



**SEATIDE**  
**Integration in Southeast Asia:**  
**Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion**

**WP2 Deliverable 2.3: Online paper 1: Politics of ethnicity**

**Ethnic minorities, the State, and beyond:**  
**Focus on Mainland Southeast Asia**

## ***Ethnic minorities, the State, and beyond: Focus on Mainland Southeast Asia***

Vatthana Pholsena (National University of Singapore)

### **Introduction**

The newly independent and internationally recognized states that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in Southeast Asia encompassed extremely diverse cultures and societies; in many parts of the region, there is in fact little coherence between the boundaries of modern states and the spatial distribution of linguistic, religious, ethnic, and racial groups. A dominant feature that traverses the political life and social fabric of several Southeast Asian countries is the politics of majority-minority. Thus, political rulers in Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia have been relying on and favoring a particular ethnic group – Kinh, Thai, Lao, or Khmer respectively – in their pursuit of homogenization, thus labelling and assimilating (or marginalizing) other ethnic groups as “minorities”.<sup>1</sup> This paper first presents ethnicity as stage-managed by the state by way of classifying, categorizing, and controlling in these four countries. It then explores “minority” ethnic groups’ responses to state ideologies and policies and debunks some of the stereotypes that have been imposed on them by majority/mainstream societies.

### **1. Paths to Mainstream within the Nation-State boundaries of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia.**

#### **1.1. Laos and Vietnam: Equality, Diversity & Unity**

Laos’ 2005 ethnic census shows 49 ethnic groups. The ethnic Lao proper, the socio-politically dominant group do not constitute an overwhelming majority (55% of the population according to the 2005 census). They are distributed in the lowlands. Other lowland areas are inhabited by ethnic groups related to the Lao who speak a variety of Tai languages. Members of the Mon-Khmer speaking family, generally acknowledged to be the original inhabitants of the country, are found throughout the country in both upland and lowland environments. Tibeto-Burman speakers arrived recently from south-west China, while the Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) peoples, likewise recent arrivals, came from southern and south-east China. These latter two families are confined primarily to highland areas in the northern provinces. The Mon-Khmer speaking Khmu people and the Hmong form the first and second largest ethnic minority groups, accounting for 11% and 8% of the total population, respectively.

The ethnic Kinh, the lowland Vietnamese majority, account for approximately 85 % of the population in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The remaining 15 % belong to one of the 53 ethnic denominations listed in the 1999 census. According to this national survey, the

---

<sup>1</sup> See Benedict Anderson, “Introduction”, *Southeast Asian tribal groups and ethnic minorities: prospects for the eighties and beyond*, Cambridge, MA: Cultural Survival, 1987; Christopher R. Duncan (ed.), *Civilizing the margins: Southeast Asian government policies for the development of minorities*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2004.

ethnic groups in Vietnam, officially named after “national minorities”, are distributed between two ethnolinguistic families of very different sizes: the (1) Austro-asiatic linguistic family and the (2) Malayo-Polynesian linguistic family. The former includes the Viet-Muong (to whom belong the ethnic Kinh) and the Mon-Khmer groups, as well as the Hmong-Yao, the Tay-Thai and the Cao Dai groups, although the last three populations are not known to speak a language of Austro-asiatic origins (we have followed here the Vietnamese official spellings). On the other hand, the Malayo-Polynesian ethnolinguistic family is comprised of four ethnic minority peoples living in the southern provinces only and merely accounts for 1% of the population.

The socialist, then post-socialist, states of Vietnam and Laos have pursued strategies of nation-building very much influenced by Marxist-Leninist theories of nationhood and ethnic policies of the former Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. The methods of ethnic classification, the way how the state classified its citizens into “nationalities” and “ethnic groups” followed the Soviet and Chinese models. However, given the relatively small territories of their nation-states and the ethnic mosaic of minority areas, neither Vietnam nor Laos implemented the creation of autonomous regions, districts, and counties. During the first years of the Communist rule, the Socialist Revolution attempted to create a loyalty to the new state greater than loyalties to particular ethnic identities. The ultimate goal for the Lao and Vietnamese communists, as it was for their Soviet and Chinese counterparts, guided by a historicist and evolutionist vision, was to eradicate the “old” identities and replace them by a “socialist” one (Pholsena 2002: 191).

However, antagonisms and mistrust between ethnic groups were to be dissipated by a period of national equality first. The program of promoting “national equality” was only a prerequisite for a higher stage in the movement towards assimilation perceived as progressive and inevitable. In speeches, policies and textbooks, the communists promoted a new image of the nation: from an apparent mono-ethnic portrait, reproduced under the ‘Old Regime’, to a multi-ethnic representation of the national community in which equality, diversity and unity were now the new key parameters and propaganda tools. Ethnic diversity in the East and Southeast Asian communist regimes was no longer overlooked. On the contrary, it became a national trademark. The Chinese, Vietnamese and Lao governments subsequently sent their cadres to the highland areas to list the populations and to collect data dealing with the material aspects of their lifestyle in order to promote *their* ethnic groups (Keyes 2002; Michaud 2009).

## **1.2. Thailand and Cambodia: the Others within**

The Thai notions of the nation, race, ethnicity and identity were shaped, to a great extent, by both the appeals of European ‘civilisation’ and the threats of colonialism. When the French captured the left bank of the Mekong River and established a protectorate over Laos in the late nineteenth century, the Thai élite was forced to reassess itself in the light of the threat of French colonial expansion into the Mekong region. The “logic of race” (i.e. a geographical and political entity can only claim to be a nation if it possesses a single language, culture and race) employed by the French colonialists so as to legitimise their claims over the Lao and Cambodian populations of the kingdom of Siam forced the Siamese elite to adapt to the European concept of national identity (Streckfuss 1993). The Siamese

officials went on absorbing and homogenizing the disparate 'Other' peoples of Siam through the merger of the concepts of ethnicity (*chon chat*), race (*chat, chüa chat*) and citizenship (*sanchat*), within the single, all-inclusive and elastic term *chat* (Streckfuss 1993: 141). Most of the Tai-language-speaking peoples (Siamese, Lao, Shan, Phuthai, etc) became Thai nationals and members of the Thai race. Now Thais formed the majority. By the 1980s, most of the rest of Thailand's inhabitants had 'become' ethnically Thai (Streckfuss 2012: 306).

Whereas population censuses in Vietnam and Laos acknowledge a large number of ethnic groups, defined mainly by language, social organization and certain cultural markers, criteria like ethnicity and mother tongue have been totally absent from Thai national censuses since 1937. Yet, the Thai ethnic group (speakers of Standard Thai, central Thai and southern Thai, but excluding Sino-Thai and Thai Muslims) merely make up half of the total population. The country has indeed distinctive ethnic and ethnoregional minorities. By ethnoregional, one means cultural differences that are commonly acknowledged to define one specific region of the country rather than a distinctive people (Keyes 1997: 213). This is the case of two Tai-speakers minority groups, namely the Isan people from North-eastern Thailand and the Khon Müang from Northern Thailand. Another people with distinctive cultural differences are the Thai-speaking Muslims, some of whom identify themselves as Malay. The Chinese (speakers of Chinese languages) and those of Chinese origins (also identify as the Sino-Thai or *luk chin* (literally "Chinese children") and speakers of Thai language) form a urban-based minority in Bangkok and in other provincial towns.

The only peoples who have been subjected to policies that are explicitly based on a recognition of unbridgeable ethnic difference are those who have been labelled as "hill peoples" (*chao khao*). The term "hill peoples" or "hill tribes" came into official use in 1959 when the Thai government set up a special committee to deal with the "hill tribe problem". The upland peoples living in the country's border areas were indeed perceived at that time to pose a threat to Thailand's national security in the Cold War mentality of the time. Nine ethnic groups have been officially identified as "hill tribes" and granted a legal status, albeit not fully recognized as Thai citizens: the Hmong/Miao (Green and White Hmong), Mien/Yao, Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Karen (Sgaw and Pwo), Lawa/Lua', Htin/T'in and Khamu/Khmu. Most of the peoples included under that category are settled in the upland areas of northern Thailand, although some are also found in the western hills along the border with Burma. The number of 'hill tribes' was estimated at 922,957 people in 2003, or about 1.46% of the total population (Mukdawan 2013: 214). The Lahu, Akha, Lisu, Yao and the Hmong have all ancestral links with China. The three Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples (the Lahu, Akha and Lisu) came through the Burmese Shan states in the late nineteenth century from China's Yunnan province. The two Miao-Yao-speaking peoples (the Hmong and the Mien) probably penetrated into the lands tributary to Siam in the early 1880s. Lastly, several other minority groups, especially those locating in the areas that border on Laos and Cambodia and in some southern parts of the country, get no official recognition either (such as the Kui, the Khmer, or the Mon).

The population's ethnic makeup in Cambodia seems relatively more clear-cut compared to that of its three neighboring countries. Almost 90 percent of Cambodia's population are ethnic Khmer. Post-independence regimes (Sihanouk, Lon Nol, Pol Pot) embarked on a strategy to define the relationship between the Khmer ethnic core of the Cambodian nation

and various ethnic minorities in a vein very similar to the Thai case. Thus, Muslim Cham were labeled “Khmer Islam” and the Mon-Khmer and Austronesian-speaking uplanders of the country’s northeast were called “Khmer Loei” (“Mountain Khmers”). The latter’s number is estimated at a total of about 100,000 of whom about 75 percent live in the northeastern provinces, Rattanakiri and Mondulhiri. The main groups are the Austronesian- (Chamic-) speaking Jarai (in Rattanakiri) and the Mon-Khmer- (Bahnaric-) speaking Brao and Tampuan (in Rattanakiri) and Phnong (in Mondulhiri). The Muslim Cham number about 230,000 individuals and are found in the central area of Cambodia. Their status as Khmer citizens implies not only recognition, but also the obligation to assimilate (eventually) into the Khmer mainstream culture and society, especially the indigenous upland minorities, thereby reflecting a deep ethno-centrist attitude rooted in a conviction that Khmer culture is superior to others (Ovesen and Trankell 2002: 194). More specifically, the role of the inassimilable Others, or “un-Khmer” peoples, has been assigned to two other minority groups, the Chinese and especially the Vietnamese (viewed by many ethnic Khmer Cambodians as “intruders”) (Edward 1996: 56).

### **1.3. The Three National Priorities: Development, Culture & Security**

Despite some differences in their minority policies, the governments in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia share some commonalities in their attitudes towards their ethnic minorities, especially those residing in rural areas. Traditional subsistence patterns in the highlands, i.e. all forms of shifting cultivation, are considered by these countries’ governments as backward, wasteful and damaging for the environment and the national economy. In addition, upland societies’ cultural and religious practices are commonly labelled as primitive and superstitious as well as increasingly incompatible with the requirements of state, market and a globalising world. The religions of highlanders are often labelled as “animist” and contrasted with those of the Buddhist lowlanders. Such clear-cut distinction is far too simplistic, however, if only because many highlanders have adopted Buddhism, while conversely lowlanders have retained many non-Buddhist cults in their religious practices. Only traits that are viewed as socially benign and touristically useful (folklore, dances, music, handicrafts) are tolerated and even enhanced through the dual process of folklorization and decontextualisation of culture (Salemink 2000: 137). On the other hand, features perceived as backward (religious beliefs, rituals, multi-family longhouses) or reactionary (“feudalistic” forms of social organisation) are to be abandoned and have been used to justify the policies of sedentarization and resettlement. Furthermore, ethnic minorities, even in this relatively more serene political climate, are still perceived as not being entirely trustworthy and lacking somewhat of this national consciousness. In short, the national discourse on development and culture in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, draws from the ideological view of modernity negatively defined in opposition to (ethnic minority) backwardness.

## **2. New approaches to the study of ethnic minorities**

### **2.1. Minority voices**

*State ethnic categories and local identities*

It would be inadequate to only consider the actions of the state towards ethnic minorities. First, state policies are not always effective. In fact, they more often than do not achieve their targets, such as eradicating shifting cultivation amongst uplanders in Laos or transforming (i.e. “improving” in government parlance) the living conditions of highlanders under the Vietnamese state’s sedentarization scheme.<sup>2</sup> These failures came down to basic economic and political realities, such as the lack of sufficient resources to support the infrastructure required for such ambitious schemes. Second, even when state projects are realized, they are not unequivocally accepted by local populations and may face (post-implementation) resistance. The ethnic classification of the population in Laos and Vietnam have reified ethnic categories. Once the list of ethnic groups was established, it became permanent, although this was less true in Laos where the list became fixed only very recently. The 1995 Lao Census indicated 47 ethnic groups. This number changed in 2001 and went up to 49, following a 1999 data-collection campaign that was instigated by numerous complaints from officials and ethnic groups’ representatives in provinces, pointing out the absence of ethnic groups’ names as well as names in the census that did not satisfy local peoples (Pholsena 2002: 185-6).

Likewise, in Vietnam many local groups whose ethnic identities were not officially recognized were displeased with their assigned ethnic status and some began to press to expand the list. Their concerns led the government to reopen its inquiry into the ethnic diversity of the country. In 2002 the government asked the Institutes of Ethnology and Linguistics in the National Academy of Social Sciences “to undertake a state-funded project named the Investigation to Determine Ethnic Group Composition in Vietnam” (Ito 2013: 67). Masako Ito’s study focuses on some of the groups whose leaders had become “vocal” in seeking official recognition of their distinctive identities. In 2004, Ito conducted field research in several provinces in the northeastern corner of Vietnam, where the major ethnic group is identified officially as Sán Chay. This group, numbering about 150,000, is made up of two subgroups, the Cao Lan and Sán Chỉ, which, as Ito found, really are very different, speaking languages belonging to different language families (the Cao Lan people speak a language belonging to the Tai language group, whereas the Sán Chỉ speak a language that belongs to the Cantonese language group) and not sharing a common culture (Ito 2003: 68, 77-81). Despite this, the request to recognize them as separate groups was shelved in 2006. In the end, despite the conclusions of the new officially mandated inquiry, no group has succeeded in persuading the government to institute any changes in the original ethnic classification scheme. This is because “it remains essential for the preservation of the vested rights of various administrative cadres and a majority of academic cadres to continue to assert that Vietnam is a ‘multiethnic community of 54 ethnic groups’” (Ito 2013: 187).

Nonetheless, local ethnic identities continue to defy state classification in Vietnam. In his field-based study on the Na Mieu (officially classified as Hmong), Nguyen Van Thang discovered that this group’s identity has been shaped through interactions with neighboring groups - via intermarriage, adoptions and hierarchical relations. The Na Mieu also shift

---

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Andreas Heinimann & Cornelia Hett & Kaspar Hurni & Peter Messerli & Michael Epprecht & Lars Jørgensen & Thomas Breu, "Socio-Economic Perspectives on Shifting Cultivation Landscapes in Northern Laos", *Human Ecology* (2013), 41:51–62; Nguyễn Văn Chính, "From Swidden Cultivation to Fixed Farming and Settlement: Effects of Sedentarization Policies among the Kmhmu in Vietnam", *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 2008), pp. 44-80.

between identities, depending on context, in response to expectations and in line with practical benefits (Nguyen Van Thang 2007). Similarly, Rie Nakamura has shown that the Cham in different parts of Vietnam (in the central region and the Mekong Delta) have resisted official classifications of their ethnicity, some emphasizing their origins in the indigenous kingdom of Champa (a state that was annexed by the Vietnamese), others rejecting ethnicity and instead emphasizing a religious-based identity and highlighting Islam as the sole basis for community membership (Nakamura 1999). A revival of religious identities has also intensified in others parts of Vietnam. Since the 1980s a significant number of indigenous peoples have converted to Christianity (Stieng, Mnong, Koho, Ede and Jarai in the Central Highlands, as well as the Hmong in the north), and protestant proselytizers have been particularly successful to attract followers. The Vietnamese state allows freedom of religion; it is, though, constrained by concerns over national security and state order. Since the mid-1990s there have been regular reports of harassment of Christians in the Central Highlands. The Vietnamese authorities are obviously distressed by this conversion movement as they perceive it as a tool in foreign hands to stir up discontent and discord, and to undermine the country's national security (UNHCR 2002). The ethnic Khmers in southern Vietnam, or Khmer Krom, are another population (amounting to approximately one million residents and construed as one of the country's 53 national minorities) whose consciousness of their cultural and religious distinctiveness (the Khmer Krom are Theravada Buddhist) has not faded despite the Vietnamese state development interventions and cultural assimilation endeavors (via notably state-sponsored in-migration of ethnic Kinh settlers and Vietnamese-language schooling) (Taylor 2006).

### *Struggle for citizenship*

A major issue that affects ethnic minorities' integration into public life in Thailand is the discriminatory process of citizenship application towards them. In 2005, 377,677 highland peoples (approximately 40% of the population) were without Thai citizenship (Mudawan 2013: 222). Until the 1950s, the highlanders in Thailand were more or less neglected by the Thai authorities. In 1956, the government conducted a survey to register all the households in the country under the Population Registration Rule (PRR) in order to grant the Household Registration (or TR.14) to all Thai people. However, the mountainous areas and its inhabitants were left out in the survey due mainly to difficult access to the villages and lack of the government's interest. Meanwhile, the population in upland Northern Thailand increased significantly with the continuing influx of migrants such as the Hmong, Akha, Lisu, Lahu and Mien/Yao who came seeking land or fleeing fighting in their home countries, mainly from China, Burma and Laos. The influx of highland populations from neighboring countries combined with the fear of communist insurgency prompted the Thai government to tackle the "problems" posed by the "hill tribes" from the late 1950s. The latter were then successively, and sometimes simultaneously, accused of being involved in the communist guerilla movements, destroying the forests and watershed with their shifting cultivation practices, and cultivating and trafficking opium (Narumon 2002: 3).

Many obstacles hamper the process of citizenship application for the highlanders of Thailand. The series of state policies and projects regarding minority status since the late 1950s has resulted in a very confusing and complex situation where one person belonging to an ethnic group may end up in some cases holding different statuses and even contradictory

legal documentation. Although many highland peoples have lived in Thailand for several generations, they have no document that can prove their long-term residency. The complexity of rules and regulations pertaining to citizenship application, many of which the Thai officials have no good command of, burdened furthermore by long bureaucratic procedures, corrupt practices, and abuses of power (Suppachai 1999; Narumon 2002; Mukdawan 2013).

However, in the last decade or so, challenges by local people against the Thai state ID system of identifying, classifying and controlling the population have multiplied, as illustrated by practices ranging “from discarding/returning the cards (*khuen bat prachachon*), burning the cards (*phao bat prachachon*), or refusing to apply for identification cards [that] have become symbolic protests against the hegemonic idea of what it means to be “thai” ” (Pinkaw 2014: 157). Yet, upland ethnic minorities in Thailand (or at least, some of them) very much aspire to obtain Thai citizenship. This will give them equal rights (as well as duties). They want to be visible, legible, and full members of the Thai nation-state. An innovative strategy that highlanders have employed to be recognised and to voice their concerns with regard to their rights and culture is the adoption of the term “indigenous population” to refer to themselves. A movement, known as the “IP movement”, began to develop in 2007 when a coalition of seventeen ethnic groups formed the Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand and declared 9 August as Indigenous Peoples Day (Mukdawan 2013: 232). They nonetheless face a daunting task, not only fighting against a Kafkaesque bureaucracy, but also (and above all) struggling against deeply-entrenched discrimination and paternalistic attitude from the state and the mainstream society.

## **2.2. Rethinking marginality: beyond state and borders**

Rural-based ethnic minorities generally perform worse than ethnic majorities in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand in terms of economic advancement and social development. They show greater level of poverty, lower access to education and health facilities, and lower participation to state education.<sup>3</sup> They are seen as benefitting less, if at all, from economic reforms and their countries’ integration into the global market economy. In other words, they are perceived as being on the losing side of the economic liberal reform process. Governments (as well as to some extent international organizations) tend to explain this failure on their “remoteness”, that is, in the national and development discourses ethnic minorities are geographically and spatially remote (and therefore cannot have, or have difficult access, to modern services (e.g. hospitals, schools, (larger) markets), while aids cannot reach them easily); their cultural, religious, and linguistic distinctiveness constitute obstacles to their interactions with the wider world and thus prevent the effects of modernization; lastly (and related to the latter point), their resistance to changes has further increased their economic and social marginalization from the mainstream.

Yet, some rural communities have displayed remarkable ability to adopt flexible and imaginative coping strategies in face of changes, reforms, and external interventions (from

---

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, A. T. Rambo & N. L. Jamieson (2003) ‘Upland areas, ethnic minorities and development’, in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*, edited by Hy Van Luong, Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 139-170; ADB (2000) *Lao PDR Country Report: Health and Education Needs of the Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region*, Research Triangle Institute.

the state or others). The Khmer Krom people (as well as other local communities) of the Mekong Delta engage in diverse livelihood strategies, including in niche economic activities, practice strategic mobility, and draw upon translocal ethnic and religious networks, “sustaining themselves, as they have for many years, in ways that run counter to the unitary vision for development that is promoted by the state” (Taylor 2008: 15). The Hmong is another ethnic group in Vietnam that are portrayed in the national development discourse as backward, uneducated, and poor. Yet, the re-emergence of Sa Pa, a small town in upland northern Vietnam, as a tourist destination and as a market for the sale of Hmong handicrafts has provided a new set of opportunities and interactions for some Hmong girls. In her doctoral study, Duong Bich Hanh traces these girls’ journeys from their initial arrival in town to work as sellers and tour guides, and their introduction to a new, exciting, modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle (Duong Bich Hanh 2006, 2011). After several years in town, their situation remains fragile, nonetheless, as living arrangements in town are difficult, and their future in the tourist market is uncertain. Some return to the village and marry. But those who have remained in town over the years have gained confidence in their dealings with locals and foreigners, obtained securer jobs and lodgings, and strengthened their role as brokers in the tourist trade. Through their fluency in foreign languages (primarily English, but also French and Japanese) and their extensive networks of friends from many countries all over the world, they have become cosmopolitans and transformed themselves into consumers by earning independent and steady incomes. Their connections, knowledge, and skills are admired and valued by local townspeople, and in consequence, the Hmong young women enjoy a kind of respect that was not available to them before (Duong Bich Hanh 2011: 254).

The Cham Muslims in the Mekong Delta (a community of about 13,000 people) in many ways exemplify Vietnam’s stereotype of a geographical remote, culturally distinct (if not backward), socially isolated, and economically impoverished, ethnic minority group. The Cham Muslims live near the Cambodian border, in small settlements on islands formed by the Mekong River Delta’s channels. They reside on stilt houses and move between settlements by wooden boats. The Cham Muslims practice small-scale subsistence agriculture, and though fish are abundant, they only capture fish for their own consumption. Cham women weave sarong, scarves and towels, and few of these products are sold, except to foreign tourists (Taylor 2006: 240). The Cham Muslims are far from being reluctant to engage in market economy practices, however. In the 1980s, many Cham households earned good income from a thriving local weaving industry, which dramatically shrank due to the competition of cheap imports by the late 1990s. As a consequence of dwindling economic and employment opportunities in the new market-based order in Vietnam, the Chams became more insular and began to nurture a more assertive and exclusive Islamic identity (Taylor 2006: 241). Nevertheless, it would be misleading to portray the Chams as losers of the liberal reform process. As a matter of fact, since the introduction of the economic reforms in Vietnam in the late 1980s, the Chams have become the region’s most successful long-distance traders.

The Chams’ extra-local trading practices, transnational trading routes and networks effectively counter their representations as “remote” and “isolated” ethnic minority community. They engage with the market economy, and their options are not limited to resist, to retreat, or to conform. In a word, they have agency. Furthermore, the Cham

Muslims' history of movement and long-distance trade is not recent. They follow premodern circuits and networks that existed prior to the creation of national borders and territories. Likewise, the Tai Lue in the Sipsongpanna region of Yunnan Province have been moving for centuries in a cross-border and transnational space. A recent work by Sara Davis traces transnational movements and cross-border networks of the Tai Lue that span more than one national boundary. Thus, border-crossing ethnic Tai Lue monks and their lay supporters are building their own "Buddhas on the borders" in Sipsongpanna, perpetuating the long-standing symbolic and cultural geography of the Thai-Lao-Burma-Yunnan borderlands in a way that challenges state claims, and even, becoming a site of contest between the Burmese military regime and ethnic activists in the Thai-Burmese borderlands (Davis 2005: 157-178).

## **Conclusion**

It is undeniable that in all these countries the (ethnic) majorities have succeeded in imposing their rule, be it political, economic, or cultural, since independence. Regarding policies of assimilation, states in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam have pursued similar policies, incorporating ethnic minorities in the cultural mainstream and the market economy (while, at the same time, preserving the more "exotic" characteristics of these communities' culture and society for tourists and the sake of 'national' heritage). But this is not the whole picture. Some ethnic communities contest, defy, or ignore state projects and vision. There is a life for ethnic minorities outside and beyond state borders (both in an administrative-legal and geographical sense). They may be even more "remote" and "isolated" now at a time of greater global interconnectedness from the viewpoint of central governments and international organisations' experts. But like any individuals, groups, or communities facing new and uncertain environments, some have demonstrated a capacity for adaptation and innovative strategies, as well as a sense of opportunism. This is not to say that the economic reform process has not impoverished local communities, forcing some off their ancestral lands and turning forest-dependent cultivators into landless peasants or wage laborers.

Transnational road linkages, together with market diversification and surging consumer demand, have ushered in social and economic change among widely diverse groups throughout the region. To be sure, transnational movements and networks at the edges of states are nothing new, as shown by the long-distance trade carried out by the Cham Muslims of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border or the cross-border and transnational journeys of the Tai Lue in the Thai-Lao-Burma-Yunnan borderlands. But as Southeast Asian countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region become increasingly integrated into the global market economy, whatever ties that may bind these populations to the national territory and state may further weaken. Frontier regions are liminal zones, where licit (and illicit) economies intermingle and people move to and from seeking opportunities amidst market opening and expanding entrepreneurialism. Such trends are developing in Northwest Laos where villagers (usually Akha, but also Tai Lue and other ethnic groups) engage with Chinese entrepreneurs (Han or Akha) in rubber plantation. Numerous formal and informal arrangements between Akha on both sides of the border, as well as larger corporate investments, have now turned hillsides in the Lao border districts of Müang Sing and Long

(as well as further inland) into rubber plantations covering tens of thousands of hectares. The state plays a lesser role in such scenarios.

## References

Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Christian Taillard, *Atlas of Laos: Spatial Structures of the Economic and Social Development in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*, Copenhagen/Chiang Mai: NIAS/Silkworm, 2000.

Davis, Sarah L.M., *Song and Silence: Ethnic Revival on China's Southeast Borders*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2006.

Duong Bich Hanh, "The Hmong Girls of Sa Pa: Local Places, Global Trajectories, Hybrid Identities", PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2006.

Duong Bich Hanh, "Contesting Marginality: Consumption, Networks, and Everyday Practice among Hmong Girls in Sa Pa, Northwestern Vietnam", Philip Taylor (ed.), *Minorities at Large. New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2011.

Edwards, Penny, "Imagining the Other in Cambodian Nationalist Discourse Before and During the UNTAC Period." In Stephen R. Heder (ed.), *Propaganda, politics, and violence in Cambodia: democratic transition under United Nations peace-keeping*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996, pp. 50–72.

Ito, Masako, *Politics of Ethnic Classification in Vietnam*. Kyoto Area Studies on Asia, v. 23.; translated by Minako Sato. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press; Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2013.

Keyes, Charles F. "Cultural Diversity and National Identity in Thailand". In Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (eds.) *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1997, pp. 197-231.

Keyes, Charles F., "Presidential Address: "The Peoples of Asia" – Science and Politics of Classification of Ethnic Groups in Thailand, China, and Vietnam", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 61 (4), November 2002, pp. 1163-1203.

Michaud, Jean, "Handling mountain minorities in China, Vietnam, and Laos: from history to current concerns", in *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2009, pp. 25–49.

Mukdawan Sakboon, "Controlling Bad Drugs, Creating Good Citizens: Citizenship and Social Immobility for Thailand's Highland Ethnic Minorities". In Coeli Barry (ed.), *Rights to culture: heritage, language, and community in Thailand*, Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre; Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2013, pp. 213-237.

Nakamura, Rie, "Cham in Vietnam: Dynamics of Ethnicity", PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1999.

Narumon Arunotai, "Part1: Background on the existing national legislation on the recognition and protection of minorities, with the focus on the Hill-tribes of Northern Thailand", paper presented at the Sub-regional Seminar "Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Southeast Asia", Chiang Mai, Thailand, 4-7 December 2002.

Nguyen Van Thang, *Ambiguity of Identity: The Mieu in North Vietnam*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007.

Ovesen, Jan and Ing-Britt Trankell, "Cambodia". In Colin Mackerras (ed.), *Ethnicity in Asia*, Routledge, 2003, pp. 194-209.

Pholsena, Vatthana, "Nation/Representation: Ethnic Classification and Mapping Nationhood in Contemporary Laos", *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol.3 (2), 2002, pp.175-197.

Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Contested Citizenship: Cards, Colors, and the Culture of Identification". In John A. Marston (ed.), *Ethnicity, borders, and the grassroots interface with the state: studies on mainland Southeast Asia in honor of Charles F. Keyes*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2014, pp. 143-162.

Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Ethnicity and the politics of ethnic classification in Thailand". In Colin Mackerras (ed.), *Ethnicity in Asia*, Routledge, 2003, pp. 157-173.

Salemink, Oscar, "Sedentarization and Selective Preservation among the Montagnards in Vietnamese Central Highlands". In Jean Michaud (ed.), *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples. Mountain Minorities in the South-East Asian Massif*, Curzon Press: Richmond, Surrey, 2000, pp. 125-148.

Streckfuss, David, "An 'ethnic' reading of 'Thai' history in the twilight of the century-old official 'Thai' national model", *South East Asia Research*, 20, 3, 2012, pp 305–327.

Streckfuss, David, "The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racialist Thought, 1890-1910". In Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Autonomous Histories. Particular Truths. Essays in Honour of John Smail*, Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, pp. 123-153.

Suppachai Jarernwong, "Citizenship and State Policy: How Can We Move Beyond the Crisis?", paper presented at the Asia-Pacific Youth Forum 1999, "The Crisis and Beyond: Can Youth Make a Difference?", Chiang Mai, Thailand, 22-28 November 1999.

Taylor, Philip, "Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam", *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 3-43.

Taylor, Philip, "Economy in Motion: Cham Muslim Traders in the Mekong Delta", *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 7, 3, 2006, pp. 237-250.

Taylor, Philip, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam. Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty*, NUS Press, 2014.

Thongchai Winichakul, "The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910". In Andrew Turton (ed.), *Civility and Savagery. Social Identity in Tai States*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 38-62.

UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, *Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands*, by An Independent WriteNet Researcher, WriteNet Paper No. 05/2001, January 2002.

**A response to ‘Ethnic minorities, the State, and beyond:  
Focus on Mainland Southeast Asia’**

**Southeast Asia’s Ethnic and Religious Minorities:  
Tradition and Modernity in a Globalized World**

Thomas Engelbert (University of Hamburg)

Vatthana Pholsena has devoted her paper to the relationship between the construction of national identity and the realities of multi-ethnicity in three Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. She has correctly observed that the relations between a dominant ethnic ‘majority’ (the Viet, Lao and Thai) and ethnic ‘minorities’ are a crucial component of the interior policies and politics of these three countries. (In German, the term *Nationalitätenpolitik* has been coined to describe this particular area of political life.) She also touched the issue (p. 1), that not all ethnic minorities are the same, as there are indigenous, former tribal populations living mostly at the margins, quite developed peoples living, partly as majority populations, in neighboring countries and last but not least immigrant minorities, called “Foreign Asians” in colonial times. She has correctly highlighted some of the major problems of this current *Nationalitätenpolitik* in these three countries: marginalization on the one hand, and attempted assimilation on the other. However, the author of these lines has several more issues in mind which he thinks are equally pressing at the moment: land grabbing and environmental destruction, especially but not only in the areas where ethnic minorities live, fair treatment, genuine representation and real participation in public life in those three countries, which are currently all dictatorships, controlled by one former communist party (Vietnam, Laos) or the military (Thailand).

Vatthana Pholsena has also correctly observed how influences coming from the West, especially colonialism in Thailand and Marxism-Leninism as much as the Soviet and Chinese models of state building have influenced respectively Thai, Viet, and Lao *Nationalitätenpolitik* up to a certain degree. How strong has foreign influence been? Has it been overriding or even overwhelming? Are there other determinant factors of majority-minority relations? In the response to Vatthana Pholsena’s paper, some of these other determinants shall be exposed here, following the idea that developments of today are shaped by the *longue durée* of Southeast Asian history.

### **The historical origin of ethnic and religious diversity in Southeast Asia**

The area along the waterways between China and India is known under the summarising geopolitical term of Southeast Asia since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This term has replaced earlier Western notions of this region. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, researchers confirmed geographic, ethnic and historical similarities in mainland and insular Southeast Asia, which would suggest treating this area between India and China as a separate geopolitical and historical region. The ethnic structure, historical development and the nature of relations between ethnic and religious majority with minority populations seemed to confirm the idea of a regional unity. Southeast Asia as an idea is much more than just a second world war-time military designation.

ASEAN is currently made up by eleven nation states of different size, and population figures, and of various degrees of economic and social progress – development levels which might even differ considerably between regions within one country, like between the capital and the remaining parts of the country, between cities and countryside or between lowland and highland or between coastal and inland areas. In addition, each individual Southeast Asian nation state has different ethnic groups, various languages belonging to different linguistic families and branches, and specific cultural and religious traditions. Nevertheless there were historical development processes that affected the whole region.

Since about the first centuries AD, four main world religions, first Hinduism, then Buddhism especially of the Mahayana and Theravada branches, later after around 1300 also Islam and finally after 1500 Catholic and Protestant Christianity have one after the other spread to and within the Southeast Asian region. In highland and jungle areas of difficult access, traditional animist beliefs or belief systems could be found until most recently, even if their days seem to be numbered, as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity spread today to the remotest corners of the region, disseminated by migrants, priests, teachers, and modern mass media. This is a challenging economic, political and last but not least cultural process which alters the structure of these formerly hinterland areas and integrates them finally into the globalised world. Their lands are subject of irreversible economic and ecological changes caused by deforestation, plantations and mines. New migrants from the cities and lowlands change the demographic balance.

Before world religions and ideas about states and rulers arrived at the Southeast Asian coasts in the first centuries AD, tribal societies in the lowlands there were probably organised in a similar way like in areas of difficult access in the highlands and jungles of Southeast Asia until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological excavations and early Western reports, e.g. on the Philippines, seem to confirm this idea. However, even these areas of difficult access have never been totally separated from the lowlands or coastal “high” civilisations. Exchanges of goods, ideas and technologies went on for centuries. These exchanges connected coasts and the interior, lowlands and highlands, tribes and kings (or sultans), Southeast kingdoms and empires with each other and with the neighbouring regions of South and East Asia.

The currently on-going merger of Southeast Asian traditions and western originated modernity in the construction of modern nation states and, at the same time, the conscious creation of a network of all-embracing peaceful regional relations, is a challenging process, not less fascinating than the developmental processes of the so-called Indianization<sup>4</sup> and Sinicization<sup>5</sup> that occurred since about the early centuries of the first millennium AD which transformed the tribal societies along the coasts of Southeast Asia into the first kingdoms

---

<sup>4</sup> The process of Indianisation means the introduction of cultural and societal influences from India, especially state- and kingship, Hinduism and Buddhism, but also many other kind of cultural and civilization techniques, like architecture, scripts, trade, statecraft, and medicine. It has always been stressed, that this process occurred peacefully, as there was no real occupation of Southeast Asian territories by Indian kingdoms and empires. Hans-Dieter Kubitscheck. *Südostasien. Völker und Kulturen*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1983, pp. 73–85

<sup>5</sup> The introduction of cultural influences from China pertained only to one particular area, the Delta of the Red River and the plains of today's Northern Central Vietnam, in the period when this region was a part of the Chinese Empire (207 BC-938 AD). Since independence, the Vietnamese state spread this type of civilization south- and eastwards. Ibid.

and empires. The second period of lasting changes began around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. On the mainland, dynastic states dominated by one majoritarian ethnic group replaced former multi-ethnic empires. In the Austronesian islands, Islam spread along Indian and Malay networks. Beginning with early 16<sup>th</sup> century the region witnessed the advance of Western colonialism, which began with Portuguese and Spanish merchants, warriors and Catholic priests.

Most of the countries of this region between India and China were forced into dependency in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with one notable exception: Thailand (Siam) which however did also not remain unaffected from the processes of Western domination, modern economic and social development, inclusion in the then western dominated world market and modernisation according to the basic model of the European and North American civilisation. Countries and peoples which in general have always been open to foreign influences, as the historical processes of the so-called Indianization and Sinicization and a thousand years later the adoption of Islam and Christianity testify, had now to include and to adapt to a new model of societal organization which had been forced upon them, bringing them unprecedented technical progress, economic and social development as well as subjugation, oppression and exploitation. Oppression and subjugation was not only exercised by Western powers, but the model was also borrowed in the process of “internal colonization”, for example regarding the northern Thai principalities (Lan Na) and the Lao dominated Khorat plateau (Isan) by Siamese rulers. It is fair to say, that there was virtually no pocket of territory and no part of the population which remained unaffected of the inclusion into what we might also call “global modernity” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

However, we should not be tempted to confine all or even most of the contemporary conflicts between diverse ethnic and/or religious groups only to the impact of Western colonialism or reactions to it. Is it correct to state that ethnic and religious conflicts or potential conflicts possibly predate the age of colonialism and nationalism or are they rather connected with colonial “divide and rule” schemes? Both factors seem to be true. Judging it on a case-by-case basis, we could perhaps ascertain similarities transcending state borders or the mainland-insular divide.

Therefore post-colonial conflict escalations cannot simply be deducted from colonial policies. Rather could we search for a continuation of an unequal relationship between the ruling elites of the majority on the one hand and ethnic or religious minorities on the other? In view of this adaption of foreign influences, is the region of Southeast Asia an area of conflict or of particular or relative religious freedom and ethnic tolerance? Sweeping statements seem to be impossible. Today’s ethnic and religious policies must therefore be regarded in a historical light. Recent conflict settlements, for example in Poso (Indonesia), also highlight the role of open, democratic procedures recognized by all participants, the rule of law and the moderating influence of civil society.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly democracy helps. The process of real democratization has always been long and arduous. It has barely begun in some countries of the region.

---

<sup>6</sup> Monika Arnez. “Religiöse und ethnische Konflikte in Poso: eine kritische Einordnung”. In: Engelbert 2013, pp. 179–212.

## **Minority protection versus national unity**

The idea of minority protection came with Western colonialism. First of all it was motivated, like with all colonial administrations since the Roman Empire, by an approach to “divide and rule” (*divide et impera*). French, Dutch and British colonial sources, for instance, were unequivocal about this basic principle of their policies. The results of this approach were, however, general measures aimed at protecting ethnic and religious minorities against exploitation, subjugation and forced assimilation. In reality, however, the picture is more diverse than it seems at first glance. Proclaimed protection and real exploitation often went hand in hand.

The conflicts between majority and minority peoples became violent again during and after the struggle for independence. In the struggle for independence, as in the cases of Vietnam, Laos and Indonesia, minority units fought at both sides of the divide. The newly founded nation states institutionalized programs for the protection of ethnic and religious minorities. In the end, elaborate theoretical programs, progressive laws and constitutions and their often incomplete or lacking implementation have produced different results. The situation is complex according to different countries and different regions, peoples and religious communities within one country. Overall generalisations seem to be superficial. However, we might be able to discern several topics, which extend over more than one country, people or religious community.

Conflicts are often similar, as are the underlying reasons: economic opportunities in virgin or less developed territories in some parts of the region, and pressure of over-population in others. But extremely important, if not decisive, is, however, the willingness of national governments to solve economic, social and perceived political problems through state-sponsored migrations and/or assimilatory measures in education and culture. We can call this the aim to strengthen what is perceived in many Southeast Asian capitals as “national unity” against even the slightest threat of separatism and secession. Partly because of former colonial divide-and-rule schemes post-colonial national governments are sometimes obsessed with the idea of control and inclusion of these territories and populations into the nation state dominated by the language and culture of the majority population.

Governments regarded the massive resettlement of majority people into the areas of ethnic minorities as a means to develop (pretended) unused or virgin territories, solve the problem of over-population and create a “human wall” against potential or real secessionist movements or foreign aggressors.

## **Ethnic and religious minorities between the general and the specific**

Because of Southeast Asia’s variety of languages, religions and cultures, it may seem hopeless to establish general ideas, principles or rules which can encompass any one particular case or any one country, to say nothing of the whole region. However, generalization *is* possible, and that without ignoring the local, regional or socio-economic specifics. It goes without saying that the study of and the work with ethnic minorities is a common task of social scientists, especially linguists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians. Representatives of other academic disciplines are involved as well, whether

academia and practical work, for example concerning development aid and human rights activism, or foreign political and cultural foundations working in Southeast Asia. Moreover, it should be commonly understood that the work for and about ethnic minorities cannot be done without the participation of local representatives and the utilization of local knowledge.

Generalizations must usually go along with the assessment of long historical traditions, the causes and consequences of today's events. Many ethnic conflicts, for example in Myanmar (Burma), have their roots deeply implanted in history. They could not and cannot be explained, and of course not be solved, without taking this long tradition of hopes and failures properly into account.

This constant interplay and interaction between the general and the specific, between the local and the regional, between region and nation, between history and current times, is one of the characteristics of Southeast Asia. In taking this background into consideration, it is important to distinguish between rule and exception, to trace down recurrent themes in history according to changing circumstances, and to seek possible ways of smoothing tensions or of solving conflicts.