Mimetic Minorities: National Identity and Desire on Thailand's Fringe

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Mimetic Minorities: National Identity and Desire on Thailand's Fringe

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Representations of identity are always political acts, but their politics are unpredictable. Among ethnic minorities in northern Thailand, there is a striking difference between the absence of ethnic markers from a political confrontation and the profusion of ethnic markers at non-confrontational festivals. I situate the difference in engagements with a national contact zone where so-called Mountain Peoples are denied political agency. Minority assertions of ethnic distinction and national compatibility take various forms that resonate with mimesis. Thai notions of Mountain Peoples suggest equally mimetic aspects of self-making through denied similarities. Theoretical approaches to mimesis emphasize interaction and denied resemblance as much as representation. Performances and imagery involving minority identity and difference in northern Thailand contradict common expectations of a fundamental tension between rural and minority communities and the state, and highlight often-overlooked dimensions of identity-work.

Key Words: Mimesis, state-minority relations, Mien, Thailand

In late 1999, ethnic minority Mien farmers in Phayao Province of Thailand's north used drastic measures to defend their farmland and their rights. Having petitioned all levels of provincial and national authorities for years, the farmers resorted to an act of sabotage, burning down several buildings at a wildlife sanctuary's headquarters. At no time did the protesting farmers convey themselves as ethnic minority peoples. In their letters, in the confrontation with sanctuary staff, and at the many meetings that followed the burning, the farmers presented themselves as national—Thai—in language, manners, aspirations, frustrations, and claims on the state (Jonsson 2005: 131–147). If the population was playing ethnic politics, it was strikingly different from the appeal to cultural uniqueness that has been common in Latin America, in reaction to the violence of state control, capitalist expansion, and other dynamics of marginalization (Warren 1998).

Thailand's Mien do not immediately fit the framework of indigenous peoples' movements, as their public representations of identity

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persistently appeal to compatibility with the nation rather than insist on some essential difference. It is telling about the national context that the political protest made no reference to ethnic minority identity, while non-confrontational festivals in minority areas involve prominent displays of ethnic markers. I view the protest and the festivals as expressions of the same dynamic of negotiating identity and rights within a nation-state, as two sides of the same contact zone of which only one appears to be actively noticed and studied by academics (see below).

Even when indigenous peoples have international supporters and sympathizers, they are continually engaged in negotiating national realities (Rosaldo 2003; Tsing 1999; Warren and Jackson 2002; Zerner 2003). The international dimension may help bring pressure on national authorities, but the triangular dynamic also places indigenous peoples at risk of being discredited at either (or both) the national or the international level (Conklin and Graham 1995; Conklin 1997; Brosius 2003). Negotiations across difference on the basis of some assumed sameness, national belonging, or transnational shared interest are key to the varied politics by or about indigenous peoples. Representation is central to this process of negotiation. The case of Thailand's Mien and other highland ethnic minorities is in many ways different from that of indigenous peoples in the Amazon region or in Sarawak of Malaysia. The fundamental commonality among the cases is the relevance of contact zones (Pratt 1992; Clifford 1997; analogous to the "structure of the conjuncture" (Sahlins 1985) and "friction" (Tsing 2005)) for the forms that identity politics takes. It is through their interactions that people define themselves, often in ways that engender social creativity and new understandings of culture, ethnicity, and common interests, in national and international contexts (Turner 1991, 2002; Jackson 1995; Warren and Jackson 2002). In many cases, such negotiations across difference involve situations of pervasive inequality (Pratt 1992: 6; Tsing 2005: 224–238).

In Thailand, ethnic minority highland peoples, known as Mountain Peoples (*chao khao*, usually glossed as "hill tribes") are commonly viewed as alien immigrants who threaten the nation politically as much as ecologically and are frequently associated with illicitness. This is the immediate background for the absence of ethnic minority markers from the Mien protest in 1999. This is also the setting for the displays of ethnic markers as collective and apolitical heritage and the increasingly common dance shows and beauty pageants at recent festivals.

My case concerns two festivals in early 2005 that involved various representations of Mien and Hmong minority identities. These are mimetic assertions of alterity, the relationship between self and other,

which fashions minorities not only as unthreatening to and compatible with Thailand but also as objects of pleasure and desire. Many of the representations of Mien and Hmong identities at recent festivals seem ambiguous in that they draw quite heavily on contemporary Thai notions of presentable dance and culture. My interest in such festivals stems partly from their commonality in my area of research. It is also motivated by their neglect in studies about this region. There appears to be a general focus on resource conflicts, the exercise of state power, and the marginalization of ethnic minority groups (Satyawadhna 2003; Laungaramsri 2003; Buadaeng 2004; Duncan 2004; Engelhart 2008; Leepreecha et al. 2008; McCaskill et al. 2008; Wittayapak 2008), with an attendant lack of attention to how the terms of negotiation are shaped by assertions of identity and difference on national terrain, at festivals and other apparently apolitical events.

Images of Thai and minority identities are not statements of fact or expressions of power but representations that aim to produce an identity effect that creates commonality or a shared purpose, against pervasive internal diversity, tensions, and conflicts of interest. Neither Thai nor Mien (or Mountain People) are a homogenous and unified people, but public representations repeatedly suggest frameworks for making such identifications true, inevitable, and embodied, in part by defining their relations across and through difference.

The work of mimesis

The term mimesis is from Ancient Greek, and it referred to imitation, representation, and expression (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 25). Plato gave the term contradictory meanings, lauding some manifestations and critiquing others (1995: 31; Halliwell 2002). His approach in *The Republic* is best known, where he critiques poets and painters for their works as diluted versions of the real thing: "Examine imitation in the light of the Ideas, and you will find that it is the production of images or appearances which are third in order from Reality and Truth" (Book X, Adam 1965: 384). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle suggested that mimesis was "a natural need of mankind [and that its pleasure was related to] the pleasure of learning" (Bal 1982: 174, Aristotle 1997: 5–6). Aristotle was concerned with the effect of representations, in particular that theater allowed for empathy among an audience that could lead to affective transformation: catharsis (Bal 1982: 175, Aristotle 1997: 18–19). Mimesis was "not only embedded in the creative process but also in the constitution of the human species" (Puetz 2004: 4; cf. Bourdieu 1990: 73 on embodied knowledge as "practical mimesis").

One way to characterize the apparent difference between Plato and Aristotle is with reference to Geertz' (1973: 93) discussion of culture as a model of the world and a model for action. Plato stated that most representations failed in relation to the original, whereas Aristotle suggested that they might succeed in engaging an audience. Gebauer and Wulf (1995: 45–52) suggest that their difference concerns historical moment, a shift from orality to literacy that had fully occurred by the time Aristotle wrote the *Poetics*. But it is very clear that Plato measured the value of representations in relation to a particular social project: "At issue is the education of members of the guardian class, with the goal of making them capable of fulfilling the duties they will be assigned by the state" (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 33). Aristotle argued that poetry should not imitate life or historical material, but "[raise] it to a 'higher' level than is found in reality" (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 55). He suggested that tragedy might result in a "purification process," whereas Plato argued against any representation of things "horrifying" or "pitiful" (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 56). Given the pervasive intellectualization of Ancient Greece in Western self-fashioning, it deserves mention that poets and playwrights were athletes, "contestants" for prizes and glory, in a society that also had contests in surgery, the carding of wool, "eating and drinking, beauty [and] kissing," and much else, along with what the West recognizes as "athletics" (Poliakoff 1987: 104).

Socrates and many other philosophers emphasized that athletics were only useful to the extent that they readied young men for warfare, in ways that would benefit their city (Poliakoff 1987: 100). Plato's dismissal of the work of painters and poets conflated reality, truth, divinity, and royalty (Adam 1965: 384). It is telling of a state-centric framework for what could be represented, which in my reading is absent from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Plato's argument about mimesis belongs to a historical moment when city-states came to gradually monopolize public life, through warfare with other city-states as much as through appropriating control over festivals (athletics, ritual, ceremony) from elite families (Kyle 1987; Poliakoff 1987; Renfrew 1988). His case is an active dismissal of representations that did not rest on or imply the state or kingship. "The image as such can arise only in the context of the city, the temple, and a new public sphere" (Vernant 1979, quoted in Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 42). At the same time, stately images manifest a mixture of appropriation, differentiation, and monopolization as city-states created new avenues for social display, contest, and representation that served to make a previous family-focus progressively unthinkable or subversive.

Gebauer and Wulf insist on historicization. Mimesis may inform all human action, interaction, and cognition, but it also makes claims to differentiate, to resemble, and to enact that are specific to time and place and assume some authorization (1995: 120). They discuss a long period in European medieval history where the Christian god was the ideal source of all imagery; kingship was related as *christomimetes*, an imitation of Christ. There are important shifts in the royal paradigm among Christ/God, the law, and the polity (1995: 64–75), which can also be viewed as mimetic variations on the ultimate justification for kingship and state control, centrally involved in the active management of what could be represented, and by whom, in social life.

Mimetic activity "establishes a complex relationship between two objects, a model [original] and a copy; it implies in each case similarity and difference, identification and transformation, in one and the same movement" (Pappellis and Dupont-Roc 1980, quoted in Bal 1982: 173; cf. Taussig 1993: 78, 233). In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Taussig (1993) draws explicitly on Walter Benjamin's 1933 essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" (Benjamin 1999), which offered a fundamental shift in the focus on mimesis from literature and art to "the relation between the individual and the world, the Other, and the self" (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 269). Taussig's book is a creative critique of the tendency to heighten the difference of Latin America's various "natives" from the modern world and to isolate "blacks" from both natives and Europeans. He remarks on figurines used for curing among the Cuna, which were carved to represent European types; "The very mimicry corrodes the alterity by which my science is nourished" (1993: 7–8). This aligns with other critiques of the assumed fundamental divide between the West and the Rest in previous anthropology (Fabian 1983; Herzfeld 1987; Latour 1993; Tsing 1993). Taussig's concern to capture the mimetic faculty in his writing leads down very different paths, but his work suggests new fields of comparative and historically grounded anthropology that can have a global reach.[1]

Differentiation and discrimination ("denied resemblance") manifest the same mimetic fashioning of self and other (alterity) as do resemblance and imitation (Taussig 1993: 144–161; Bhabha 1984; see Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 233–307 on Benjamin, Adorno, Girard, Derrida, and others). Simon Harrison (2006) argues that "social identities are created by the imposition of constraints on imitation and resemblance." Furthermore, "in the sphere of social identity, resemblance and imitation are ontologically primary. Differences are secondary effects produced by the regulation, control, suppression, and denial of similarities" (2006: 13). Modern nation-states are particular frameworks for making assertions of sameness and difference relevant,

in relation to national ideologies that may systemically disqualify certain internal others from membership, and in relation to the options and constraints that people must maneuver as they claim basic rights and recognition. The minorities that are classified as Mountain People in contemporary Thailand are not acknowledged as rightful political actors. This systemic denial of basic rights (such as citizenship, see McKinnon 2004; Toyota 2005) is key to the representations of difference that animate their contemporary politics—their attempts to suggest safe difference and their own compatibility with the nation-state of Thailand.

"Mimesis designates not a passive process of reproduction but the [active] process of creation, representation, or enactment" (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 119). All communication and identification draws on representation, but how one approaches the term makes fundamental descriptive and analytical difference. An examination of the work of mimesis calls attention to interaction across difference. This opens to realms of suggestion, seduction, appropriation, control, and conflict and may inform a more nuanced ethnographic sense of identity politics that play differently at local, national, and international levels.

My case calls attention, from the political margins of Thailand, to the complexity of national societies, where official and vernacular cultural forms relate variously to class, gender, sexuality, self-making, and ethnic- and rural-urban divides. The national landscape (forests, mountains, villages, etc.) is signified variously in terms of state-control, the national religion, violence, ethnic culture, commercial potential, rival environmentalisms, desire, and spirituality. An examination of the work of mimesis suggests the practical impossibility of delimiting a subject position (identity) as unique and uniform (i.e., bounded, homogeneous, or having a fixed agenda). Agendas and representations bring about and shape identities, in large part through interaction and (notions of) difference.

The national context

The insistence on ethnic minority difference was foundational to twentieth-century Thai identity. Winichakul (2000a, 2000b) shows how the early-twentieth-century Thai elite appropriated Western discourses of civilization and progress to fashion its social prominence on new ground, after the Bangkok regime erased many tributary and autonomous states and made them its provinces. In this scheme, Forest People (*chao pa*, who later became Mountain People) were characterized by their essential strangeness and lack of civility. Thai ethnographic understandings became gradually more racialized, in terms that also

insisted on the alien-ness of Mountain Peoples, that they had no claims to national membership or to land (Jonsson 2005: 45–55).

During the Cold War, Thai nation building was refashioned in relation to a communist threat from neighboring countries such as China, Vietnam, and Laos, with considerable United States involvement. Mountain People emerged as shorthand for some of these anxieties, as alleged border-crossers who showed no particular allegiance to king or country. There was a domestic communist movement, but it was defined as foreign, somewhat like the Mountain People. Any agitation for farmer or labor rights was seen as an alien communist threat, and was fiercely suppressed. Militarized violence escalated in the late 1960s and came to involve attacks on highland settlements by 1968, after which large tracts of mountains were declared free-fire zones and many people fled toward the lowlands (Hearn 1974; Race 1974; Bowie 1997; Jonsson 2005: 55–60).

The Thai trope of Mountain People Problems (*panha chao khao*, see Laungaramsri 2001: 42–50) conflates various opposites of assumed national identity (border crossing, migratory tendencies, illicitness, lack of loyalty to king and country) in a binary construction of "the Thai." The level of fear and distrust, as well as of hate—manifest in settlement erasure, deportation, military attacks, policies against the use of ethnic minority languages at school, and the destruction of the orchards and houses of Hmong people in Nan Province in 2000 (Wittayapak 2008: 111)—suggests the affective transformation that mimesis may bring about: division and conflict. These were not acts by an undifferentiated Thai society, but mimetic assertions that sought to lend a particular, unified shape to Thai identity, against pervasive internal diversity. Their sources are sometimes unclear and occasionally impossible to pinpoint. During and after the violence that lasted into the 1980s, Hmong in particular were singled out for their alleged communist sympathies. The label *meo daeng* (Red [communist] Meo/ Hmong) stuck, in some ways as a gloss for all Mountain Peoples. In the lowlands across the country, there were many analogous attacks on suspected communist sympathizers (Charoensin-O-Larn 1988). The incidents were varied, but all assumed an image of "Thailand under threat" (Irvine 1982), where anxiety and violence were constitutive of the object that they sought to defend through the image of threatening alterity (cf. Kapferer 1988; Malkki 1995).

Soon after this violence came to an end, children in many ethnic minority highland villages were given a t-shirt with a print of the Thai national flag and the statement "I Love Thailand" (*nu rak muang thai*; the *nu* is a dimunitive personal pronoun that literally translates as "mouse," or "little-I"). "Love" here implies a relationship of dependency

and care that is decidedly asymmetrical. The t-shirt suggests both the condition of lack and the expected repair as resting on the infantilized Mountain People's love of the country. I have no firm information about the initiator or donor of this t-shirt, or about how widely it was distributed—it had become rare in 1990. Mimetic assertions create particular contact zones in ways that define the identities involved. Rather than explaining the t-shirt as given by a certain Thai organization to hill tribe children at a particular date, I view it, as well as the notion of Mountain People Problems, as involved in (re-)creating "Thai" and "Mountain People" through mimetic definitions that deny commonality and establish particular intersections and inequalities.

The Thai dynamic of national sameness and difference was never exclusively about inter-ethnic relations. Rather, the process has sometimes focused on ethnicity, and sometimes had ethnic consequences while its focus was elsewhere. One example is what happened to forests and members of the Communist Party of Thailand. The CPT was offered amnesty by the late 1970s, in an effort at national reconciliation, and its members may all have given up their forest-based struggle by the early 1980s (see Morell and Samudavanija 1981). CPT members' surrender was enacted as a spectacle of national identity (for the media) that rested on the iconic contrast between the forest and society.

The forest, *pa theuan*, had earlier been characterized as lawlessness indexed by insubordination to the state (see Davis 1984: 81). From the dominant perspective, society was its mimetic opposite: hierarchy, Buddhism, military rule, and devotion to monarchy. In rituals of re-incorporation into Thailand, CPT members would publicly "[hand] over their rifles and red flags to the government officials. In return, they would receive the tricolor flag and a picture of their majesties, and finally they would join in singing the national anthem together" (Winichakul 1994: 169–170, cf. Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 197). As a ritual of affective transformation, the event turned the participants from hostile aliens to docile members. With the threat of insurgency and insubordination erased, the forest was later remade, with uninhabited nature, as *thammachat*; the "birthplace of the Buddha's teachings." This mimetically transformed domain implies Buddhism and national identity in a way that defines non-Buddhist, ethnically non-Thai farmers as an alien and destructive threat (Hayami 1997: 572–573). Shifting cultivation had already been signified as anti-Thai (Hanks and Hanks 2001: 128), and this alienation of Mountain Peoples was further entrenched as national identity and space were reworked in an act of closure on a period of civil war.

In 1981, the Royal Forestry Department established a Wildlife Sanctuary in the subdistrict of Phachangnoi, in Pong district of

Phayao province, to close off a former area of CPT insurgent bases in the forest. By 1992, the RFD declared five of six registered villages illegal and announced their eviction. Nothing happened at the time. After the protest in 1999, there was still no change. In 2003, the RFD declared the whole subdistrict a Primary Watershed (Class A1); all settlement and farming was illegal and should be erased. Judging from a visit in 2005 and from correspondence in late 2008, the villages are still in place and farming continues, though wage-labor (in Thai cities as well as in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere) has been of growing importance since the mid-1980s.

Within Thai society there is an ongoing debate whether farmers are compatible with forests. One aspect of this factionalizing debate is a counter-discourse against the notion of Mountain People as trouble-makers. It is remarkably slanted in favor of Karen peoples and against the Hmong, leaving other minority ethnicities somehow less marked (see Forsyth and Walker 2008). This, too, can be understood as drawing on a mimetic fashioning of the Thai self, with the "good alien" Karen as the most compatible with Thai notions of society and the environment and the "bad alien" Hmong assumed to be the least compatible (Hayami 1997, 2006; Walker 2001; Laungaramsri 2001: 54, cf. Taussig 1993: 142–143). Such representations are often recy-cled uncritically in academic discourse: "The Hmong are notorious for their former practice of burning forest to prepare fields for opium cul-tivation. When fields were exhausted, they would repeat the process in a new area. This highly destructive practice drew relatively little attention until 1970" (Engelhart 2008: 100). In contrast, "highlanders such as Karen have been living in harmony with the conservation of the forest in the mountainous north" (Wittayapak 2008: 123). These examples show not only the common practice of taking ethnic labels for granted as referring to coherent clusters of ideas and practices (Hinton 1983; Thornton 1988) but also the uncritical academic use of state-related classifications and moral valuations (Caro-Baroja 1963; Herzfeld 1987, 1997).

"[Value] transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic" (Marx 1976: 167). Viewed in the context of political confrontations, festi-vals in the Thai countryside point to ongoing negotiations of social rela-tions in terms of the value assigned to categories of people and place. The politics is much more complex, mundane, and problematic than is suggested by the assumed antagonism of the state and a community or the nation and a minority: the realm of resource conflicts, power, and resistance. It is about signifying the national setting and its components (e.g., forests, mountains, ethnicity, and gender) in such a way that the contingency of particular configurations of identity, power, and history

disappears. Representations of identity are about social relations within and beyond ethnic labels or administrative units, while they appear to simply express a "thing" in itself.

Sporting culture

Thai society still harbored many suspicions about their highland Others in the early 1980s, after pervasive militarized violence against the CPT and assumed sympathizers had come to an end. At that time, Mien people in certain villages started to assemble for contests in soccer. As far as I can tell, these events did not involve any ethnic markers but rather played to notions of national sameness and apolitical fun. In my research area, ethnic minority Mien and Hmong school students started to come together for subdistrict-wide sports contests in 1988. In early 1993, the annual competition of running and volleyball was framed by national loyalty (flags, the anthem, and a politician's speech) and ethnic markers (evening displays of dance and song by people in ethnic dress). The event also played to male desire, with dance partners for hire during two nights of evening entertainment (Jonsson 2001a).

In 2001, Mien people came together for their first national ethnic event, which began with flag raising and the national anthem, and included four days of sports contests and two nights of cultural displays. This event was organized by the national Mien Association and supported largely by the host village. It did not aim for a Thai audience and did not feature sexualized dance (unlike festivals in 1993 and 2005). The village did not succeed in having a national-level politician visit and give a speech, but one donated money and prize-cups (Jonsson 2003a, 2003b). At that time, all the sports were those common in Thai schools. The subsequent introduction of traditional or cultural sports is a new feature, in part related to the growing acceptance and endorsement of ethnic markers as apolitical heritage (Jonsson 2004; Connors 2005).

The Mien Sports and Culture Festival (*ngan mahakam kila-watthanatham chon- phao iu-mien-samphan*), which was held during 1–4 February 2005, was the fourth annual event of the Mien Association. It had an opening ceremony, contests in "international," "local," and "cultural" sports, and evening entertainment. The event made various statements about belonging in national society, blurring the boundaries among the event itself, the host village, and its school field, the dispersed members of an ethnic group, and national space. The entry-parade can be viewed as a symbolic condensation of the intended message of the festival. Prominently at the front were

national flags, carried by people in ethnic minority dress. Following the flag-carriers in the parade were ethnic markers, including an enlarged photo portrait of Phaya Khiri Srisombat, the man alleged to be the founder of Mien settlement in Thailand over a century ago.[2] Behind the photo of the national-minority founder were people carrying a scroll, about fifteen feet long, that is promoted in a provincial tourism brochure as "the world's longest passport." This is an old document attributed to a Chinese emperor of uncertain historical provenance, that declares the Yao people (Mien are a kind of Yao) free from duties to the Empire (Jonsson 2005: 26–34).

This object is becoming the collective heritage of the ethnic group, through parades organized by the national Mien Association. Behind the photo of the ethnic group's indexical leader and its now-heirloom object were live expressions of heritage—an elaborately dressed bridal couple with several attendants and a group of men dressed as higher level spirit mediums. Trailing them were people carrying a "Mien Games" flag. It is modeled on the Olympics flag, with twelve rings in reference to the twelve lineages of the Mien people. Last were groups of contestants and others in ethnic or sports dress with signs for each of the competing villages.

The parade suggests an exaggeration of difference as a claim to sameness. With people in ethnic dress (that no longer is common) carrying national flags, ethnic minority markers are cast as manifesting national loyalty, having previously been associated with its opposite. The portrait of the founding ancestor is in an analogous place to portraits of the king in Thai public events, and this is suggestive of its intended message. Embodiments of ethnic religion, heritage, culture, and society—the scroll, the dress-up spirit mediums and the bridal couple, and the registered villages—actively fuse difference as devotion in a statement of the legibility, appeal, and belonging of an ethnic minority people in modern Thailand. They draw on state imagery in an active denial of the state's monopoly on representation and modernity (cf. Holston 2000).

The opening ceremony further connected the ethnic group and various aspects of the nation-state. The national anthem was played, and then there was a welcoming ceremony in the manner of Mien weddings, honoring visiting dignitaries, including the Director of the Provincial Administrative Council who later gave a speech. Another aspect of the opening ceremony was a collective bowing to portraits of the king and queen of Thailand that were set above the event's billboard and below national flags. This act of deference draws on performances that had been customary for a Mien bridal couple on the eve of their wedding, of bowing to the spirits of the patrilineal ancestors of (usually) the groom.

The social creativity of this event expresses multiple mimetic cross-references between Mien and Thai, the minority and the nation, ancestor spirits and royalty, through pleasure and play.

The organizers had assembled about twenty committees of referees and judges for the various sports, and for the event as a whole there were forty-five committees with a total of 396 positions. The ethnic and traditional event was both modern and bureaucratic. Equally important, the games defined people as representatives of villages that competed for recognition and prizes. The village as a socially relevant unit is very much an artifact of the modern nation-state, and in Thailand it is the state's smallest administrative unit. Households and kin-groups, previously the exclusive focus of Mien and Hmong ritual and social life, do not get activated in public engagements with the nation, and village festivals contribute to making them unthinkable in contemporary social life.

At the cultural or ethnic sports, people competed in the name of villages. But these events also turned into sports what had been everyday practices of livelihood (crossbow shooting), ritual (calligraphy, the making of spirit money) and dress (embroidery). As contests or sports, these are novel, but previously there had been a competitive element to singing and dancing, primarily at weddings when people represented the kin-groups of bride and groom. These previously competitive practices have increasingly been turned into collective and non-competitive expressions of heritage pertaining to the ethnic group, and dancing has shifted from adult men to teenage (and younger) girls. The fair expresses the making of history and identity through the assembly of ethnic markers and their relationship to national loyalty and membership in registered villages, under the umbrella of a national ethnic minority association. All of this fashions an ethnic group as a knowable entity that then can become a party to negotiating with state structures and international entities like ethnic Iu Mien in the United States (former refugees from neighboring Laos), who sent a team of athletes.

The combination of cultural, local, and international sports is as important as is the insistence on their distinctions for envisioning the Mien as a transcendent ethnic group, whose heritage is guarded by the Mien Association and whose identity is as profoundly Thai as it is squarely ethnic. The sports and culture fair successfully brought in a powerful provincial government official and received national attention through coverage on TV Channel 7 with its display of ethnic heritage, apolitical fun and games, and loyalty to the nation. During the following months, the video segment was shown at least three times on national television on an evening slot devoted to cultural matters

and human interest stories. To Mien acquaintances in my research area this was a good thing; it showed that they were in view as a presentable component of modern Thailand, which might also bring them visitors at future festivals and more positive national attention.

Evening entertainment teams representing individual villages were predominantly made up of young schoolgirls ranging in age from about five to fifteen. They wore ethnic dress, Mien and Hmong, and performed sexualized dances akin to the televised presentation of contemporary pop music. This gendering sexualization is not up front at the event's agenda (unlike in 1993), but it points to the implicit politics of village fairs in the Thai countryside. It takes place within a national domain that is strongly gendered, at an event focused on ethnic heritage and loyalty to the nation. Jeffrey (2002: 42) notes changes in rural entertainment in lowland Thailand during the 1960s, with the "expansion of roads and radio through the countryside." New musical styles, notably *luk thung*, which drew on urban and international sounds but was promoted as rural and Thai (see Jirattikorn 2006), involved "backup dancers (usually females) in flashy costumes." A masculine gaze on sexualized young women has become routine at village fairs in Thailand, in ways that connect to the national domain of political rallies, musical performances, and televised entertainment (Jeffrey 2002: 163, cf. Bowie 1997: 174–175; Fordham 2005). This is part of the national reality that Mien and Hmong people are claiming a space within, through girls at festivals that mimetically effect the Thai Other as a male and desiring subject.

Contemporary Thailand is fashioned through a standardization of displays and contests that rests on national terms of engagement and interactions. Festivals place communities in the national public sphere in the hope of some beneficial interactions. This brings its own risks: The 2009 Mien Sports and Culture Festival was held in the village of Huai Chomphu; "some gangsters came and destroyed the whole event, it was really bad" (Kittisakr Ruttanakrajangsri, personal communication 11 February 2009). Thailand's Mien people may abandon this annual event.

Marketing and local beauties

The Festival of Lychee (fruit) and Local Treasures in Phachangnoi Sub-district (*ngan thesakarn linji lae khongdi tambol phachangnoi*) was held on 7 May and was part of an effort to establish Phayao Province's reputation as a source of quality products for national and international markets.[3] It was on a smaller scale than the Sports and Culture Festival, but it can be viewed as an analogous attempt to

place people within a national domain, through cash crops. There was a contest for the best-tasting lychees, and also a lychee eating contest, a beauty pageant, singing, and dance shows. The festival resulted in prizes: first-, second-, and third place for the best lychees, as there had been for the athletes and other contestants at the sports and culture festival; for the top three beauties; and the election of a Lychee Queen who went on to a pageant in the provincial capital.

If the lychee festival is explicitly about quality crops for national and international markets, it is implicitly about the gendering and sexualization of entertainment, with one after another troupe of girls dancing in the style of backup or chorus-line dancers. The girls performing dances for the (male) audience's pleasure were, like the contestants in "cultural," "local," and "international" sports, representations of registered villages. That is, as they reproduced the gendered and sexualized inequalities and pleasures of the national domain, in the context of an extensive commercialization of women's bodies, they expressed the smallest administrative units of the modern nation-state.

An official from the Provincial Agriculture Department spoke at the opening of the event: "People need to know that forest is water and water is forest. You have to help protect the forest so that there is water for the lychees, so that lychees in Phayao province are of good quality." He continued, and shifted to tourism; "There is a rally today from Phayao City, they will come here and visit, to see the lifeways of people in Phachangnoi subdistrict, the Yao and the Hmong people." As a representative of the provincial authorities, the man evoked the image of Mountain Peoples as a threat to the forest and the provincial economy, and the ethnic lifeways as something for tourists, dissociated from daily practice. Tourism and the marketing of cash crops imply revenue for the province, and the festival was in some ways a distillation of the subdistrict's commercial potential, where culture had emerged as another product. The event rendered a particular political-economic regime of dispossession as an opportunity (cf. Brosius 2003: 121; Tsing 2005: 55–77).

The beauty pageant was not without surprises. An announcer with a cordless microphone called the contestants out, primarily girls in their late teens. When they introduced themselves, they did so in their local languages, Mien and Hmong. The announcer was somewhat baffled and teased them in Thai about incomprehensibility. They re-introduced themselves in Thai, giving the village they were from and the names of their parents. Later the announcer asked them, in the manner of national television and maybe with reference to national marketing, what is the importance of the lychee festival for the subdistrict? "This brings together the people from different

villages, and we get to know each other better. People will know how far the quality of lychees in different villages has improved." Another girl said; "It is an important event because the Welfare Department will learn about lychees from our subdistrict. Traders will come and buy our lychees, and the public will know that our lychees are a quality product. Thank you." Said a third; "the festival is a good thing. People have love and friendship. Outsiders will know more about lychees from our subdistrict. And I think that there has been a lot of lychee production, so the price has gone down. I would like those in charge [of market prices] to work on improving the price. Thank you."

The contestants were on stage as something fun to watch and follow, something presentable and desirable that would not be out of place on national television. But they had to be teased into translation, away from the local and ethnic minority linguistic register to that of the nation. The girls were obliging when asked about the relevance of the festival for the administrative unit. Perhaps because they were framed as pretty and desirable, there was no alarm when one of them voiced the concerns of farmers, who are cognizant of and concerned with their unstable returns for cash-crops. The girl spoke as a farming subject and not just another pretty face in ethnic dress.

Neither event was a collective representation in any uncomplicated way. There are various internal differences regarding how Thailand's Mien people engage with matters of their culture and identity. Some, notably schoolteachers and officials at the levels of village and subdistrict, are particularly keen on displays of presentable culture for a general, national audience. Others, such as NGO workers, are concerned with ways of manifesting eco-wisdom that might boost claims to legal settlement and land (cf. Ruttanakrajangsri 2002). Older men and women with little social capital are in general more concerned with household continuity, while teenagers are for the most part immersed in realms of Thai popular culture. All can be viewed as equally local, Mien, and national, but they have very unequal means of manifesting their sense of identity in the public sphere, and of engaging with the nation as regular members, or as representatives of an ethnic group (Jonsson 2001a, 2003a, 2004; cf., for Maasai, Hodgson 1999).

Individuals, too, embody contrary agendas. The headmaster of the local school is central to some aspects of national integration. He is also the president of the Mien Association, invested in the codification and presentation of ethnic culture. At the same time, he has actively promoted the importance of Phaya Khiri Srisombat as a founder of Thailand's Mien. The man is a fourth-generation descendant, and his promotion of an ancestor is also to claim his legacy and importance:

for the ethnic group within Thailand, for his kin-group and village in relation to other lineages and villages, and for himself over his cousins who are in some rivalry regarding local prominence.

Representations of identity and community are political acts that may significantly influence people's ability to negotiate rights and recognition. Mimetic assertions of identity establish particular parameters of common interests that are wielded for purposes of nation building, counter-hegemonic contestation, as well as the assertion of vernacular domains that make no deliberate claim to represent the nation. Such assertions are equally deployed for the mobilization of minority identities against marginalization, culture loss, and generational divides; sometimes for the purpose of making benevolent connections with more powerful others, or for entrenching the prominence of particular individuals. These representations are communicative acts and, simultaneously, acts of meta-communication (Bateson 1972: 177–193) that aim to redraw the contact zones where people can negotiate matters of identity, difference, and recognition.

Many of the dances on display at minority festivals are either copied or fashioned by Thai schoolteachers, who draw on the (trans-)national public sphere. Attempting to distinguish such elements from who the Mien or the Hmong really are, or from how they represent themselves, would introduce an artificial purity to this situation. Ethnic minorities are inextricable from their immediate, national context. It is in many cases impossible to assign a single source to the representations that concern Mountain Peoples in Thailand. The binary opposition to Mountain Peoples is significantly involved in the fashioning of Thai realities, not simply those of ethnic and national identity but also those of state control, military command, border concerns, forests and watersheds, enjoyable culture, and enticing entertainment. In this national context, Mountain Peoples' identities have always been about the nation, their assumed opposite.

A moving mountain

A sign on the Lychee Festival stage read "Spirit Mountain" (Thai, *doi thewada*) and gave a phone number. This is a recent tourist destination in the province, and a road was laid to a scenic spot (*chom wiu*) at the top in 2005. Spirit Mountain refers to Phulangka, a well-known local mountain. The spirit ("divinity," "angel") reference is said to draw on local Mien people's reverence for a mountain spirit. I had never heard of it prior to this time, or of anything that could be called "mountain spirits," or a Mien reverence for mountain spirits. Some locals later told me that this was a new association. The headmaster of

the local school, who is well connected in the province, had made this up and successfully pitched it to provincial tourism authorities. A nearby mountain, not Phulangka, had been known as a spirit mountain (Mien, *fin-ja-bo*), but not because of any reverence or a relationship to the spirit. Instead, it drew on an episode from approximately the late 1940s when a man made several attempts to start a field on that other mountain. He would repeatedly get lost in fog, get dizzy, faint, or fall asleep, and ultimately he gave up. The word spread that some spirit on that mountain was decidedly uninviting, so no one tried to farm there.

Fin-ja-bo defined the place as unappealing and as useless for farming. Through a domestic tourism effort, decades later, the reference was moved to another mountain as it was remade in translation as an object of mimetic reverence. A brochure from the province's tourism office states that the local, ethnic people also refer to the mountain, because of two rocks, as "Mt. Maiden's Breasts" (Thai, *doi nom sao*). Again, this is not something from the locality, but an expression of the mimetic drive to make the Thai into a subject of desire that travels around the country. A lingering Thai desire for male sexual pleasure (and for spiritual links to the land) signifies the landscape and sometimes attributes the reference to local, ethnically different sources.

This geography of pleasure has its counter in the public promotion of domestic tourist destinations that is largely confined to waterfalls and Buddhist temples and suggests the official denial of male vernacular desires and subjectivities. The binary implies a "tension between official and vernacular cultural forms [but] does not describe the heterogeneous and shifting social world in which people nevertheless use it to establish their own claims to power and distinction" (Herzfeld 1997: 14). The spiritualized and sexualized mountain has a parallel in the exaggeration of ethnic culture and of girls' sexuality at village festivals. These binaries are variants in the contemporary fashioning of subjectivity in relation to a national domain, from different perspectives.

A hard-surface road now leads from the highway to a scenic spot near the top of Spirit Mountain. It was laid by a company owned by the brother of a democratically elected provincial representative in the national Parliament, who won a contract of Baht 20 million (half a million United States dollars) from the Provincial Administrative Council. This is some indication of who can now make a living off the forested mountains, and how. A press release that appeared (as news) in two newspapers mentioned the budget but not who were involved, focusing instead on how the road benefits tourism and the preservation and enjoyment of nature; "only one big tree was cut" (*Chiangmai*

News, Lanna Business section, 6 June, 2005: 15; *Northern Citizen*, 6–12 June, 2005: 10).

Identities are fundamentally intersubjective and relational, products of history and productive of social relations. The "social hieroglyphic" (Marx 1976: 167) of ethnicity in modern Thailand rests on objectification and nation building. The social and natural landscape (villages, fields, roads, mountains, forests, ethnic labels, and the like) is, like any commodity, "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx 1976: 163). The road, the renamed mountain, and the combination of domestic tourism and nature preservation conflate the landscape's character and use-value in an active dispossession and redefinition of the local farming population in relation to the market for crops, labor, culture, and entertainment. The genealogy of this new reality lies equally in state-minority relations, variant national-cultural forms, the ongoing contestations over national identity, capitalist transformations, and modernity, and in the closure on a civil war that was the precursor to the Buddhist nationalization of forests as pristine and enjoyable nature. Any enactment of identity by Thailand's Mien or other minority peoples is an engagement with this complex history. The enactment shapes its (ethnic or other) reference, at a historically particular moment that allows certain representations as it makes certain others unthinkable.

Implications for practice

The difference between Latin American indigenism and Thailand's Mien people's claims to national belonging is a product of particular contact zones and also productive of particular relations across difference. Mimesis calls attention to the practical impossibility of delimiting any identity as unique and uniform (bounded, homogenous, having a fixed agenda). Social and individual agendas and representations bring about and shape identities, in large part through interaction and (notions of) difference. Mimetic assertions are often constrained by what can be imagined and represented in particular political contexts, but, as play on sameness and difference, they may also change the relations among people and social categories. This is a social process, central to the ongoing dynamics of recognition, sovereignty, discrimination, and citizenship.

Mimesis assumes the embodiment of identity in relations across difference. It asserts the politics of a particular view that may silence various alternatives. Plato's case for mimesis suggests its own contingency as it offers a perspective on the more general entanglement of representation with realms of contestation and social control. Various

people across Thailand engage with the ongoing and interconnected definitions of forests, mountains, roads, villages, ethnic categories, inequalities, pleasure, and basic rights through notions of sameness and difference.

The notion of mimesis does not disentangle this complexity, but it offers an alternative to preconceived notions about the character of politics, ethnicity, and state-village relations. This alternative points to sites of social interaction and affective transformation, and the historically particular character of identity-representation in relation to the regimes of control and recognition. It offers a perspective on the ongoing negotiation of value that is simultaneously about particular people and places and about the terms through which they come into being, agency, and relations. The state, national society, and the minority community derive their coherence from mimetic configurations, through their interactions, that are anchored to particular ways of knowing politics, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, forests, and mountains. The denial of sameness meets claims to belonging in and on the national terms that are a precondition for any public representation in contemporary Thailand.

Notes

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1. The debate involving Jay 1993, 1994; Taussig 1994; and Stoller 1994 is instructive about some dimensions of Taussig's case.
2. Phaya Khiri Srisombat is the title and family name that the king of Nan (Nan subsequently became a province of Thailand) gave a Mien man whose name was Tang Tsan Khwoen (Thai, Jan Khuan Sae Tern), who had led a large migration group to the area in approximately the 1880s (Jonsson 1999, 2001b, 2005: 74–87). I had a role in the growing importance of photographs of past leaders, by bringing a photo (taken in 1950, published in 1960) of Phaya Khiri's son to villagers' attention in 1993 (Jonsson 1999: 111).

3. Phayao has an old history as a kingdom, but beyond its provincial borders it is prima-
   rily known, since the 1950s, for Dok Kham Tai District as an important source-area
   of the nation's prostitutes (Suwannaphat 1998).

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