

Mien through Sports and Culture: Mobilizing Minority Identity in Thailand

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ABSTRACT *The recent importance of sports competitions and cultural displays among highland ethnic minorities in Thailand suggests a growing resonance of national forms of sociability and presentability. A national contact zone simultaneously provides a context for unprecedented ethnic mobilization and identification among the country's minorities. Taking the case of Thailand's Mien (Yao), I explore the restructuring of social life that emerges with this ethnic mobilization for sports and culture. These activities produce an identity effect that defines Mien in national terms. The ability and need to organize in relation to the nation facilitates the position of a select few Mien villages as the bearers of social life and cultural traditions, and imports new forms of inequality into local life.*

KEYWORDS *Sports, culture, national integration, Thailand, Mien*

In March 2001, Thailand's Mien assembled for their first pan-ethnic event, a festival that consisted of four days of sports competitions and two nights of culture performances. Mien, an ethnic minority people in the northern highlands, are known to anthropology as one of Thailand's 'hill tribes,' migratory shifting cultivators of rice, maize, and poppy, and Mien religious life has been characterized as ancestor worship, Daoism, or a combination of the two. The sports Mien played at their ethnic festival were soccer, basketball, volleyball, takraw, petong,¹ ping pong, and handball. All are non-local sports, and none was played in a manner that was specifically Mien. Rather, the sports were those played and promoted through the national school system. Thailand's Mien have no history of sport-like practices or events prior to the current context of national integration. Mien engagements with sports are thus squarely within the contact zone of an ethnic minority people and its encompassing nation state.²

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Along with daytime sports there were evening displays of culture, that included singing and instrumental music, dance, and an old, illustrated manuscript; elements of Mien traditions that were presented to the Mien audience as collectively theirs. While the culture enacted at the evening displays was recognizable as Mien and thus traditional, the displays were equally within the national contact zone. The song and dance at the Fair were similar to what Mien have enacted at festival or ritual occasions such as weddings, but in contrast to the previous settings where they fed into ongoing maneuverings of honor and status among households and kin-groups, at the fair they were all done by performers for an audience and for the purpose of displaying and preserving a culture. In this, the Mien staging of their own culture for a Mien audience partakes in the national discourse on local or ethnic culture as dress, song, and dance that is staged in the countryside. The effort to display and preserve culture involves standardization of previously considerable diversity (by region, village, and kin-group) in the forms culture takes.

In examining the four-day fair, my fundamental concern is with how Thailand's Mien identify themselves (to themselves, primarily) as they collectively engage with sports and culture as players/performers, commentators, and audience. Among the issues to explore are the roles and relationships that the fair makes self-evident through sports contests among villages, and the process of relocating culture from the engagements of individuals and households with other such units and toward performers displaying Mien-ness to a general audience. The sports have no local precursor in Mien cultural life, but it is important to situate these novel practices in relation to the social dynamics that they have to some extent replaced. This serves to preclude the notion of a shift from tradition to modernity that would attribute a closed and static quality to previous cultural trends among Mien. Equally, this ethnographic context serves to locate Mien social dynamics in long-standing engagements with a regional political economy. The recent activation of the ethnic group and the recent prominence of the village in Mien social life, both of which were central to their Fair, are to some extent radical departures from previous foci of social and cultural life. But as these dynamics draw on Mien people's engagement with national life, they need to be placed both in the local contexts they revise and in the national contexts they refer to.

Sport and Society

In the anthropology of sport, it is commonly assumed that games provide a window on culture and social life (Blanchard 1995). Geertz's (1972) account

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of the Balinese cockfight is a frequently cited example. The event that he describes was specifically put on to raise money for a school, after the village failed to secure government funding for this effort (Geertz 1972:2–3). This context of villagers taxing themselves for the purposes of becoming a modern, national village through the desired school is never more than peripheral to Geertz's study, which is aimed at a symbolic interpretation of 'the Balinese.' Studies in this vein, that emphasize the semantic richness of a local sport and work from there to a more general description of a culture or society, risk precluding an understanding of the internal diversity and inequality of cultural practice in the contact zones of local communities and their larger social environment.

Such dynamics are in general much clearer in studies of 'modern' sports, which have highlighted the role of athletics of various kinds in national and otherwise political imaginaries (e.g. MacClancy 1996; Cronin & Mayall 1998). Cricket, a game emblematic of 'contact' settings, is especially significant in this context. The celebrated case of Trobriand Cricket (Leach & Kildea 1975) shows a systemic revision of the British colonizers' sport, where the game has become a feature of an indigenous movement toward cultural revival and political independence. The resonance of this case to an anthropological audience may come from Trobrianders' 'ancestral' position via Malinowski. It may equally derive from a romantic attachment to indigeneity in relation to global forces (Stocking 1989; Lévi-Strauss 1973). That is, the ability of a small-scale society to radically revise an artifact of colonial hegemony into a means of cultural and political revival and resistance may be celebrated in part because of its allegorical potential as a commentary on an otherwise homogenizing, modern world (Clifford 1986).

Viewed in this context, Mien engagements with the world of national/global sports have more in common with cricket in India (Appadurai 1995) and the Caribbean (Stoddart 1988) than in the Trobriands, as the appropriation of sports has involved reworking local social relations rather than the game's form. But this comparison may also reinforce an implicit contrast between anthropology and its Others (cf. Fabian 1983), between the local, indigenous, and traditional and that which is global and modern. In the anthropology of sports, the link between society and sport is routine. Some societies 'have' traditional sports, be they cockfights, footraces, or wrestling, and thus the societies in question are (to some extent still) traditional.

Kummels (2001) offers an ethnographically rich alternative to such approaches, showing how footraces among Rarámuri in northern Mexico have been repeatedly 'recreated in a complex, long-term interaction between Rará-

muri, regional Mestizo society, government agencies and the Church' (2001:92). The considerable diversity of footracing is linked to socioeconomic status, position within national society and various other factors. The self-identification that rural and urban Rarámuri engage in through races is very much of a national contact zone, where their varied local agendas are entangled with 'processes of centralization, homogenization and ethnic ascription on the part of the Church and the state' (2001:94). From Kummels' case, it is clear that 'Tarahumara footraces' as a uniform activity do not exist. In the Mexican public sphere, sports are assumed to be separate from politics. Through the 'apolitical' sport, Rarámuri can organize without the otherwise persistent involvement of Church and national agents of Indian affairs. Footraces, rather than being a reflection of a society, are a significant vehicle for identity-work, the projection and mobilization of particular and varied visions of society and culture. Studies of polo (Parkes 1996) and buzkashi (Azoy 2003) similarly show how equestrian sports have provided important arenas for display and mobilization of support for social agendas, political power, and for the consolidation of an increasingly national social life.

The introduction of modern sports in Thailand was an aspect of royally promoted modernization for the purposes of nation building (Vella 1978:144–151). The English-educated King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r.1910–25) was an avid sponsor of soccer in particular, and made athletic events an important feature of royal and other public ceremonies. The primary units of team formation were elite and military schools and the national armed forces and police. Through the Ministry of Interior, this emphasis on sports competitions was then broadcast to provinces around the capital. Vail (1998:70–111) describes how Thai boxing changed in the course of Thailand's national integration, from the royal patronage of the modernizer king Chulalongkorn (r.1868–1910) to the standardization of a modern and national competitive sport. Media coverage contributes to and thrives on boxing's popularity, and boxing matches take place regularly anywhere from temple fairs in the countryside to stadiums in Bangkok. The current Thai king, Bhumiphol, sponsors 'a large and prestigious international amateur boxing tournament, the King's Cup. '[Boxing] is the national sport, conspicuously supported by military, political, and royal elites, and laden with religious significance' (1998:116). The distribution of camps and tournaments parallels that of the nation's political reality, with a hierarchy of camps in the country's different regions, where there are regional championships, culminating in televised performances from either of the two stadiums in Bangkok (1998:136–143).

The use of sports in the service of identity is not always about the nation, but the national scheme for sports competitions provides a discursive framework for the promotion of particular identifications. Mills (1999) describes 'Sports Days' at Bangkok textile factories in relation to industrial hegemony and labor control. Striving for an image as benevolent patrons, factory owners would sponsor sports competitions. As the loyalty of factory workers was cultivated, these events also provided elements of 'modernity' that generally were not within the orbits of labor migrants' lives (1999:122-124).

Mien engagements with modern sports are within a complex and stratified world of excitement, competition, fundraising, and identification that is fundamentally national. Schools are central to the contemporary importance of sports in social life in rural areas. It is through sports teams that villages engage with one another and thus embody competitive socializing that manifests the units of national society from the village level to the capital (Bangkok) and the national mediascape, the double site for national sports competitions.³

The Mien sports competition and culture show are to some extent a local response to a lingering national anxiety about the destructive potential of highland ethnic minority peoples, their cultural, social, and agricultural forms. As among Rarámuri, local agency is in many ways informed and shaped by a national public sphere, and the apolitical connotations of modern sports at school grounds serve to preclude the state's anxiety over ethnic minority mobilization. At the same time, it is important to examine the extent to which 'the local,' Mien in this case, is the projection of particular interests on to the ethnic group. The contemporary national context appears to support new forms of hegemony and inequality in local life, and to privilege the voices of particular agents over many others. Because sports and ethnic mobilization are recent features of highland people's social and cultural life, it is possible to view hegemony and inequality as recent imports into a reality previously more autonomous and egalitarian. An ethnographic answer to that issue, which in part concerns sports, culture, identity, and modernity, is significantly influenced by how one understands Mien (or any other) society.

National Integration in the Northern Thai Highlands

Anthropological research during the 1960s and 1970s was an aspect of national integration, and the Thai government had international support (financial and academic) for the establishment of a Tribal Research Center through which information on the ethnically non-Thai highland peoples was assembled. The Western anthropologists, ambivalent about the processes of Thailand's

national integration, emphasized the rationale of highland farming practices in terms of the structures of ethnically different highland societies. The government's concerns were control and security, and it declared shifting cultivation, settlement migration, and poppy growing illegal. In a Cold War climate, Thai police, military, and other agents of national authorities interpreted any resistance to their power as communist subversion, and many highland villages came under attack. After members of the Communist Party of Thailand took to 'the jungle,' military attacks on highland settlements greatly intensified, and they lasted from the late 1960s and until 1982. There were widespread attacks on the settlements of Mien, Hmong, and other ethnic minorities, particularly in Nan and Chiangrai Provinces where some regions were declared free-fire zones.⁴ Highlanders' assumed proclivity toward settlement migration was seen as threatening the territorial integrity of the nation and their shifting cultivation (now illegal) was seen as a threat to ecological stability.

The cluster of national views of highland peoples assumed that they posed a threat to the nation. Education was seen as central to the assimilation of highlanders into Thai society, on the assumption that their perpetuation of cultural and social difference manifested disloyalty, backwardness, and ignorance. Thus, only by becoming 'Thai' could highland ethnic minority people fit within Thai society. Schools were a significant component of the national integration of rural areas as of the 1950s (Vaddhanapudhi 1991; Keyes 1991), though it was only in the subsequent era of nationalist anxieties about their cultural orientation that Thai schools were brought to highland settlements. The earliest efforts were through the Border Patrol Police, which set up primary schools as part of their 'hearts and minds' campaign during the 1960s (Hanks & Hanks 2001:122-128).

For decades, highland peoples have been defined as an obstacle to national integration. The notion that highlanders must loosen their attachment to their cultural practices is implicit in this public view.⁵ Cultural and social dynamics in highland areas have not necessarily reproduced the national prejudice, but the general trend in highlanders' dealings with official realities has been toward making themselves presentable in national terms. Thus villagers will stage dance shows for visiting officials, offer local tokens of goodwill and blessings, and entertain them with meat and liquor (Kesmanee 1992). Some of these practices are specific to dealings with Thai officials, but they are also indicative of more general contemporary changes in local cultural practices (Jonsson 2001a).

Highland ethnic minority villages have been brought into national orbits through schools, development projects, and laws against previously common

land use practices. Ethnic minority villagers have not only responded to outside pressures, they have also acted on the options and constraints of this emerging system in order to place themselves better within it. The widespread national prejudice against highlander practices of difference has contributed to a change in the look of ethnic minority villages. An increasing number of houses are built according to Thai conventions. In villages that have electricity, television sets, refrigerators, and electric fans are common. These goods are markers of modernity, the conveniences that are associated with city life (cf. Mills 1999), at the same time as their relative presence indicates the uneven wealth of households and villages. Highlander ethnic clothing, while important at certain festival occasions, is no longer a feature of everyday life. Store-bought clothes facilitate highlander presence in lowland Thai society. These changes in the look of people and villages are an indication of motivated engagements with national modernity at the same time as they are partly driven by national anxieties and prejudice. Eviction orders to highland villages have continued since the 1960s, most recently in the name of a Masterplan on the Environment, within which settlements that are not linked to the state (through having a school, development project, or a hard-surface road) are defined as illegal (Jonsson 2001a:156–157). As people engage with this national reality, their social and cultural practices have taken new forms, such as the recent pan-ethnic sports and culture fair.

The Mien Fair in 2001 was held at the village school in Pang Khwai, in the northern part of Chiangmai Province, and Thai school teachers served as referees. It started with a parade and then a ceremonial raising of the Thai flag as the national anthem was played over the loudspeakers. Soccer was central to the four days of the fair, played on the largest and central field in front of the school. On one side of the field, in front of the main school building, sat the commentators whose ongoing description of the game was broadcast through five feet tall loudspeakers. On a table under the canopy was a lineup of the cups that were to be awarded for each sport. Simultaneous with the soccer, and less central to the event, teams competed in other sports. Only men played football and takraw, both women and men played volleyball, basketball, and ping-pong, and only women played handball and petong. The gender division is the same as in Thai school sports more generally.

The social units activated for the sports competition were villages. The event implies competence in national sports activities as the criteria for social engagement, and further that it is through schools that units of Mien society are linked. Seventeen villages competed, a little less than ten percent of Mien

villages in Thailand. Exclusion was thus built into the event. In part, such exclusions had to do with relative prosperity, as only a large village has enough young men to field a football team, for instance. Additionally, villagers have to raise funds to buy sports outfits. The host village, Pang Khwai, was visibly prosperous, and this was as evident from the shoes and sports clothes of their athletes as in their ability to host the competition. About 500 visitors came, athletes and others, and I learned that the village had come up with the equivalent of over US\$ 5,000 to stage the event. The cost involved building new toilets at the school, and buying food and drink, cups and other prizes for contestants, paying the referees, and so on. From conversations with the sponsors as well as with people from the various guest villages, I learned that no other Mien village in Thailand could have raised that much money for a fair. As such, the event sets a new standard for social position that is beyond the reach of other villages. Host villagers made various remarks regarding their significant wealth. 'You might find a vehicle or two in any Mien village, but here we have over 300 vehicles.'

A Member of Parliament for Chiangmai Province, whose poster was up on many walls in the village, had donated money to buy prize cups, and his name and the logo of his party were on some of the cups. Sports thus serve to align Mien with the nation in many ways, such as the imagery of a national ceremony, the social framework of national schools, and the manifestation of official presence through the politician's reminders. There was a further link to the nation and the state in that the organizers in Pang Khwai had an official permit for their games from the District Officer, and their permit, complete with the Garuda insignia of the Thai state, was reproduced in the mimeographed booklet that contained the event's program (Sujibatr 2001).

To my knowledge, there is no stipulation to get an official permit for a village festival of this sort, and my sense is that the reason for the permit and its inclusion in the program was to demonstrate Pang Khwai village's links to the state through the District Office. But there is another and more subtle reason for the display of the link to the state. The program stated on the cover that the event was the 'thirteenth Iu Mien Games' (Sujibatr 2001). The games had no precursor as a Mien-wide competition, and 'Mien-wide' is a deliberate exaggeration of the organizers, as less than ten percent of Mien villages could compete in the events. Pang Khwai villagers had invited Mien from Chiangrai Province for sports contests on twelve previous occasions. By having the Mien Association's event in 2001 written into the official permit as the thirteenth Iu Mien Games, Pang Khwai village had drawn on its own, more local



The sidelines offered a national soundscape. Fans chanted *chaiyo!* (victory!) and other enthusiastic Thai cheers. Photo by author.

past and rewritten it through the District Office in a way that claimed their prominence within the now-national world of Mien sports events and ethnic culture more generally.

Another dimension to how Pang Khwai was refashioning itself as a village concerns its change in name. The signs at the village entry still refer to it as Pang Khwai ('Buffalo Pen'). But in the sports program only the new village-name was used: Jao Mae Luang ('Royal Mother'). Jao Mae Luang is a reference to H.R.H. The Princess Mother, the late mother of the current Thai king, who was actively involved in hill tribe development, particularly on nearby Doi Tung Mountain in Chiangrai Province. During the sports contests, fans on the sidelines chanted 'Jao Mae' with enthusiasm when their team played, no one chanted 'Pang Khwai.' The formerly Pang Khwai village thus not only staged a demonstration of its wealth through this expensive fair, the village also broadcast its 'upgraded' Jao Mae identity through the program (and thus the District Office) and the fans' chanting on the sidelines.

The program served not only to routinize the host village's new identity, broadcast its official connections, and to project their local past of sports contests onto the emerging Mien-wide social landscape. It was also a vehicle for an aspect of state control and monitoring, providing a detailed chart of referees

and other officials serving at the games, the sequence of participants in the opening parade, and a stipulation that contestants provide identification (name and a photograph) in order to qualify for the sports (Sujibatr 2001). I did not observe any such official monitoring of identity during the games. Still, the clause in the program indicates that this officially endorsed Mien fair was not only about the host village's link to the official reality and a sanction of Mien-ness within the national landscape of sports competitions. It is equally about the state's reach, and about Mien people's formal compliance with the state's practices of control, through the statement about the official monitoring of contestants' identities.

Sports have to some extent created the current form of Mien society, and it is through this social form centered on sports and cultural performances at school-grounds that Mien are defining themselves as a sub-nationality of sorts, as a unit of Thailand. During the four-day fair, sports and culture were paired as opposites, with the daytime competitions between different villages complemented by the nighttime performance of shared culture. The Mien engagement with notions of a national modernity through sports serves to reify a particular location of culture at the same time as it produces the distinction between tradition and modernity.

Modern sports are not the opposite of ethnic traditions. Rather, they make it possible to imagine ethnic tradition as shared, of the past, and a matter of expert performers on stage. In Europe and elsewhere, the 19th century nationalist wave of 'invented traditions' occurred in the same historical context as the consolidation of modern sports (Hobsbawm 1983). Both sports and culture performances are about collectivities having a team that represents them in a social universe where analogous units engage with one another. Sports and culture-displays both make difference legible in the sense of homogenizing the forms of identity that get manifest in public life. In rural Thailand, sports activate the village as the significant unit of mobilizing people's labor, resources, and attentions. It was as hyphenated Thai that Mien manifested their identity at this fair. As Mien assembled for the event on the two hyphens between Thai-Mien and traditional-modern, the collective concern with sports and culture ambiguated individual, village-based, and gendered agency through the politics of a minority voice within a national context. The collective ethnic minority voice is the domain of the organizers of the event, the Mien Association.

Reworking Culture and Ethnicity

The Mien Association was formed during 1992–93, through the combined efforts of Mien villagers concerned with the loss of local culture and IMPECT, a non-governmental organization that has primarily ethnic minority staff and focuses on ethnic minority culture, education, and development. At their first two meetings in 1992 and 1993, there was a discernible division of opinion on culture and identity. The older, village-based component focused on household prosperity and the efficacy of customs and rituals in everyday life. The Mien-ness that they were concerned with was that of farming households. The goal of the younger, school-educated and more urban members was a written handbook, for which they planned to locate ‘resource persons’ as the authoritative sources on aspects of Mien culture. Urban Mien, separated from the everyday practice of Mien culture because of school or wage work, could thus access their traditions and identity. The two views were expressed in concerns with ritual practice and, on the other hand, an organizational identity within a national and international network of groups concerned with indigenous people and farmers’ rights. Almost a decade after the two initial meetings, the Mien Association held its first event.

The pan-ethnic event of 2001 is a novelty, as is the staging of Mien culture for a Mien audience. The emerging emphasis on Mien ethnic identity contributes to a reworking of social relations. Previously, Mien social life was characterized by somewhat competitive rituals and feasting at the household level. With national integration, Mien livelihood was drastically altered, and competitive farming and feasting by households largely became a thing of the past. Subsequently, social action has been largely at or through the village, which has played up the agency of village headmen and school headmasters. These recently prominent actors can mobilize people for collective concerns. In my experience, their concerns have primarily been manifest in projects that concern the village within the nation, through schools, sports, development, and the quest for official favors (Jonsson 1999; 2001a).

When the Mien Association met during the Pang Khwai festival in 2001, the only woman present was the representative from IMPECT, substituting for a male colleague who had to attend another meeting. The other participants were mostly village headmen, men in their forties to sixties. The organization of events such as this tends to bring a clear gender distinction in that women take care of food, largely through the village Housewives’ Association (Thai: *klum mae ban*, the term has not been localized in Mien). Thus, a national framework for village organization, related to the nation state’s modernizing agenda



Dress now indexes social orientation toward the nation or the ethnic minority village, but this division was blurred in the nighttime display of Thai-Yao heritage. Photo by author.

in the countryside, contributes to silencing the voices of women in the public affairs of Mien villages and in their recent organizing as an ethnic group.

The agendas that the men brought up at the meeting suggested that Mien are emerging as an entity within the Thai nation. There was talk of the need to have funds for the organization, so that they could operate like the country’s Chinese associations. Suggestions about how to raise the funds ranged from a membership fee in the Association to a tax on the proceeds of individual farmers’ harvest. There was no resolution on the issue. Some participants complained that the Association was not democratic, saying that there was no mechanism for keeping the general Mien public up to date on activities and as it stood it was not serving except a few of Thailand’s Mien villages. This seemed a thinly veiled criticism of both the Association and of the sports and culture fair as only accommodating and celebrating a small number of Mien villages within the country. This critique, while it went no further, is interesting for how it drew on the modern and national language of democratic representation. The nation and its rhetorics have to a considerable extent achieved a hegemonic force among marginalized minority groups, which is evident for instance in how both the Mien Association’s leadership and its critics draw on national imagery to position themselves. More ‘local’ agendas, such as those voiced by older villagers at the initial meetings of the Association

about a decade earlier, are silenced in this context. Agency at the household level has been firmly marginalized, and while there may be debate there is an increasingly shared sense of Mien having to act as an ethnic group.

The president of the Association suggested that Mien have a greeting, and his suggestion was that one do the Thai greeting (*wai*, with hands clasped together) and the *farang* (Westerner) handshake, but saying a Mien phrase with each gesture: *peng awn* ('peace') with the Thai *wai*-gesture and *yiem long nye sa?* ('how are you?') with the handshake. He called for a vote on the issue, and it was approved. The issue of a 'Mien greeting' is a good example of the reworking of local culture through national and international contexts, where Mien are viewed in terms of Thai and western customs and proposed changes in Mien culture modeled explicitly on these other cultures. An additional dimension to the issue of a 'lack of a Mien greeting' is that in Thai society there is a general sense that 'hill tribes' have no manners. It may be because the Association's president is primarily within a Thai cultural framework in his day-to-day life, being the headmaster of a Thai school and married to a Thai woman, that he is very concerned with the issue. None of the other participants in the meeting showed particular enthusiasm or concern for a Mien greeting. After the rather inconclusive meeting, all the participants had lunch at the Pang Khwai headman's house, cooked and served by members of the village Housewives' Association.

The Mien village of Pang Kha, where I was based for much of my previous research, did not compete in sports,⁶ but much of the evening events including all the displays of Mien culture were from that village. The current president of the Mien Association, who is the headmaster of the Pang Kha school, had brought a full-size color photocopy of the *Kia Shen Pong* illustrated manuscript (see Jonsson 2000) that belongs to his uncle, and it was displayed as a piece of cultural heritage that belongs to Mien collectively. This is a significant reworking of the object's meaning, as it had previously defined Mien *vis-à-vis* outsiders, and had been a rare item of power and prestige with which Mien leaders could strike deals with lowland rulers. I had heard stories of such objects causing calamity for their commoner owners, that to have it one must have powerful connections in the spirit world. Now the object, albeit a photocopy of the actual one, is beginning to define Mien to themselves, through the Mien Association.

Other features of the cultural events proposed a similar reality of a collective cultural heritage, through reworkings of practices that used to link households in an exchange relationship that reflected on and constructed the honor of

individual households or lineages. One display from Pang Kha was the march and music of a band for a wedding reception, where the players walked around and through two lines of stand-in wedding guests, beginning and ending with mutual bowing. Then older men from Pang Kha performed a plate dance. Later, a group of young women, dressed in what I initially took to be Vietnamese Yao outfits, performed a plate dance. When I asked about this performance, I was told that this was a traditional component of wedding ceremonies in Pang Kha Village.

I had been to a number of weddings in the Pang Kha area during 1992-94, and never seen either the outfits or women performing the dance. It is possible that this was a feature at some wedding in someone's living memory, but it was certainly not a regular occurrence. Instead, what is emerging is that some practices from one village emerge as typical and traditional not only for that village but also for the ethnic group as a whole.⁷ When Pang Kha people performed their plate dance for a general audience during a sports fair in 1993, a man from a neighboring village came up to me as I watched and told me that the dancers were no good and that they did not even know how to really do this dance. According to this man, the way to do it was to have a team each from the groom's and the bride's sides and then they try to outdo one another with their skill in the dance. This was how people did it 'correctly' in the village where he lived.

No such local contestation was aired at the Pang Khwai event, and it is possible that Mien culture has firmly shifted from an aspect of competitive householding and intervillage differences and rivalries to a performance by specialists who represent the ethnic group. This certainly would be within the discursive framework of the Mien Association's effort to find resource persons in order to compile manuals of Mien culture for today's Mien youth. But equally, this reworking of culture into an ethnic performance is within the national definition of culture as ethnic dress and dance, a discursive practice that tends to erase all traces of the politics of defining culture and ethnicity.

The features of the 'culture program' were a showcase of the cultural agendas of the Mien Association's president, and his home village had emerged as the representative of Mien culture. Judging from the Mien case, being an ethnic group and having a culture, aimed as it is at a largely national context, implies a division of labor that mutes a number of local voices (in excluding 90 percent of Thailand's Mien villages from competition). The culture program plays up one segment of the population, those from Pang Kha village who displayed their music and dance for others to emulate, as the bearers of classical

Mien cultural heritage. The event renders segments of the population in a servant role, particularly the way it structures women, through the *klum mae ban*, as cooks and table servants at the Association's lunch. The Fair constitutes Thailand's Mien as a social entity, through the constellation of organizers, performers, contestants, staff, and audience, and this achievement is of course the main point. While the organizers and participants take Mien for granted as a category, and come together for a celebration of their identity and for the preservation of their culture, the event in fact creates Thailand's Mien as an acting subject for the first time.

The culture display was received well by the Mien audience, and this is indicative of a consensus on what forms of Mien culture are presentable. The practices of music and dance that were displayed were significantly different from those previously practiced in the host village of Pang Khwai. One of the older men from that village told me: 'This was really interesting. I liked seeing how this is done. See, here in Pang Khwai we are far from other Mien villages. Most of our neighbors have been *jan-khe*, ethnically (Yunnanese) Chinese. Over time, we have borrowed the Chinese forms of ritual presentations at weddings, and it is really important for us to see the Mien way of conducting a wedding ceremony.'

The banner that was stretched across the canopy above the evening stage is suggestive about the non-local character of the effort to display Mien culture. It was written in Thai and Chinese in black on red cloth, and the Thai stated: *Suebsan Watthanatham Thai-Yao* ('extend (into the future) the culture of Thai-Yao'), only parenthetically and in a smaller script using the more elaborate reference *Iu Mien*. Yao is the Thai and (originally) Chinese appellation for Mien people. The banner's 'Thai-Yao' makes them explicitly of Thai national space.⁸ The choice of the word for culture, *watthanatham*, is equally striking. While the equivalent Mien term, *le* ('customs'), would translate as *prapheni* in Thai, which has connotations of local, non-elite cultural practices, the term *watthanatham* (Thai, from Sanskrit) literally means 'progress of the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings),' for which there is no equivalent in Mien language. Thus 'culture' and the choice of an ethnic label both draw on an official and national reality. The Mien Association's president spoke in Mien at their meeting, but his opening discussion of the central issue of preserving Mien culture used the Thai term for culture (and not 'customs' in either Mien or Thai) and a series of Thai terms for notions of preservation (*anurak*, *raksa*, *pongkarn*, *suebsan*; 'preserve, protect, extend (into the future)').

In the language used, as well as in the form that presented culture took at

the Fair, the issue of preserving and celebrating Mien culture and identity is very much in national terms. This is not accidental, in that the recent changes that undermined the household focus to Mien social and cultural life resulted from political economic changes that were an aspect of national integration. The process of national integration defined various manifestations of highland ethnic minority difference as backwards practices that posed ecological, political, and social challenges to the Thai nation. Schools have been at the heart of the re-education of highland peoples toward Thai frameworks, and it is in schools that students and their teachers reiterate issues of culture and identity in national terms (Mulder 1997). Schools have also been central to the reorientation of social life toward a village focus, and to the establishment of sports as a feature of local social dynamics.

The national imagery that schools bring to Mien and other rural and ethnic minority villages provides models of presentability that replace previous social and cultural agendas and dynamics. These new models simultaneously reorient people's engagements with their culture from households, kin-groups, and villages within ethnically specific and diverse schemes, toward generalized forms which involve presenters and their audience, and where the references for having, displaying, and preserving culture are all national.

But the notion of this previous social reality may be informed to some extent by the homogenizing forces of contemporary inequalities. Kia Shen Pong, the scroll that establishes Yao identity and declares them exempt from the duties of state subjects, inscribes inequality into the social landscape of Yao regions (Jonsson 2000:69). Further, the text of this document defines Yao ritual practice, as the source of their prosperity and well-being, as derived from the state, implying considerable intimacy with the Chinese state that complements Yao maternal ancestry in a lady of the court. The state's gift of ritual, and thus of well-being, comes with the promise of Pan Hu's ancestral wrath to 'anyone who departs from these customs, who is not faithful, or who creates dissention' (Thongkum 1991:42), blurring whatever distinctions there may have been between local cultural practice and compliance with the state's rule. Historically, highland leaders with links to lowland courts had considerable power to impose their prominence. Nation states did not use such tributary links, but administrative integration, the issuing of identity- and land use papers, and trade connections played very unevenly to variously situated highland peoples in the twentieth century (Jonsson 2001b). Inequalities within highland social formations have a very long history, and both inequalities and histories relate to regional political economic systems. The notion

of a pre-contact situation or an ethnically shared framework of cultural and social life, implicit in much anthropological work on 'tribal' peoples, distorts this historically complex reality.

Among Mien, only wealthier householders could engage with certain prestigious ritual schemes, and certain of their leaders attempted to standardize the scale of ritual prestations (cf. Kandre 1967:608–609). Poor people who could not afford the cost of wedding ceremonies or other rituals were in some cases unable to sustain independent households, and many lived in informal satellite communities around wealthier villages (Jonsson 2001b). Along with such inequality among households and settlements, there was systemic gender inequality within households. Women did a considerable share of agricultural work, and this was particularly disproportionate in wealthy households because well-off Mien men frequently left farm work to others in order to engage in trade. While space does not allow more than a brief mention of these issues here, it is clear that inequality among Mien, between men and women and among households and settlements, is far from new. What is new is the national context, the prominence of the village in the mobilization of identity, and the resonance of the ethnic group and its culture for a public display.

Sporting Identity

At the recent pan-Mien fair and equally at smaller scale sports festivals during the previous decade or longer, sports have provided a vehicle for realigning Mien people as particular kinds of social entities. Sports and culture performances can be characterized as a particular kind of contact zone, not only between Thai and Mien models of sociality and identity, but also between alternative Mien models of organizing themselves, and in the relations of Mien to ethnically-other co-villagers. The models of the world that these events assume and promote are tentative. Viewing the novel pan-ethnic fair in the context of similar but smaller scale events that I had witnessed about a decade earlier, the emerging combination of sports and ethnic culture suggests how Mien in public are a kind of Thai. Sports competitions obfuscate the political dynamics of defining a particular public reality, and create national spaces for Mien to act out their identity through the engagements of audiences and expert performers on stage and on sports fields.

This practice also configures village populations in a particular way, one that counters their contemporary, multi-ethnic composition. Pang Khwai (Jao Mae) village also has Shan, Northern Thai, Lisu, Jin-Haw (Yunnanese Chinese), and Palong inhabitants, but in its representation through sports it was a uni-

formly Mien village. Mien sports contribute to particular social imaginaries and preclude others. A key component in this social imagination is the notion of community as both inherently limited and sovereign, features Anderson (1991:6) proposed were central to the nationalist definition of its project. The Mien Association's project is delimited by the boundaries of the Thai nation state, excluding non-Mien co-villagers from its village-centered gathering. While the Association does not have a political ambition toward a Mienland, its board deliberated on organizational practicalities (office, finances) as an ethnic entity, its president proposed a unique body language (the Mien greeting), and the event included a display of supposed key elements of Mien cultural heritage.

Culture and identity have been placed within a national sphere. At the Fair, elements of the national gaze were evident in the orientation of the opening ceremony and in the sponsorship of a member of the national parliament. The ways in which Mien are placing themselves within the nation are also evident in the 'legibility' of the performances of sports and culture for a general audience, in the mobilization of the Housewives' Association for 'domestic' duties, and in the clause about monitoring the identities of sports contestants. Engagements with the national sphere have facilitated the embodiment of Mien as an entity, and sport plays a central role in mapping the ethnic community through the nation's administrative units into a league that identifies Mien to themselves. In this context, Mien tradition emerges as that which engagements with modernity define as its opposite, assuming the ethnic subject.

The voices of many Mien people contributed to the formation of the Mien Association. Among the older and village-based constituents, there was a general sense of a cultural crisis. Young men were not training to become spirit mediums, younger people in general did not know the archaic song language that was used at weddings, and households had entered a precarious situation as more of the young people were away for work or education. Mien village life, as the older people knew it, was in danger of disappearing. These voices appear largely marginalized in the Mien Association's manifestation of the ethnic group, and the Mien-ness that was on display at the Fair belongs squarely 'in a global context where collective identity is increasingly represented by having a culture (a distinctive way of life, tradition, form of art, craft)' (Clifford 1997:218). The dynamics of the Mien case have many parallels in Jackson's (1995) description of Tukanoans in the Colombian Amazon region, where 'ethnicity' and 'culture' are fundamentally informed by engagements with the nation state, and where 'organizational efforts to promote cultural

autonomy '[serve] integration into the national society' (1995:17). The effort to promote and preserve Mien culture and identity institutes various forms of inequality in local life. Only some people's voices are heard, particularly those of village headmen and schoolteachers. Women and many older people who are not educated in Thai schools have become subaltern groups, to be called upon for food service or as resource persons about ancient customs, but otherwise cut off from the dynamics of the ongoing definition of what constitutes Thailand's Mien. The teenagers that represent Mien villages in sports competitions are recipients of Mien-ness. They are mobilized in an activation of Mien society. But while the evening culture performances were intended for their benefit, most of the younger people had taken off to karaoke bars in a nearby Thai town by the time of the culture shows.

The public enactments of ethnicity at the Mien Association's Fair speak to a national reality. It addresses the national anxiety about unruly 'hill tribes' with a display of orderliness that started with a parade and flag raising which constituted acts of allegiance to the nation state. State structures were integral to the village-to-village competitions, Thai schoolteachers served as referees and thus agents of translocal discipline, and the program declared compliance with an official surveillance of identities. In staging their culture as presentable to a general audience, the Mien Association partakes in the widespread activation of 'local culture' in the Thai countryside that in many ways is a response to globalization (Reynolds 1998:134-138). The emphasis on a presentable heritage that can be shared within the nation, such as the portrayal of Mien culture as dress, dance, and music, belongs to a more general move in Thailand to seek delight in an ethnically diverse heritage within national boundaries. This quest for heritage is in important ways conditioned by a view of the forces of modernity as constituting a threat to Thai identity (Reynolds 1998). But as Mien offer an alternative to modernity, they are engaging in a particularly national form of modernity themselves, as they come together as modern villagers who compete in sports at school grounds.

If sports allow Thailand's Mien to 'play with modernity' (Appadurai 1995), they also contribute to a reworking of the ethnoscape (Appadurai 1990) in a way that defines Mien practices of song, music, and dance as features of a common cultural heritage that is of the past. In facilitating the imagination of Thailand's Mien as an entity, the fair provides a forum for playing with both modernity and tradition in national terms, a process that has undone the household of its former agency. This process has simultaneously relocated culture from practice that constitutes individuals, households, kin-groups, and

villages through ritual to one which constitutes villages and the ethnic group through sports and collective heritage. The Mien Association contributes in important ways to the relocation of culture and identity to a national public sphere. As contradictory as it may sound, this may prove to be its relevance to the constituents who appear largely marginalized at the Fair. Mien households and villages face the structures of the state through eviction orders and the like. The only way to counter such structures is through an organization that is linked to other advocacy groups and sympathetic members of the media (cf. Hayami 1997; Ockey 1997). As the Mien Association contributes to new inequalities in Mien social life, it also offers what may be the only viable framework for engaging with the nation state in a way that defends the right of farming populations.

Through sports and culture performances at village festivals, Mien people make themselves legible to the state and the nation, and thus allow for the insertion of state structures in everyday life. As they engage with this national context, they simultaneously influence the shape of a contact zone where they may exercise some rights as members of the nation state. This may be the lasting relevance of sports in this setting, where teenagers are mobilized for ballgames in the name of villages and the minority ethnic group emerges as a legitimate entity. The Mien youth that competed on behalf of villages is not grounded in village life. Most of them live in Thai towns or cities for work or schooling, and it is possible to portray their sports teams as phantasmatic representations of the villages. The young people have little daily contact with the world of farming, and they are unlikely to settle into farming life later on.

Mien people's engagements with their ethnic identity in relation to the nation, the Mien Association's 'Thai-Yao,' animate the projection of autonomous villages and the united ethnic group through sports and culture. This modern Mien identity manifests the hegemony of a new elite in Mien affairs. The celebration of identity, and the form identity takes, are both products of a contact zone that has empowered a particular set of Mien actors to project their visions in social life. Their version of Mien identity is prominent not only because of the agentive power of this new elite but equally for the disempowerment of a range of Mien actors who now cannot compete, both in the literal sense of fielding a soccer team and in the abstract sense of challenging the increasingly national framework for ethnic minorities' identity work.

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Notes

1. Takraw is a ballgame played with a rattan ball. The game is structurally like volleyball, but players use their feet and heads to move the ball, and do not touch it with their hands. Common across Southeast Asia, it is included in the Southeast Asia Games. Petong, from the French petanques, is also known as boules and boccia.
2. Pratt (1992) defines contact zones as 'the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separate come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other' (1992:6–7). While her perspective thus provides an orientation to the dynamic processes of mutual identification among colonizers and colonized, my emphasis is primarily on what difference this contact zone makes for unevenly situated Mien agents in terms of their ability to lend a particular shape to their society. In important ways, these uneven Mien engagements with their own social formations are predicated on hegemonic national encounters with ethnic minority populations that constitute a form of internal colonialism.
3. The most recent embodiment of national society via sports took place at the 33rd National Games that were held at Chiangmai's 700th Anniversary Stadium. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra opened the games that featured 7,500 athletes and 1,400 officials from 76 provinces in 450 competitions. Channel 11 television station provided six hours of live coverage during each of the eleven days of the competition ('Thaksin to open National Games,' *The Nation*, December 13, 2002).
4. See Hearn (1974) for policies, actions, warfare and resettlement that concern highlanders. For an overview and analysis of the heavily militarized and somewhat paranoid political and social climate during the 1960s and 1970s, see Bowie's (1997) account of the village scout movement. Winichakul's (1994) study of the

- Thai-ization of national territory is important for an understanding of the 'alien' position of non-Thai highlanders.
5. Highland peoples (*chao khao*, 'mountain people') are commonly perceived as aliens on Thai soil. The current Thai King Bhumiphol (Rama IX) has referred to highlanders as *chao thai phu-khao* ('Mountain Thai', 'Thai Mountain People'). The term gives ethnically non-Thai highlanders some links to national territory. At the same time, 'Mountain Thai' suggests an erasure of non-Thai identities that has some parallel in the Turkish designation of Kurds during the 1930s as 'Mountain Turks' (Jonsson 2001c:59).
 6. Pang Kha village is the center of its own annual sports contest, where they compete with other villages in their subdistrict. Starting in 1990 as Phulangka Hansa (from Sanskrit via Thai, 'fun-fair,' Phulangka refers to the highest mountain in the area and to the village that previously was central to the Mien settlement in this region), it now is called Phulangka Games (in English).
 7. There is some parallel in Schiller's (2001) description of a Ngaju Dayak ritual that was performed for the purpose of a documentation and broadcast by National Geographic Television, where local religious activists appropriated a ritual form from a neighboring sub-group, with the explicit aim of standardizing local ritual practice (2001:39). Some of Thailand's Mien people have participated in transnational Yao events, where a conference on culture and identity is followed by cultural displays and visits to a set of representative villages (Jonsson 2000; Litzinger 2000; MacDonald 1997). Such transnational Yao events have taken place in Thailand, France, Vietnam, and China, and add an international dimension to the standardizations that are emerging at national levels (cf. Schein 2000 for Miao).
 8. Since the 1980s, there has been a trend in Thailand (especially in the north where most of the highland ethnic minorities are located) to move toward local ethnic labels and away from the official terms that tend to carry various prejudiced connotations, see Jonsson 2001a:159.

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