustic in the mountain heights, and a second, somewhat later in time, on the slopes of the same mountains. Little by little men living on the lower slopes acquired self-confidence and courage, and then, the third and most modern political order was formed, on the plains" (1963:29). The people in the mountains were honest and had no reason for ill will toward one another, they lived in "naïve simplicity" (679c; Pangle 1980:62). With the move downhill, people grew in virtue and vices as they established cities and engaged in commerce, and then a disaster would wipe out these more sophisticated areas, and in each case there would be not even the memories left (678a; Pangle 1980:60). The origin and transformation of political regimes would begin again from a clean slate among the simple mountain folk. This process may be called a lapsarian loop. The closed circle offers the main contrast to more recent Western ideas about "primitive" society (see Kuper 1988 for the latter).

[18]Collier notes that while the cultural encyclopedia was held in high regard, the practices it described were not seen as desirable as practice because they indexed a stigmatized Andalusian unmodernity. Instead, the knowledge of practices was valued as ethnic heritage that was best kept in books and other venues that were distinct from everyday social life (1997: 150-220). It is my impression that a similar ambiguity characterizes Mien codifications of their culture-as-ethnicity, but also that this process has so far been very uneven in different areas of Mien settlements.