

# The Borders Within: The Akha at the Frontiers of National Integration<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

National incorporation of the hill ethnic minorities in Thailand emphasises the imperative of territoriality and national loyalty. In many peripheral areas, the enforcement of aggressive drug prevention and control policy has reshaped district authorities' conception about membership in the nation-state at the expense of several hill villagers struggle for the rights to belong. Focusing on the ethnic Akha people, this paper examines how national integration project interweaved the issues of territory and citizenship, through an exploration of the development of historical conditions upon which state-ethnic relationship was formed. To understand the national integration in practice, the paper investigates the practices of district officials in citizenship registration procedures. It shows that the interconnected network of border politics has manipulated the procedures and turned the issue of citizenship into powerful apparatus in controlling and abusing hill villagers. The politicisation and ethnicisation of the issue of citizenship by district officials, it is argued, have effectively created internal barriers that exclude the hill ethnic minorities from participating meaningfully in the national realms.

## Introduction

### January 23, 2005: Mae Fa Luang district, Chiang Rai

Rows and rows of tofu in different preparations were proudly displayed on a table stall, refused to be outdone by innumerable varieties of pickle vegetables – typical of Shan diets. A soybean milk stall stands close by where young and elder Chinese-Yunnanese men chat over their hot cup. Next to the stall, an elder Shan woman, flowers in her hair, patiently bargain for a bunch of slim, red fishes “freshly caught from a forested stream,” proclaimed the proud vendor in *kham muang* tinged with her Akha accent. “Care for *Lorshor*?” she attended to another prospective buyer, a young Lahu woman undetermined of what vegetable to bring home. Vendors in a nearby shop busied themselves unpacking loads of cheap Chinese-imported toys, to the delight of young Hmong and Lisu clients. As usual, this lively morning market at Hin Taek - a former stronghold of the Shan druglord Khun Sa, has never failed to impress visitors. Local, however, have something more interesting today. They will become “full Thai citizen.”

Inside the meeting hall of one of the village's main Chinese schools, the banner on the wall over the main stage decorated with Thai flags read in Thai *phithee prakas ton pen polamuang Thai* (literally, the ceremony to declare oneself as a Thai citizen.) Below the high wall, at the left corner of the stage, were placed Buddha images and their offerings. Close by, stood the human-sized portraits of King Bhumipol and Queen Sirikit of Thailand. All set, the props speak the volume of the three pillars of the Thai identity; *chat, satsana, phramahakasat*. Outside, rows of new Thai citizen, in their best ethnic dress lied up to complete the registration procedures. From the outfits, it can be seen the majority of them Shan, the rest, the mixture of ethnicities; Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and Hmong, a reflection of the realities of multi-ethnicities in this district. Those registered came inside the building to find their place. Over the loudspeaker, a district official rehearsed the procedures to be solemnly followed.

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Attendants must rise when the Chiang Rai governor- the chair of the ceremony arrives. His entourage included Mae Fa Luang district chief, district chief police, *kamnans* and *puyaiiban* who head sub-districts and villages respectively. These officials have their places set separately from other attendants, the Thai way of space arrangement to indicate power hierarchy. According to this arrangement, the highest in power (*puyai* or *nai*) will be sitting at the centre, distinguishable from others who are lower in positions and ranks by special seat and services provided. The governor arrived. The audience rose. The process began. Incense sticks and candles were lit to pay homage to the Buddha images. The governor and his entourages took their seats. The district chief approached the podium.

“About 806 Mae Fa Luang residents become Thai citizen today by the approval of the Interior Minister. Therefore, they are now ‘full Thai’ and are free to go anywhere. However, when you have entitled to rights, you also have duties to be abided by the laws. Those who are men will have to be conscripted. Motorists must apply for a proper driving license. Anyone of you if found involved in drugs, will have your Thai ID cards been revoked, because you have betrayed the Interior Minister, the Governor, and me. If anyone of you thinks this is too much a burden, you can return the Thai ID card to me.”

Attendants were then called upon to receive their Thai ID cards from the authorities. Card givers and receivers face each other in two parallel lines. The authorities’ line was headed with of course, the governor, followed by the district chief, chief police, *kamnans*, chairs of each Tambon Administrative Organisations, and village heads. The distribution of the cards continued spontaneously, except for a pause one in a while when the governor posed for TV camera crews and newspaper photographers. The governor, before giving the card to its owner, read out the name, before suggesting a name change which can be done at a minimal fee. To wrap up the ceremony, a man dressed in Shan outfit led the newly-become Thai citizen in making a vow that they will 1) be a good citizen 2) abide by the laws 3) not involve in drug 4) respect and honour the monarchy 5) be loyal to the nation and the monarchy. The most interesting part of the ceremony, however, was when the young Shan lady, told the meeting that after this ceremony, she and other “children of the Shan people,” will lit the incense stick to pay homage to the spirit of the first ruler of Mae Hong Song province whom she said was the ancestors of the Shan people here, “to tell him that his children have now become Thai citizen.” Hin Taek, by the way, was renamed Thoed Thai (honouring Thai) soon after Khun Sa was forced out of Thailand in 1982.

## Overview

Against the ethnically divergent backdrop, only the dominant ethnic group “Thai” can be proudly declared in such a ritual of national consciousness. Ethnic differences materially manifested through clothes, languages, and practices are allowed and tolerated as long as they serve the ultimate goal of glorifying the pride of national identity. The ritual of national consciousness narrated above tells a lot about state-ethnic relationship in the modern nation-state of Thailand. The hill ethnic minorities<sup>2</sup> are characterised as alien to Thai society and culture. Thus, in authorities’ understanding, they lack loyalty to what the Thai people in general hold dearly as the pillars of the Thai nation. The state-ethnic relationship which has been evolved through the duo discourses of “hill-tribe” and “otherness,” therefore, dictates that the hill ethnic minorities take their vow of loyalty before becoming a Thai citizen. The

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<sup>2</sup> Used here to mean the nine officially listed ethnic groups called “hill tribes.” They are the Karen, Hmong, Mien, Akha Lahu, Lisu, Khamu, Lua, and Mlabri. Critiques contended both “hill tribes” and its Thai equivalent “*chao khao*” carry prejudice and gives incorrect definition to the groups it referred to.

logic underscores state authorities' perception about the hill villager seemed to be that; because they are "others," they cannot be trusted. They cannot be trusted because they are "others." In the beginning of the nation building process, many upland ethnic minorities had not been incorporated due largely to their remote settings. Central power in Bangkok only indirectly ruled over the peripheries and their people. The socio-economic and political developments in the 1970s had changed this. During the 1970 and 1980s, states carpeted most northern hills with "development" projects, and cleared large areas of forests to control communists' activities. The real intention is to regulate border and to control its dwellers. In present day modern Thailand, new tensions arose between states that have claimed power over "national" resources, and hill dwellers whose livelihoods depend on their participation in the management and use of the forest. Throughout the country, forest and land use disputes had taken people to the street, and in some cases, to the Government House, a symbol of the highest authority. State responded with a variety of measures; negotiation, ignorance, and violation.

The issue of citizenship or the lack thereof, is one major area of contention. In its national trajectory, Thai states have deployed legislations and programmes that tie membership of the nation-state to citizen's expression of loyalty to the three pillars of the Thai nation. Related laws stipulate that a person born in Thailand automatically obtain Thai citizenship. The laws are not automatically applied to a member of the hill ethnic minorities, though. The perception of them as alien that permeates all social stratum has dictated the deployment of different set of laws with regard to their legal status. Depending on the social and political situation at a particular period, these policies and laws included the hill people at one time, and excluded them at the other. In the past few years, concerns over the mobility of people and drugs across the border have seen the stagnation in authorities' policy and programmes addressing the lack of legal status of the hill villagers. The Thai state has been cautious about giving out citizenship to the hill ethnic minorities whom it thinks might not be qualify to be a citizen of the Thai nation-state. Focusing on the ethnic Akha people, this paper explores the politics of membership within the context of state-ethnic relationship at the peripheral areas. To begin with, historical developments of state-ethnic relationship and state understanding of citizenship, borders, and people who live within its boundaries, provides a point of entry as well as serving as a basis upon which further analysis could be made.

### **State-ethnic relationship and national integration**

With the estimated 1.2 million ethnic minority people who account for some 5.25 percent of Thailand's 63 million populations, Thailand might not be considered as much ethnically diverse as its neighbouring countries. In Laos, Burma and Vietnam, indigenous people per the total population range from 45.7, 14.3, and 13.6 percent respectively (Kampe 1997). Two different definitions were given. The first, by the Department of Provincial Administration, refers to the ethnic minorities as "individual without Thai nationality, whose numbers are smaller than the majority Thai people, and whose culture, customs, and tradition are different from the majorities." The department has categorised 17 ethnic minorities (see Appendix A). According to the second definition by the then Hill Tribe Welfare Division, ethnic minorities are "temporary residents of the Northern highlands, who are usually migrated between Thai-Burma, or Thai-Lao borders. The list included Palong, Taungthu, Tailue, Chinese Haw, Shan, Khmer, Chinese, Mon, Burmese, and Laotian.

One important ethnic minority category is "*bukkol bon puenthee soong/ chumchon bon puenthee soong* (literally highland people/community).<sup>3</sup> The Department of Social

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<sup>3</sup> State regulations defined the highland as areas in 20 provinces that have slope of over 35° or situated over 500 metres above the sea level. Currently, the 20 provinces are Kanchana Buri, Kampaengphet, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Tak, Nan, Prachuab Khiri Khan, Phayao, Phitsanulok, Petch Buri, Petchabun,

Development and Welfare in 2002 reported there were some 1,203,149 people living in the highlands in 20 provinces. Three groups were identified; the “hill tribes,” ethnic minorities (the second definition), and lowland people who had moved upland. The “hill tribes” numbered 923,257, followed by the lowland group (212,720), and ethnic minorities (67,172). Over the past three decades, state policies with regard to each ethnic minority categories differed, depending on the socio-political context surrounding the presence of each ethnic minority in Thailand, and also on state’s understanding and perception of each category. The focus of successive governments, however, has always been on the highland people residing in the north mountain of Thailand.

The birth of the modern Thai nation-state had impacted on the relationship between the central authority in what were then Siam, and its northern peripheries. Before 1874, the region was comprised of a number of semi-autonomous principalities, with Chiang Mai as a political dominant capital. Both the lowlands and upland peoples paid tribute to these princes in return for the rights to lands. Thus, indirect contact had been established between the hill people and principalities’ authorities. The North was formally integrated into the nation and a commissioner sent from Bangkok to take over the powers of the local princes in 1874. Two decades later, part of the reforms of King Chulalongkorn has seen an establishment of a provincial administration. This had further established the assumption of political authority by the Bangkok government (LeMay 1926; Manndorff 1967; Nimmanhaeminda 1967; Walker 1975; Kundstadter 1969). The reforms of King Chulalongkorn had brought an end to the relative autonomy of Northern Thailand. Accordingly, the birth of the modern Thai nation-state and the mapping of the country’s territories, which dictated clear identification of national borders and citizen, had significantly affected power relationship between state and its citizen.

Relationships between the ethnic minorities who reside in the upland areas in the North – the peripheries, and the central power in Bangkok, has thus been evolved from semi-independent to close surveillance when the peripheries were enclosed in the national realm. In essence, the Thai state had expanded its nation building process from the centre to the peripheries. However, before the perceived threat of communism in the 1970s, the Thai state made small demand on the hill ethnic minority population, whose residence in the mountainous areas was for several decades, excluded them from the central power in Bangkok.<sup>4</sup> However, authorities had considered incorporating them in their national agenda, after perceiving the looming “threat” of communism due to the war in neighbouring countries. The hill ethnic minorities have become the major target of national integration policy due to their strategic settlements in the hills of north Thailand, their farming system of shifting cultivation that state authorities have linked to forest destruction, and the opium cultivation among some groups. Several policies and programmes have since been implemented to address these concerns. Additionally, their cultural differences have made them “under-privileged,” and “backward,” in the eyes of authorities and the public in general. A director general of the Public Welfare Department once addressed the 1967 Symposium of the now-defunct Tribal Research Centre<sup>5</sup> that “the hill tribes of Thailand constitute a minority

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Phrae, Mae Hong Son, Ratch Buri, Loei, Lampang, Lamphun, Sukhothai, Suphan Buri, and Uthai Thani.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the first census in 1956 to register and issue household registration paper for Thai excluded the hill ethnic minorities.

<sup>5</sup> Officially opened in 1965, the centre was later renamed the Tribal Research Institute in 1984. It was dissolved in 2002 as a result of bureaucratic reform. During the height of the war against communism in the 1970s, the centre and its foreign researchers’ roles were implicated in counterinsurgency projects, accusations they strongly rejected. For details of this “Thailand controversy,” see Hinton (2002), Geddes (1983).

group, which, as elsewhere, poses political, administrative, economic and social problems for the Government,” (Ruenyote 1969:12).

In 1956, the government set up the Committee to Provide Welfare to People in Remote Areas, which was renamed the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee, and later, the Hill Tribe Committee. These committees focused on what have always been considered to be the “hill tribe problem” – poppy growing, shifting cultivation and a threat to national security (Bhruksasri 1978:1). During 1960-1961, four *Nikhoms* (so-called self-help resettlement areas) were established in an attempt to permanently settle and confine different “hill-tribe” groups in one place. These efforts proved a monumental failure. The Public Welfare Department (PWD) instead sent the mobile teams to reach the hill villages (Public Welfare Department 1971:24-26). It also hired some of them to work with the team to help communicate its plan.<sup>6</sup> To obtain socio-economic information about the hill community, two major surveys took places during 1961-1962, and 1965-1966 with the supports of international organisations including the United Nations. On July 6, 1976, the then Cabinet issued the resolution which committed the Royal Thai Government to “a policy under which assistance is given to the hill tribes for the express purpose of helping them to become first class, self-reliant Thai citizen...” (Bhruksasri 1989:18). Integral to this policy were the creation of national loyalty, opium eradication, natural conservation and socio-economic development of the hill ethnic minorities. Additional measures included the population census surveys, and the push out of new immigrants. Consequently, authorities have initiated “development programmes” mostly funded by foreign donors as well as international and local non-governmental organisations. These programmes’ main objectives were meant to securing borders, substituting opium cultivation, and raising level of well-being of the hill ethnic minority people. Meanwhile, in order to identify and control the hill ethnic minorities, an array of strategies had been deployed with an apparent objective to identify the hill populations, as well as to alter their livelihood. Major among these measures were state surveys and registration of the hill people<sup>7</sup>, the building of schools in highland areas by the Border Patrol Police,<sup>8</sup> and the sending of the Buddhist missionary to the highland.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the state’s representation of the hill ethnic minorities has informed their plans related to these people, which have since been anchored in an overall national plan dealing with the control of access to forests and land uses, drug control, and permanent settlements.

### **On making the Thai citizen**

In order to create the national loyalty among the “alien” hill villagers, states have employed policies and laws that will register them as citizen. In Thailand, citizenship conferral reflected the influence of the territorialised idea of nation. Thai citizenship, is thus, based on the principle of *ius soli* (literally, law of the soil), meaning citizenship as obtained based on birth in the territory of the country.<sup>10</sup> However, a member of the hill ethnic

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<sup>6</sup> One of them is a Lisu man called Yibaw by Sturgeon (2005) and Hanks and Hanks (2001). Despite his retirement from the civil services, district officials frequently seek for his advice. He is also appointed as one of the district committees approving applications for legal status of the hill villagers.

<sup>7</sup> The 1920 anthropological survey by the Siam Society was limited in its reaches, and based on few questionnaires sent to provincial offices (Preechasilpakul and Khongcharoen 2002:22). Before state first survey of the hill people in 1969, Gordon Young’s 1960 survey had been a reference for most studies on the hill ethnic minorities.

<sup>8</sup> Established in 1953, this paramilitary organisation was assigned to protect the border and to win loyalty of the hill ethnic minorities. For its programmes and activities see Walker (1970:59; Kunstadter 1967a:381-2; Saihoo 1970:45).

<sup>9</sup> In 1965, the PWD supported the Buddhist Missionary Dharmajarik project of the Education Ministry and the set up of the Public Relations Department’s Hill Tribe broadcasting with funds and equipments from the United States.

<sup>10</sup> Several scholars (Renard 1993; Wyatt 1984; Sturgeon 2005) have attributed the evolution of citizenship in Siam and then Thailand to the role of the royal family particularly that of King

minorities is an exception, and the law of the soil cannot be applied to them. Why? Because state authorities thought they are different, they lack the sense of national belonging, and their livelihoods are backward and destructive to the environment. Despite increasing availability of evidence that prove to the contrary,<sup>11</sup> yet, the governing discourses of “hill tribe” and “otherness” are so powerful that state authorities have continued to let it inform their policies and plans for the upland ethnic minorities. Accordingly, the consideration of hill people citizenship needs to involve different policies and principle. In considering the legal status of members of the hill ethnic minorities, state takes into consideration; their birth place, or their date of entry into the kingdom, their parent’s status, their parents’ birthplace, and other supporting documents<sup>12</sup> and witnesses provided. Related laws and regulations stipulated that only the hill people, who are considered “original” people, can apply to their district chief for the registration of their citizenship in the household document. They are persons who were born in Thailand during April 10, 1913 - December 13, 1972. This is the time the first Nationality Act had been enforced (Central Registration Bureau’s Regulation on the Registration of Personal Status in the Household Document of Highland People B.E.2543:4). Other hill ethnic minorities who had moved from other countries into Thailand either get “legal immigrant” status, or “illegal immigrant” status depending on whether they entered Thailand before or after October 3, 1985, according to the Cabinet Resolution on October 3, 1995.

Indeed, through these classifications of the hill ethnic minorities in relation to their legal status legitimacy, the Thai states have effectively deployed a technology of power to control them. Before the issuance of the Cabinet Resolution of October 3, 1995, the hill ethnic villagers were considered Thai citizen, but whose citizenship had yet to be registered in the household document. The Hill Tribe Committee’s sub-committee on administration and registration, at the meeting on May 8, 1973 proposed that;

“Most hill people have long been settled in Thailand’s territory. Legally, they are citizen, whose citizenship has yet to be registered in the household document. This is not their mistake, however. It is just because state authorities had failed to reach them at their locations. Thus, it is not appropriate to ‘give’ citizenship to the hill people who are already Thai citizen. The better resolution should be the official registration of their citizenship in the household paper.”

The Hill Tribe Committee approved this proposal and proposed that the Interior Ministry take further action. The Ministry on December 20, 1974, issued the ministerial regulation relating to the registration of Thai citizenship in the household document of the hill people.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, hill people living in Thailand had been assigned the status of Thai citizenship, awaiting the official registration of such status in their household document. The *de facto* citizenship of the hill people had been affected when the Cabinet in 1995 issued the resolution on October 3. This edict which was intended to address the hill villagers who had “long been immigrated into the country” designated them as “legal immigrants,” provided that they;

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Vajiravudh, hailed as the founder of the three pillars of the Thai nation. These trinity of the Thai nation had later been emphasised by elite nationalists, prominent among them were Field Marshall Plaek Pibulsongkram, and Luang Wichitwathakan (Barne:1993).

<sup>11</sup> Such as shifting cultivation which properly managed, is the most appropriate mode of upland cultivation (Kammerer 1989; Grandstaff 1976;).

<sup>12</sup> Such as birth certificate, papers issued by authorities as evidence of their being surveyed and registered by state agencies, and other papers which might be used to prove their eligibility.

<sup>13</sup> This regulation was later replaced by other directives, issued in 1992, 1996 and 2000. The present regulation has been enforced since 2000, as a result of discussion between state officials, scholars, rights groups and the hill people. Its contents are said to be friendlier to the hill people in their proof of citizenship eligibility.

1. are “hill tribes”<sup>14</sup> who have been registered, and were issued with highland people ID card, or having their names in the temporary household registration paper.
2. have been resided in Thailand at least 15 years, or have been residing successively in one district for at least 10 years at the time the Cabinet Resolution comes into force. (This residency qualification must be certified by the District Hill Tribe Committee or the Kamnan, or the village head).
3. are laws abiding persons.
4. interest in the use of Thai language.
5. are loyal to the Thai nation and the symbolic head of the nation.
6. have good records of cooperating, assist, or do good services to the state and community.
7. having stable income, decent occupations.
8. are not opium growers, users, or involve in drug trade.
9. are not the perpetrator or promoter or supporter of forest destruction and other natural resources.
10. The qualifications as stated in (5), (6), (7), (8), (9) must be certified by at least three persons that are;
  1. Thai citizen with state-approved trustworthiness and,
  2. Tambon Council Committee and,
  3. Civil servant of C-4 level or higher whose responsibility covers the same area where the applicant live.

There have been great confusions and mistakes when this Cabinet Resolution comes into practice. Many “original” hill people, who might well claim citizenship, had instead been considered as legal immigrants, who after five year can apply for the naturalisation. From “original” people to “legal immigrant,” the status of the hill ethnic minorities changed again, by virtue of the Cabinet Resolution on August 29, 2000. This resolution divided the hill ethnic minority people into three categories;

1. Original hill people. These are persons born during April 10, 1913 and December 13, 1972. They are entitled to Thai citizenship, so are their children.
2. Legal immigrants. They are hill people who entered the kingdom before or on October 3, 1985. Their children who are born in Thailand can apply for Thai citizenship from the Interior Minister.
3. Illegal Immigrants, meaning hill people who entered the country after October 3, 1985. They cannot apply for any legal status and must be repatriated; neither do their children who had been born in Thailand.

Now, the new term “illegal immigrant,” had been added into state’s terminology depot about the hill people. These abundant classifications ensured that authorities are adequately provided with terms to exploit at will, to suit their convenient in the implementation of different policies on the hill people during different social and political environment. However, the classification set was based not on real situation. It is the result of frequent reviving concerns about drug, national security, and environmental destruction - guided by the ugly duo-discourses of otherness and “hill-tribe” - that state authorities have always deployed as effective tool in their control of the hill ethnic minorities. When it comes to implementation, the Pandora box was opened.

Regulations required that applicants produce state-certified document as evidence of their eligibility to the legal status. Authorities ignored the fact that state surveys had excluded many hill villagers. Additionally, several mistakes occurred during the process of registering personal details of each hill villagers; their date of birth, place of birth, date of entry into the

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<sup>14</sup> One of the nine officially recognised hill ethnic groups as mentioned in the related laws.

kingdom, the birth place of their parents, etc. Enforcing the policy without addressing these realities, as has been the case in the decision of officials in many districts, has resulted in misinterpretation, bitterness, complaints, and petitions. Many original hill people, who had been excluded from the survey, have become legal or illegal immigrants. In several cases, families have seen some of their children become Thai, others, legal or illegal immigrants regardless of the fact that they had been born in Thailand.

Unsurprisingly, after over three decades of state's national integration aiming to turn the hill ethnic minorities into the "first-class, self-reliant" Thai citizen, there remains about 400,000 of them struggling for the rights to belong.<sup>15</sup> In Mae Fa Luang district alone, such people outnumbered residents with Thai citizenship (43,000: 34,000).<sup>16</sup> However, when the national policy has been actually implemented at the district level, there are more factors than just terminology flaws that accounted for slowness in procedures, frustration, and continued lack of legal status of huge numbers of hill villagers. These factors are the interweaving of power of the network of district registrars, *kammans*, *phuyai ban*, and other types of local influentials – a web that Sturgeon (2005) called "small border polities." In order to understand how this interconnected network works, and how it contributes to the lack of citizenship among the hill people, I have observed citizenship application procedures at the district level, stayed in the hill villages, visited the district office and talked to officials, as testified in the following narratives.

### **The Akha: a case study of national integration**

The ethnic Akha<sup>17</sup> people are listed as one of the nine so-called "hill-tribes" officially recognised by authorities. There are between three and five hundred thousand Akha residing in Yunnan and in the highlands of Southeast Asia stretching from Burma's eastern Shan States through northern Thailand and western Laos, apparently into the north-west corner of Vietnam (Kammerer 1989:269). The first Akha settlement in northern Thailand was founded just after the turn of the century (Alting von Geusau 1983:246). Akha population in Thailand as reported by authorities in 2002 is 68,653. The majority of them (59,782) live in Chiang Rai with the highest number concentrated in Mae Fa Luang district (Ministry of Social Welfare and Human Security 2002). Numerically, the Akha is the ethnic majority, not minority in Mae Fa Luang (over 80 per cent of its population).<sup>18</sup> In Mae Fa Luang district, I chose an Akha village in Tambon Mae Salong Nai, close to the Thai-Burma border as my fieldwork site attracted by its settlement history, strategic location, and its large numbers of "non-Thai" residents. This village which I named Akhapu,<sup>19</sup> is about 105 kilometres from Chiang Rai town.<sup>20</sup> It is one village among earlier Akha settlements in Thailand. Its residents comprised of four generations. The Thai-Burma border is within an hour walk from the village.

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<sup>15</sup> The current numbers range from 377,677 by the Department of Provincial Administration to 42,000 by the National Security Council.

<sup>16</sup> According to a district registrar.

<sup>17</sup> For more study on Akha ethnic identity, cultural and social structure sees Alting von Geusau 1983; Feingold 1976; Hanks 1974; Hanks and Hanks 1975; Hansson 1983; Hanks&Hanks and Sharp 1964; Kammerer 1989.

<sup>18</sup> The rest ethnic groups include Shan, Chinese Yunnanese (Chinese Haw), Lahu, Lisu, and Hmong. Most of the Shan concentrated in Hin Taek. There are also some Chinese Yunnanese lives in Hin Taek but the majority of them live in Doi Mae Salong (Mae Salong mountain), the former base of the Chinese National Soldiers or the Guomintang armies. These armies fled from China into Burma, and then being expelled into northern part of Thailand into their present locations. Some of them settled in Chiang Mai's Fang and Mae Ai districts.

<sup>19</sup> Not a real name though. This word means an Akha village, in Akha language. Sturgeon (2005) used this term as well.

<sup>20</sup> Thailand's northern most province, bordering Burma and Laos. Before the annexation of the north by what was then Siam which is present day Thailand, Chiang Rai is one of the semi-autonomous

## Akhapu: October 2005

The *pi ma*<sup>21</sup> was just two-years-old when he moved with his parents from the village/town in Burma his parents said was named Mae Jo. At 76, the spirit-priest is one of Akhapu's oldest villagers. He is the second generation of Akhapu's residents, which is also comprised of the third, fourth, and fifth generations. According to the spirit priest, while the first and second generations were immigrants from Burma, the other generations had been born in Thailand. When I ascended his house that day, he looked up, murmuring "ah the *morthorthor*, come take a seat," which I did, on one of the rattan and bamboo stool.<sup>22</sup> He was making one when I arrived. As farming became too hard, the old man makes a few hundred Baht selling stools, baskets and rice containers. His eyes still sharp, his ears were not. Our talk then, sounded like a brawl, a lively one indeed. The old man brought me back to his childhood time. I set my recorders on.

The year was 1932. A famine struck a village in Mae Jo in Burma, after the dark wave of rats invaded, and cleared the village's rice fields within a week. Decided to leave, leaders contacted the Lahu man named Saeja, who was said to rule over the areas surrounding Akhapu then, for a permission to live in his village. Request was granted. Sixteen households came first. In six decades that followed before villagers settled at the present location in 1991, villagers moved eight times. Reasons for abandoning were; fear about evil spirits, leadership dispute, fire, unknown grave sickness, fire, split up, conflict with nearby village, and finally another leadership dispute that led to the division of Akhapu into two settlements. With the presence of the Border Patrol Police (BPP) in the village around 1956,<sup>23</sup> the moves that occurred in recent years were partly influence by the BPP that considered their village was built too close to the border. The *pi ma* as well as other villagers who remembered the first sight of the BPP said they did not know these "big" men in uniform that came in helicopters. The police were quite friendly to villagers; they gave foods and medicines, and *khanom* to children, and distribute cloths and blankets. At night, they visited each houses, talked to their owners and taught them some simple Thai languages,<sup>24</sup> apparently, part of an attempt to assimilate/integrate villagers rather than to improve literacy. Most men who had been in contact with the police can speak some simple Thai and *kham muang* – the northern language; women, none. Where there was no road, villagers carried the sick to hospital, most died on the way. Others, luckier, reached doctors on time, taken by the BPP's helicopter. The lack of health care in the mountain resulted in both the BPP officers and villagers resorted to the opium as medicine, and later consume its full use.

While borders as the nation's territory markers can be demarcated, such understandings seemed to not exist among Akhapu villagers. Nutritious varieties of hill rice were grown on fields the BPP considered Burma's. Cattle were raised there, some being

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principalities in the north. It was built in 1262 by King Mengrai, who later founded Chiang Mai in 1296.

<sup>21</sup> Other Akha sub-group says *boe maw* to mean spirit-priest. Akhapu villagers identify themselves as *ulo* Akha. Other Akha sub-group refers to themselves as *loimi*. Akha living in Doi Pamee in Chiang Rai's Mae Sai district called themselves *ubya* or *pamee* Akha.

<sup>22</sup> Like most villagers, the old man always called me a photographer.

<sup>23</sup> Walker (1970:59) and Tapp 1989: 32) said the BPP was established in 1953 as the very first organisation to initiated contact with the hill people. America, concerned with communists, funded the BPP's work through the United States Operations Mission – USOM (Tapp 1989: 32).

<sup>24</sup>The BPP was different from regular police force and the army, and mainly concerned with border protection. They had established some positive social welfare programmes in the villages they visited (Kunstadter 1967: 381-2). From 1956, they built schools in hill villages staffed with their own teachers, but received books and other educational materials from the Education Ministry, the United States government, and private sources (Saihoo 1970: 45).

bought cheaper from that side for ancestor offerings, funerals, and other rituals. Cross-border movements abound involving: transaction in goods including, perhaps mainly, opium; wild game hunting; relatives' visits; rituals attendance; and marriage. Some second generation residents had move at older ages, to join their relatives who came earlier. For late immigrants, ecologically, economically, socially and culturally, all were more favourably in Burma, except for one, and most important thing. Life insecurity.

“Life was miserable there. Like other men in the village, I was forced at gun point to carry the bullets for the Burmese soldiers, who then fought both the *la bue* and *bi shum*.<sup>25</sup> My offerings to the ancestors' spirits must have helped. I was lucky to survive. In the battlefields, bullets came from all directions. After two months as a human-shield, I abandoned my village.”

Having heard that Thai soldiers were more kind and were not forcing villagers to carry guns and bullets, he then walked for there days to settle in the old Akhapu. Late settlers said they also have to pay the 200 Baht “tax” to the BPP.

But lives in Akhapu before the 1980s were just as precarious. The Thai armies had forced Khun Sa to abandon its Hin Taek stronghold, and removed all its armies posted neared the Thai border. Around 1961, a 10-member team of welfare, agriculture, and education officials, and the BPP came to Akhapu to survey the socio-economic of hill villages. One BPP personnel was shot while on his way leading children to sing a national anthem at the BPP-staffed school. He defied villagers warning that the Shan soldiers were around the area, and that it was not safe to go closer to the border. He said as he was in Thailand, there was no need to fear. Villagers said the police knew little of border situation. His death later led to the set up of the border-defence volunteers in Akhapu as well as in several surrounding villages. Villagers had been “encouraged” to join in return for a monthly stipend of 900 Baht, a gun, and 150 bullets each. Not a single bullet was fired to protect the borders, however. Former volunteers remembered making the most use of their guns on many wild games. Volunteers had been trained at camps in Chiang Mai's Mae Rim and Mae Taeng districts, yet, had never engaged in any real fight with Khun Sa's armies. Once they were called to the operation in Hin Taek, but when they arrived, the Khun Sa soldiers had already retreated. But it was just a matter of time before the Shan armies took their revenge on villagers. Women went to the rice fields had been raped by Shan soldiers. At dusk fall, soldiers stormed the villages, hunting down the border-defence volunteers as a punishment for their cooperation with the BPP. Five of them in Akhapu had died.

During 1969 and 1970, state agents surveyed hill villages in the north. The purpose of the survey is to identify hill villagers, not to register them as citizen. There were no cards given or photograph taken. However, authorities distributed over 60,000 coins to villagers who had been surveyed, as a memento for the excursion.<sup>26</sup> Some Akhapu women who received these coins said they didn't know who the person shown in the coin was, or what the picture shown at the back of the coin meant. They recalled officials told them these coins amount to a license for them to live in Thailand. They were told that later, they will be given with a Thai ID cards. In the past, hill ethnic villagers did not interest in getting the Thai citizenship. They said they only stay in a village up the mountain and didn't know why they should need the Thai citizenship. Some were so scared of moving sickness that they preferred to stay in a village rather than traveling down to the Hill Tribe Centre to get citizenship. In Akhapu nowadays, many receivers of the coins are still left without any legal status. Women use the coins to decorate their headdress. Some had been approached by the BPP, soldiers and other people from town, to buy the coins. The price given ranged from 200 Baht to 2,000

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<sup>25</sup> Akhapu villagers' reference to Chinese Yunnanese and Shan respectively.

<sup>26</sup> The front side of the coin featured the portrait of King Bhumipol, and the back, the territorial configuration of a country Thailand.

Baht. However, officials rejected the credential of these coins as valid evidence to apply for citizenship. The coins are easily to be bought and sold and it is difficult to prove the real owner, they said. In 1990-1991, authorities conducted another survey of hill villages and its residents. Household members were recorded, photograph taken, as well as fingerprints. The villagers surveyed were a few months later given their *tabien prawat* (household files) document and the blue “hill tribe” card<sup>27</sup> as evidence of their being surveyed and registered. Authorities said this was not equaled to citizenship acknowledgement. These evidences, however, can be used to support hill villagers’ claim of legal status.

### **Akhapu today**

Three settlements constituted Akhapu; the first and the second are predominantly Akha, and the third, Lahu. Present Akhapu village head is the Lahu man from the third settlement because his hamlet has more people with Thai citizenship than the two Akha settlements. Administratively, Akhapu used to be a satellite village under another village, some 20 kilometres away, before becoming an official village in 1991. It is now one of 26 villages under Tambon Mae Salong Nai. The *kamnan* of this Tambon is a Chinese Yunnanese man. His residence is in Hin Taek. Altogether, Akhapu numbered about 176 households and over 1,025 populations. The major settlement where my fieldwork was done has about 76 household and 407 populations. Villagers earn their income from growing maize and gingers. The majority of villagers strictly carry on their ancestral practices. There are two churches; one in the Lahu hamlet, and the other in the major Akapu settlement. Most of the converters said they changed because none in their families knows how to carry on the ancestral practices. Others simply said they were too poor to sacrifice the pigs and chickens. Apart from Christianity, some villagers had adopted a Chinese cult, recently introduced by Chinese Yunnanese living in nearby village.

The only one school in Akhapu was built by the BPP in 1969. Students either enter a nearby high school or go to Hin Taek. The Department of Non-Formal Education has established the non-formal education centre in a nearby village where teachers used to teach Thai to villagers at night. Akhapu villagers also sent their children to temples in Chiang Rai town and as far as Ang Thong and Sing Buri provinces that provide free education. It is interesting to note that a special subject on the dedicated works of the late King’s mother has been taught in all BPP schools. Students learned about her auto-biography, her work in the Northern provinces to improve the well-being of the hill people, and her dedication to the development of health care and education for the hill villagers.<sup>28</sup>

The nearest health centre is some 10 kilometres away, where children get immunisations and women get birth control injection. For serious sickness, most villagers preferred a clinic in Mae Chan district, an hour and a half drive away. Villagers accused health officials at Mae Fa Luang of ignoring patients and of looking down on Akha villagers. Villagers, particularly elder women, seldom leave their village. Villagers’ livelihoods revolving around growing hill rice, maize and gingers, and carrying the ancestral practices. They grew opium in the old days, and a few elder villagers still use the drug they now find from the other side of the border. Many elders who had quitted opium have become addicted to alcohol instead. Most villagers have no education.<sup>29</sup> As the Lahu hamlet is reputed to be the transit point for opium and *ya ba*,<sup>30</sup> police have kept a close watch of Akhapu, ensuring frequent raids and arrests. While authorities considered drugs a threat to national security,

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<sup>27</sup> Numerous cards of different colours had been given to each ethnic minority categories, part of state’s apparatus to control the ethnic minorities.

<sup>28</sup> Mae Fa Luang district was named to honour her as the “great mother of the sky.”

<sup>29</sup> There is only one university-level student in Akhapu. He is now a sophomore at a university in Bangkok.

<sup>30</sup> Methamphetamine. *Ya ba* (cracy drug) used to be called *ya ma* (horse drug) for its stimulant effect.

villagers said the grave threat to their livelihoods is forest officials' reforestation programmes that have prohibited them from practicing the shifting cultivation.<sup>31</sup> Their farm lands have much been reduced, and villagers have anticipated land disputes to arise in the near future between them and Lahu villagers as farm lands become limited. However, villagers are strong in this issue. They insisted they won't let the forest officials to claim more lands.

Young villagers find work in Chiang Rai or Chiang Mai town, mostly as assistant to cooks, and waiter/waitress in restaurants. Young men also work in construction sites. Both men and women also work as short-time wage labour for lowland northern Thai people during short pause after harvesting season. An increasing number of young women, meanwhile, have come to work as waitress in karaoke bars in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, as soon as they finish village's school. Some quit early when agents approached their parents, or they want to join their friend who work the same work. Some of the villagers after returning from working in other provinces have married non-Akha people including *khon muang*, and *khon Isan*.

The fact that they lack the Thai ID card has prevented villagers from traveling far. As a holder of the blue "hill tribe" card, villagers are prohibited from traveling outside Mae Fa Luang district without the permission of the district chief. In order to be able to travel/work outside their district, villagers must secure the district chief's permission to travel. Workers must also attach employer's letter. Without the Thai ID card, they cannot apply to have official driving license. As a result, motorists who travel outside the district have always been fined. As non-Thai citizen, villagers cannot own land, borrow from the village fund, or get health services under the low-cost medical scheme, better known as the 30-Baht programme. Their children cannot borrow from the state educational funds. Villagers with the Thai ID card have more freedom. Some have been worked at a furniture factory in Southern Surat Thani province, or a factory in Songkhla's Hat Yai producing medical gloves. However, some villagers who have been working at the Hat Yai factory have no Thai citizenship. In some way, their employers have come to the village to pick them up. The employers also handle all the paper work for the villagers. A few other villagers have been worked in Malaysia, raising pigs or killing chickens.

As noted earlier, Akhapu had been moved several times before locating at the present location. During the height of the war between Khun Sa and the Thai soldiers, villagers had been living in fear and always on the run. There is a military post in the village and a military base close to the border. Villagers have been told to be on the alert for immediate evacuation during the winter season when fightings between the Shan army and the Burmese soldiers in opposite Muang Hsat are feared to have the spillover. Villagers, however, don't feel limited by the borders as the dividing line between two nation-states even though they have always been told not to get across the border. They talk about crossing the border to visit relatives in Burma as if they were about to visit them in another district in Thailand. They need not bother with travel document or fear of Burmese soldiers guarding the borders. Villagers said that they are not Burmese, but Lahu soldiers with whom they can communicate. Villagers always talk about people from Burma (Shan, Lahu, and Burmese) walking across the border through the village down to Hin Taek to buy goods back to Burma. Akhapu villagers also get across the border to buy livestock for their year-round rituals. Some young Akha men used to hunt wild game in Burma's forests and long to be back again. Others talked at length about work opportunity in Burma's Muang Yon whose builders are mostly Thais

### **National identification and ethnic loyalty**

In contrast to the past when villagers did not want to be Thai citizen, villagers now want to be included as they have seen citizenship as an entry point to other social services and

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<sup>31</sup> All forest lands in Mae Fa Luang district had been declared the national forest conservation areas.

other rights. However, the level of national identification differs between young and older villagers. Most Akhapu's middle-aged and elder villagers don't share the national consciousness of belonging to the same "Chat Thai" as authorities would otherwise have them believed. They don't know, can't sing, and have not high respect for the national anthem. Most can't communicate in Thai especially the middle-aged or older women. Many elder villagers don't know the King and Queen, let alone all the royal family members. There were instances where villagers given with the portraits of the King and Queen had no idea what to do with them. The portraits had been kept together with other unused materials; others used them more usefully as a mat. For authorities promoting national identity, this deficiency in national consciousness justifies the deprivation of their rights to citizenship, as shown in the following remark by the Mae Fa Luang district chief;

"An elder woman said she want the Thai ID card. I asked why? She said she need it so that she can get free health care services and a 300 Baht-monthly support for the elderly as other people. She knew all what she wanted but when I asked what is the country she is now resides. She didn't know. I don't want to give her citizenship."

Many elderly also don't know the King and Queen, let alone all the royal family members. There were instances where villagers given with the portraits of their majesties had no idea what to do with them. The portraits had been kept together with other unused materials. Some used them as a mat. Young Akha, however, are more inclined toward holding duo-identity as Thai and as Akha. This duo-consciousness stemmed from the opportunity to study in school, to have Thai friends, to be in contact with authorities and outside visitors, and from working outside the village. Teenagers are more readily accommodating national identity, sprinkling their conversations with central Thai language; spice them with new slangs they learned from TV. While their mothers and grannies tune in every morning for the local radio station broadcast in Akha language, youngsters play young Thai pops' latest hits at the highest volume on their new stereo bought with the money from selling corn. While many middle-aged and older women usually wear their traditional garbs, children as well as young men and women prefer fashionable dress to their traditional one. Like teenagers elsewhere, young Akha enthusiastically embrace all things label "trendy" – song, dress, and lifestyle.

Akhapu villagers are proud of their ethnic identity and are frustrating being looked down upon. It is interesting to note that the availability of cheap VCD players from China has enabled villagers in Akhapu to link with people with common history in China. What has become more popular among elder women is the after-dinner gathering to watch VCD of Akha singers from Chinna's Yunnan province,<sup>32</sup> playing on China-made VCD players. Villagers, particularly elder women can listen to the same VCD playing again and again. They were excited to see Akha people, similar traditional dress, and likeness in ancestral practices in other countries especially in China where they believed their ancestors were from. Interestingly, though, they said they can understand most of what the singers sing, but cannot understand when the singers speak. Perhaps this is the influences of Chinese language in the daily spoken language of the Akha in China. By watching this VCD, the middle-aged and elder villagers have related their ethnic culture with the Akha in other countries.

However proud they are about their ethnic identity, Akhapu villagers' perception of themselves as minority has patterned their relationship with the lowland Thais. The realities of the situations in which they find themselves (non-Thai, restriction of basic rights) and in which their identity is defined (backward, drug trafficker, forest destroyer), has constructed their self-conceptions of identity as inferior to the lowland Thais in general and to officials in particular. When state authorities made membership in a nation state conditioned upon drug

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<sup>32</sup> Two most favorite Akha singers from Yunnan are Yabo and Longpae. Because of their popularity among the Akha in Chiang Rai, they were invited in 2004 to perform in a concert alongside other Akha singers from Thailand and Burma..

prevention and control, villagers internalise such state's understanding and have initiated programmes to prove to the contrary – state's perception of them.

### **The lack of citizenship**

In 2000, a mobile district team came to the village to receive citizenship applications from the hill villagers.<sup>33</sup> The former village head, an Akha, collected 3,000 Baht from each household. He said the money goes to district officials, and was crucial for the applications to be prioritised and hopefully, approved. When the applications were approved, villagers had been asked to pay again, this time in order to get the Thai ID card. Only a few households could pay then, the majority of villagers remain without Thai citizenship. In October 2005, their hope was enlivened, hearing that the district office will send another mobile team to collect applications again. The situation was different with the presence of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the village. Four members of the Chiang Mai-based NGO<sup>34</sup> had been in Akhapu and surrounding village to collect information about the hill villagers' lack of legal status. They hope to exchange this information with the district office, and together, work out resolution. Villagers learned from the team, laws and procedures involved in citizenship application which involve no fee. Unsurprisingly, the NGO's presence as well as its information made many village headmen felt uneasy. Most held negative attitude about NGOs in general, labeling them trouble makers. However, at the beginning, Akhapu village head and his assistant welcomed the NGO team. They allowed the team to stay in the village and hold meetings with villagers. Before the district office sends its mobile team to the village in October 2005, the NGO team held a meeting with the chair of the Tambon Administrative Organisation (TAO), other NGOs, and some state agencies. No district officials attended. They resolved to meet up with the district chief on September 29, to exchange information and to propose the cooperation between the NGO team and the district office.<sup>35</sup> The district chief did not show up on the appointment date. The team was led instead into the meeting room where village head from all 26 villages in Tambon Mae Salong Nai awaited them. The NGO team was surprised as this was not in their plan. Dozens of villagers also accompanied the team.

Later on, the district chief's assistant met up with the team. He accused team leader for not informing in advance about their visit, and for bringing along villagers to "pressure" the district office. This official said he had not the authority to consider the NGO team's request for cooperation – only the district chief did. During this confrontation, several village heads took turn to refuse their collection of fees from villagers. Villagers, they said, were "voluntarily" pooled their money to foot the bill for food and other expenses for the district mobile team, as well as to reward the persons the district hires to assist in filling up application forms.<sup>36</sup> In his response to such remark, the district chief's assistant insisted it is not a district policy to collect fees for legal status applications. He further cited the earlier walky-talky order the district chief sent to all village heads prohibiting any collection of money from villagers. After this confrontation, the relation between the NGO team on one side, and the district officials and the village heads on the other had been further deteriorated.

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<sup>33</sup> According to state regulation, applicants can go directly to the district office to submit their applications. However, Mae Fa Luang district officials said they don't have the policy to receive applications at the district office.

<sup>34</sup> This is a coalition of NGOs working to promote hill villagers rights to citizenship and forest and land rights as well as other rights.

<sup>35</sup> The NGO planned to offer photo-copy and photo-taking services, as well as human resources for the district office often faced with shortage in budget and personnel.

<sup>36</sup> Many districts in the North often turned down proposal by several NGOs to assist in this process, preferred instead to hire their own personnel.

Akhapu village head's assistant meanwhile, held a series of meetings, telling villagers that there were fees involved in the application despite the assertion of the district chief's assistant.<sup>37</sup> Villagers were first told to pay 300 Baht per each household. Later, this was changed to be per each application, meaning more money to be collected. Reactions were mixed. Some villagers didn't want to pay, others were not objected. Many refrained from giving opinion. In the nearby village, disagreement even led to a fight. But eventually, villagers in all villages where the district mobile team visited all had to pay. Some villages paid higher, 600 Baht per each application.

The village head's assistant said district officials were furious about the NGO taking villagers to the district office, and might cancel the sending of the mobile team altogether. He said his, and a nearby village where the NGO had worked went under strong criticism from district officials and other village heads at the monthly meeting at the district office. He claimed he was the only person in the meeting that negotiated for the fees to be collected per a household not per an applicant so as to reduce the burden on villagers. He said many village heads scolded him. They said their villagers had no problem with paying the fees. He also suggested the NGO team stay away from the village when the district mobile team comes. After that, the NGO team withdrew from the area, saying their work had finished but that villagers can contact and consult them anytime.

In January 2006, three months<sup>38</sup> after villagers lodged their applications with the district mobile team, they heard nothing from the district.<sup>39</sup> Villagers planned to petition Her Majesty the Queen, who was scheduled to visit her project in a nearby village. Villagers left at dawn to avoid strict security measures. They were barred from entering the reception ground. They had all been searched for the petition letter. The Queen flew back without receiving the letter the villagers had prepared for her. Another attempt to petition to HRH Princess Sirindhorn who visited the school nearby also failed with similar, but stricter security measures. Villagers then contacted the NGO team and another NGO based in Chiang Rai to form an alliance to follow up their applications. They sent two letters inquiring the progress from the district chief. He gave no reply. A lawsuit is thus, unavoidable. Villagers then assigned the NGOs to represent them in the lawsuit against the district chief. Defiance, the district chief told villagers to wipe out drugs from their village before asking him to approve their applications.

Villagers faced stronger opposition from the village head and his assistant who have prevented them from holding meeting in the village. They were told to stop or face a violent death. This had scared some villagers whose mothers begged in tears for them to withdraw. The village head and his assistant then told villagers they got a nod from the district chief to propose the names of villagers who should get the approval first due to their work in drug prevention and control. But they won't consider anyone who continues to cooperate with the NGOs. On August 28, 2006, the district chief came to the village. He approves those names proposed by the village head and his assistant. He said he will approve more if villagers had shown to be just as dedicated in controlling drug. As of earlier this year, no more villagers get Thai citizenship. Almost all villagers withdrew from the alliance, except one, who insists to continue with the lawsuit. The district chief is now under investigation by the Senate Ombudsman who received complaints from the NGOs acting for villagers.

### **Border chiefs and the politics of citizenship**

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<sup>37</sup> The village head's assistant told me that district officials, while insisting on not collecting fees, had pressured village heads to do so.

<sup>38</sup> According to the related regulation, the district registrar must send all applications to the district chief within 30 days. The latter also have 30 days as the maximum to make a decision, after that the appeal process could begin if he disapproved any application.

<sup>39</sup> Only one family get approved because one member who is a university student need this so that he can borrow money from the university's educational funds.

Fixed understanding of the hill ethnic minorities as a threat to national security, a forest destroyer, and an opium grower, has shaped state policies with regard to their citizenship. Laws stipulated the eligibility of members of the ethnic minorities who can apply for citizenship. In essence, the criteria were differentiated between those considered as “original,” and those who have been migrated from other countries, recently or long time ago. In practice, however, state authorities are not able to make a clear distinction between the original, the recent, and the long-settled immigrants. Therefore, they chose instead to not taking any action. At many districts, citizenship applications have been left unattended for years. Some important documents attached had been lost or damaged without authorities taking any responsibility. In Mae Fa Luang district until recently, these old applications since 2000 had been piled up for years at the opened underground of one building, with no protection against termites, rats or rain. The ignorance on the part of authorities is partly due to a deep-seated perception of hill people as “alien” who have recently come into Thailand in search of economic prosperity. Some district officials said they didn’t believe there still are any “original” hill ethnic minorities remain without Thai nationality anymore.

Tightened border control, more state expansions of forest covers, and aggressive drugs prevention and control strategies, all meant that procedures will become more complex, screening stricter, and much more qualifications than necessary applied. In the border areas like Mae Fa Luang district, where officials have become more concerned with chasing old opium addicted, and planting more trees in the mountain than ensuring sufficient protein intake in school’s lunch, the issue of citizenship has been politicised and ethnicised. Politically, the present district chief has refused to consider applications of some villagers who cooperated with the NGOs. He was furious that these people questioned the legitimacy of his citizenship consideration policies. The district chief had made it known in several occasions to the village heads who repeated his message that he will never approve any applicants that sided with the NGOs. Akhapu village head pronounced that even if the Administration Court ordered the district office to approve villagers’ applications, he for one, won’t sign for them to get their Thai ID card.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the understandings of many state officials of each hill people as equal to a drug lord, has resulted in citizenship approval being conditioned upon how “well” hill villagers had done in cooperating with authorities in the prevention and control of drug. Applying this approach in Mae Fa Luang, the district chief boldly declared that unless the whole village gets rid of drug, he won’t sign a single application for citizenship. This has, in effect, increased the alienation among the hill people. Therefore, they refused or were reluctant to participate or involve in national life. Villagers, meanwhile, reacted by bringing their plight before the civil groups and local and national politicians, as well as the court.

The central administration governs national policy, but it is district officials who actually enforce it. They are the real might. When it comes to citizenship, the powers of these officials have been strengthened further. Villagers need their certification in all processes involved in citizenship application, making them an easy prey to the corrupted practices of these officials, who have made themselves patrons of the hill ethnic minorities by extracting fees in return for the consideration of citizenship. The license of the village head and the sub-district committee are required for applications to be considered valid. It is the district registrar who prepares all applications to the district chief, who is solely authorised to approve or reject the applications. Finally, the village head’s license must be secured before the Thai ID card is given. Exploiting villagers’ hunger for the rights to belong, district officials had colluded with sub-district and village heads in extracting both money and national loyalty from villagers. Accordingly, citizenship has become instrumental for these officials in extracting social, economic, political, and cultural cooperation from villagers. Akhapu

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<sup>40</sup> Civil registration regulations in Thailand requires that a person who get the Thai ID card for the first time must be certified of his permanent residency by the head of the village that he/she resides.

villagers had been told time and again to donate blood, become village guard or health volunteers, and participate in state rituals, in return for special treatment of their citizenship applications, which has yet to come and probably never come. As it turned out, the sending of the mobile team and the overall process of citizenship applications, consideration and approval has been exploited by local officials at all level to extort money as a tributary from villagers. In effect, they have reworked the pre-modern nation state tributary system, extracting fees from villagers in a mafia-like manner in return for no protection.

Fearing drugs and people mobility, district authorities increase their attention and reaches of the border areas. However, officials' major concerns with drugs and forests have consumed much of the limited available budget and resources at the expense of other social programmes such as health and education. Without the Thai ID card, villagers were denied access to state low-cost medical scheme. District hospital charged them more than its medicines and services worth. In Akhapu where police frequently raided and arrested old opium smokers and young *ya ba* users, school is only opened when the BPP officers feel like teaching. Most of the time, they were drunk or have not yet backed from town. As several military units have taken up the task of protecting the border, the BPP's police no longer patrol the border as in the 1970s, their only job, thus, is to teach. But with limited budget and lack of interest and experience, many have been discouraged.

### **Citizenship as a technology of power**

As reflected in state policies and related laws, the idea of who belong to the nation was constructed within the nation-state framework. Citizenship laws, for instance, emphasise the principle of the law of the land, as well as residential criteria. A legal acceptant of Thai citizenship comes in the form of a Thai identification card and a confirmation of one's Thai nationality in the household registration paper. State officials also defined citizenship as a bundle of rights and duties relating an individual as a member of a political community. To become a Thai citizen, state officials demand the hill people embrace loyalty to the nation and king. When he met up with Akhapu villagers who wait for his approval of their application, the Mae Fa Luang district chief said he didn't want villagers to treat their citizenship as just like "a ticket to travel anywhere anytime you like," but to have the sense of belonging, of loving the nation, the monarchy; and that they must feel indebted to this land. An excerpt;

"I don't want to give it out easily, so that it seems like valueless. A student once came ask for citizenship, I pointed at the King photo and asked him who is this? The King, he replied, well, then, what is his name? He didn't know. How can I approve his request then?"

The social and political environment within which the concept of citizenship was employed has significantly informed state agencies about their idea of citizenship. In the border village of Akhapu, (forever) concerns over the widespread of drug, and the mobility of people have remarkably shaped district officials' idea about citizenship. Through the imagination of a new form of national security threat engendered by the widespread of drug and illegal immigrants, local officials have redefined their concept of who have the rights to belong, and have effectively use this to control and manipulate the hill ethnic minorities. These officials have arbitrarily interpreted the government's drugs prevention and control policy in ways that inhibit the hill ethnic minorities from getting their Thai citizenship. They therefore condition villagers' eligibility for citizenship upon their degrees of cooperation in drug prevention and control. Villagers, either lacking the power to negotiate, or have long been made to feel that they are lacking power, have internalised these ideas and exerted pressure on other villagers to accept this re-definition of membership in a society.

In many districts of Thailand, the network of state officials and local influentials has effectively managed citizenship as both a strategic tool to demand national loyalty as well as

cash, and as a commodity for sale to wealthy individuals who need a legal acceptance of Thai citizenship – the Thai ID card as a ticket into business adventures and/or other opportunities in the country.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, despite the state policy of “inclusion,” Thai citizenship policies implicitly feature the internal stratification of citizenship, treating the Thai hill people as second or even third class citizen. For example, a system has been arranged enabling state authorities to distinguish the Thai ID card whose holders are members of the hill ethnic minorities as different from others.<sup>42</sup> Once caught in illegal conducts, their Thai citizenship is under threat of being revoked. Thai people have never encountered similar treatment. Indeed, when communism as an ideology had ceased to be a threat, citizenship, has, then been used as state’s strategic instrument in the war on drugs, subjected to be revoked as a punishment for any hill people found involved. It still holds true what Vienne (1989:48) had stated two decades ago that in the changing social and political context, it seemed the Thai state officials still hold traditional cultures and ethnic identity accountable for the problems in relation to security, narcotics, and forest destruction. This assumes that cultural differences are the founding problem. It followed that problems do not result from an historical process but emerge out of the inherent “nature” of the hill ethnic minorities.

The racialisation of the membership into the nation-state can be seen in the way the Akha are treated despite their becoming Thai citizen. In one case, an Akha holder of a Thai ID card traveling along with other passengers was spot for thoroughly body-search for drug. Though his Thai ID card does not identify his ethnic minority nationality, his Akha name on the card sounds unfamiliar to the police. Another Thai Akha has always been asked for a give-away – cigarettes, liquor, by police manning the Mae Chan-Mae Sai check point. This explains why many want to change their name into one that sounds Thai, so that they become no further targets of harassment, so that their children will have more chance to get scholarship, etc.

Indeed, the “hill tribe” discourse has so strongly informed public perception and understandings of the hill ethnic minorities. These understandings have been produced, reproduced, and maintained by both education and the media institutes. Thai people in general might perhaps know only the *Hmong* and *Karen*. They were told by news headlines that the former often involved in the drug trade; the latter, they have included in their dictionary of daily usage to be used interchangeably with their own *ban nok*. The *khon muang* people have more words in their store for reference to the hill ethnic minorities. For example, Karen is *yang*, Akha is *ekaw*, Lahu is *muser*, Hmong is *Maeo*, Lisu is *lisaw*. But all of them were collectively referred, insultingly and derogatively as groups of insect-like creatures *maeng moonee*. From such a terminology, the hill ethnic minorities are not even considered as human at all, let alone being recognised as equal human being.

Whether the radical universalism debates about post-national citizenship, urban citizenship, help advance the cause of the ethnic minority struggling to settle in the national boundary of Thailand remains to be seen. However, as long as the issues of access to welfare services, full political membership in a society, and social identity, are still strictly regulated

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<sup>41</sup> There is a trend of what had been termed a “commoditisation” of citizenship where states have offered citizenship for sale in an attempt to boost foreign investment (Castle 1999:61). Cambodia, for example, had been contemplating using the provisions of its citizenship law to attract wealthy residents from other Asian territories, hoping that they could assist in rebuilding the economy. In 1995, temporary Cambodian nationality was granted to merchants and investors who were Chinese nationals but who had applied for Cambodian citizenship. Thailand also sought to attract foreign investment by offering permanent residency status to citizens of Hong Kong, as well as other foreign investors, experts, technicians and Thai nationals who had renounced their citizenship (Castles 1999:61).

<sup>42</sup> The first number of the 13-digits code number of each Thai ID card tells if a holder is a Thai citizen at birth (no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), or were given Thai citizenship later (no. 8) like in most cases of the hill ethnic minorities.

by the nation-state as is the case in Thailand, bypassing the state-bounded for “transnational” or “global” forms of citizenship-whatever the meaning of such terms, might help expanding the scope of discussion, yet provide illusionary alternative to a concrete resolution. What is more pertinent in the case of the hill ethnic minorities in Thailand, thence, is the promotion and creation of the conditions under which genuine citizenship will be possible. It is not the Thai ID card that ties the ethnic nationalities with the nation-state, but the ensuring of equal treatment and acceptance in all aspects; social, economic, political, and cultural. Apparently, the situation in Akhapu reflected that villagers have yet been engaged as full participants in the national life.

However, the role of the Royal family must be noted in their accommodation of the hill ethnic minorities in national integration. In his speech given to the Cabinet on February 18, 2001, the King said that

“There are groups of people who have been living in Thailand for a long time but they are not considered as Thai. These people were born and have lived in Thailand but have been excluded from any benefits and rights given the Thai people. This must be corrected because the feeling of being ignored can impact on the national security.”

In other cases, HRH Princess Sirindhorn, emphasising on the importance of education, has founded the foundation that sponsored education for disadvantaged children including students of the BPP schools. The princess has pushed through the BPP and the district offices to accelerate the granting of citizenship to students who received fund from her foundation. In essence, some members of the Royal family felt the responsibility on their part to contribute to the national integration project. Villagers, meanwhile, use this as a channel to grieve their plight, though not seeing any result now. Some of them tried but failed, two times to petition the Queen and the Princess when they visited villages in Mae Fa Luang. Later, they were succeeded in submitting the petition to the Princess when she visited a village in Mae Chan district. However, it remains to be seen what the petition will lead to.

## **Conclusion**

National integration policy as has been implemented tends to be the one that alienates instead of incorporates the hill ethnic minorities, as local administrators politicised, ethnicised and racialised the issue of citizenship and other related rights pertain to it. By tying the issue of citizenship to policies to combat drugs, this has increased the feeling of alienation among the hill people, some of whom expressed their contentment to not cooperate with state programmes and policies. Villagers refused or were reluctant to participate in national life. They negotiated by playing one local influential against the other, not much success, as finally, it is the district officials that are the most powerful, and even the higher power than him has yet to press for a meaningful change.

As the state demand “loyalty” to the nation from members of the hill ethnic minorities, state agencies at the local levels have exploited legislations and procedures, and set up hurdles for them in their struggle to become citizen. The nation building processes and the state’s envisions of the boundaries and the hill ethnic minority people, has provided the opportunity for the new form of small border polities that comprise of district registrars, sub-district and village heads, and local influentials, to flourish. These small polities either act on their own or, as is the case in this study, cooperate among themselves, have seized the opportunities provide under the legislations and processes involved in the registration of legal status of the hill ethnic minorities, to exploit the hill villagers struggling to be fully accepted as Thai citizen. These small border polities, fed on arbitrarily extract of any forms; cash, valuable goods, labour, forced sex, have reworked the border polities similar to that of the pre-modern state. Their model, however, was a mafia-like in manner than the patron-client

relationship of the old days. In most cases, villagers have been forced to pay tribute in return for no protection. The institutional practices of these border polities through the combination of the manipulation of the laws, corruption, negative attitude and sheer ignorance, have reached the point where it has contributed to make the ethnic Akha feel being left out. This has created barriers internally for them to integrate.

Ironically, while state's laws and its efforts to regulate border have failed to prevent the inclusion of new immigrants into the national life, the institutional practices of district officials have instead effectively established internal barriers for the ethnic Akha villagers in search of the rights to belong. These ethnic minorities who have long lived here or had been born in the country were struggled at the frontier of national integration as a result of negative attitude, corrupt practice, and ignorance. Hence, citizenship – initially employed as a tool for national integration has been manipulated by the new alliance of border polities as an apparatus to control and abuse the hill ethnic minorities, so much so that the ethnic Akha feel being left out when this extracting system interferes and manipulates all stratum of their life experience. It is clear from the Akha experience that national integration will critically depend on full social and political acceptance. As it turned out so far, the state is now at risk of losing a good opportunity to successfully integrate the hill ethnic minorities. The public as well does not make more effort to incorporate them. Indeed, those who were push out and excluded from the national realms are not new immigrants from the other side of the border, but indigenous people who have long been struggled in their quest for the rights to belong.

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## **Appendix A: 17 ethnic minority categories in Thailand**

According to the classification of the Department of Provincial Administration (2001), the 17 ethnic minority categories are;

1. Vietnamese refugees who fled from Vietnam and Laos into Thailand in 1945 and 1946. This group reside in 13 northeastern border provinces.
2. Guamintang soldiers. They were members of the 93<sup>rd</sup> platoon of the Nationalist Chinese Soldiers who fled into Thailand from Burma between 1950 and 1954, to reside in 3 northern provinces of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son.

3. Chinese Yunnanese or Haw refugees who are family members that accompanies the Guamintang soldiers into Thailand.
4. Independent Chinese Haw who either claimed to be relatives of the Gaumintang soldiers, or were independent Chinese Haw. This group was said to enter Thailand illegally to reside in 4 northern provinces; Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, and Phayao.
5. Malaya Chinese Communists who gave themselves up to Thai authority and were designated as “participants in the Thai nation development project.”
6. Thai Lue. This group comprise of descendants of the Tai-speaking group who used to reside in certain areas in China’s Southern Yunnan province, who entered Thailand some 300 years ago.
7. Laotian refugees who fled from Laos in 1974 and 1975 due to the change in political regime.
8. Nepalese refugees. This group comprises of Nepalese people who used to reside in Burma who fled to Thailand when Japan raided Burma during World War II.
9. Displaced person from Burma. This group comprises several ethnic minority groups from Burma who fled the fighting into Thailand before March 9, 1973. They live in 9 provinces; Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Tak, Mae Hong Son, Ratchaburi, Kanchanaburi, Prachuan Khirikhan, Chumphon, and Ranong.
10. Illegal immigrants from Burma.
11. Burmese displaced people of Thai descendants. Only those entered the kingdom on or before March 9, 1976 are accepted as this group and are eligible to Thai citizenship through naturalisation.
12. People reside in the highland (areas with the slope of 35° or is over 500 metres above the sea level). This group included the hill ethnic minorities and other ethnic minority nationalities.
13. Refugees of Thai descendants from Cambodia’s Koh Kong province.
14. Illegal immigrants from Cambodia.
15. The ethnic Mlabri people.\* They reside in Phrae and Nan province.
16. Highland communities.
17. Illegal labour migrants.

\*In other official documents and categorisation, the Mlabri is included as one of the major 9 hill ethnic minority groups.