

“Politics of the Commons”
Articulating Development and Strengthening Local Practices

Everyday Articulations of Power
Narratives of a Lisu Community in Northern Thailand

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Abstract:

This paper will explore the multiple dimensions of identity and marginalization read through life histories, lived experiences and everyday articulations of power in the context of the modern situation of the Lisu, an ethnic group of northern Thailand. It is through the analysis of identity and of every day lived experiences expressed through narrative that the role of internal and external factors in the contestation and construction of identity can be investigated. In order to understand these concepts we need to construct new methods and frameworks for examining cultural differences that consider the complexity of the *culture*, situating it not as a localized and static concept but as fluid, heterogeneous and dynamic.

I

Introduction:

This paper has two major objectives, first to explore the traditional notions of identity and how analysis has moved from essentialist normative classifications to a more flexible understanding of identity as constructed, multiple and shifting. The second is to relate these definitions to my experiences with Lisu ethnic groups of Northern Thailand. A number of these concepts will work through the macro level, for example, identity, ethnic classification and marginalization. However, I am suggesting the use of perceptions, narratives and life histories at the personal level. I am therefore not attempting to show the validity of the reality but rather the perceptions of identity and marginalization and change that affect current identity. These perceptions within a symbolic framework affect decisions, attitudes and behaviour. Every day life does have a history, one that is intimately bound up with the dynamics of modernity (and some would argue, post-modernity). Hence according to Gardiner (2000:6), it must be acknowledged that everyday life incorporates a form of 'depth' reflexivity, which is necessary if we are to account for the remarkable ability that human beings display in adapting to new situations and coping with ongoing existential challenges, as well as to explain the enormous cross-cultural and historical variability that daily life maintains.

The paper discusses the extent to which ethnic identity can be viewed as a production of interrelated variables; a response to internal adaptation to a changing environment, social structure, political and economic framework and/or external power relations. Its focus is on the processes rather than essence involved in present experiences of identity. I will be using the case of Lisu ethnic group in Northern Thailand to assist in the formulation and conceptualization of different interpretations of the social phenomena mentioned above. This paper is the result of contributions of advice and of course stories from many Lisu people, an amalgamation of ideas, thoughts and experiences with hopefully some theoretical backing mixed in. The intention of this paper is to offer some suggestions or alternative ways of investigating previously held notions of identity. The notion of identity has intrigued academics, and myself, for some time. Is identity permanent, or does it shift? Do we have a single identity, or is identity multiple and contested? Is identity inherent (genetic) or is it social, culturally constructed? Lying at the heart of studies into identity is ambivalence. On the one side, it expresses locality, permanence, a fixed perception, and on the other, it is

constructed, shifting and multiple. This double sense of identity is even more acute in an age of globalization.

This paper is not one story, but is a combination of different stories told at different times and about different topics. A simple question came to mind, but like many simple questions there are often complex answers. “How can peoples’ stories, their experiences and life histories affect one’s own identity?” Or, to put it another way “Are peoples’ stories important in the examination of things such as development, marginalization and identity?” Or yet another approach, “Who tells stories and who listens?” and, “have stories changed, do people still hear the same words?” I originally drafted a few simple notes, and asked my self a question that I expected would be simple question to answer; “*What has changed?*”

The Lisu as a group tell stories of ancestors in Yunnan, south-western China, Myanmar and now Thailand. From these stories it is told that Lisu have always been hill people. “This means that their way of life has been determined by the steep slopes of mountain ridges, by the forbidding forest, the red dust clouds in March, and the long rainy period during which they become shadows moving between maize stalks in daytime fog (Hutheesing 1990:1).” Looking from kinship and clan lineage, Lisu interact in a widespread network of relations throughout southeast Asia and southern China. These relations or networks follow both ritual and political interaction. As a group of people Lisu have to be considered within the context of these networks (see Durrenberger 1970). Lisu like many ethnic groups today no longer live in isolation. Daily interactions between different communities and ethnic, outside agencies including the state, non-governmental organizations along with researchers, and with the supernatural are defined by articulations of power. This idea of articulation of power on a daily basis will be discussed in terms of links, traditional practice and stories with modern situations. This is not a new question for investigation among social scientists, however by examining how these relations and how they are played out and unfold in a Lisu community will provide alternatives ‘sites’ for the investigation of identity.

As to Lisu culture, Durrenberger (1970: 9) suggests that we need not mean anything more than a collection of the internal representations of the world that a group of people refer to Lisu identity. The distinctive dress and language of the Lisu are best taken as signs of their particular ethnic identity, as claims to membership in one ethnic category among many involved in a network of relations. In this sense, these claims to being Lisu are indications of taking a particular role among a number of alternative roles at the same level, the plane of ethnic identification. One of the central features of Lisu political and legal discourse is continued reference to the presence of the ‘outside’ system of Thai administration as a

significant power resource (see Durrenberger). This approach is continued through the analysis of the paradigm of incorporation, of having full claim to membership in the category, Lisu is at best complex. Every Lisu must belong to some lineage.

Each lineage has a distinct set of lineage spirits. So, the question of what lineage one belongs to is universally applicable to all Lisu. The notion of Lisu identity is summarized by Durrenberger (1971:16) as follows: ‘perhaps all that can be said with certainty is that the Lisu are an ethnic category who distinguish themselves by their distinctive language, dress, customs, and political system from other groups with whom they participate in a system of complimentary interaction’. Otome Hutheesing takes another approach and from my own personal experiences I tend to agree, despite these fluidities and blurred distinctions, I suggest that among the many mentioned cultural elements that differentiate the Lisu from other people, their way of singing would be a sure proof of *Lisuness* (1990:20).

“Do you want to hear a story?”

The follow is a story from personal communication with a Lisu elder. This story is significant in the discussion of identity and provides possible links between the ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ dimension of everyday life of Lisu in two particular villages. Particular attention must be paid to the overall situation, the method of transmission, the actors involved and the specific theme of the story.

...There is only one phone in the village, in the house of a village elder. While I was recovering from the four-hour trip from Chiang Mai the phone rang many times. People entered and left. After one rather lengthy call the elder who answered the phone told me what the general conversation was about.... He said that a relative (a grandson), a young man from another village, had called to ask for some advice. He was planning on purchasing a new motorbike, the latest model and silver in color. Before purchasing the bike he had preformed a ceremony, the reading of chicken bones¹. After performing the required tasks of the ceremony, certain elders can tell of impending ill fate or fortune by reading sharpened bamboo sticks placed into the bone. Once his grandson had done this he called his

¹ Those who can read chicken bones are mostly those who can perform community ceremonies and have respect (repute) within the community. Chicken bone reading ceremony is performed by Lisu on important occasions; New Years, new corn festivals, and before things are accepted into the house (including a daughter in law or motorbike). It covers economic situation, health and social and political aspects of an individual or community. This indicates a relationship between people (individual and clan), spirits and the community.

grandfather for advice. Over the phone the grandson explained how the sticks were positioned and other details of the ceremony. After listening to the explanation it was determined that his nephew should in fact buy a new motorbike, just a different color...

Blue...

This narrative is a representation of everyday practices and articulations of power, as alluded to in the title of this paper. It tells a story of a process, presenting a cognitive map and decision-making practices resulting from the interaction between generations, traditional and modern, and the relationship between Lisu and the spirit world in a particular situation. The grandson in the story decided to purchase a motorbike, found a model and color, which he liked. At this point the young man, with money in his hand, had a decision to make. This decision was both social and cultural and embedded in every day life of Lisu, the outcome would be determined by a ceremony. The young man chose to perform a chicken bone ceremony as told in the above story. The setting for this story involved a young man, an elder, a motorbike, two villages, the village guardian spirit (Apo Mo Hee) and a male chicken.

Why did the young man choose to perform the ceremony? These questions can be explored from many perspectives. First, it shows that traditional cultural and beliefs still remain important in the identity of this particular man. Second by contacting an elder in another village indicates the maintenance and respect for clan lineage and the importance of this occasion to get a 'correct' reading. This was in fact not the first time that this particular elder offered advice regarding transport. In the past this ceremony was performed before the purchase of a horse or cow, 'transport'. Today the same ceremony is performed but the mode of transport has changed.

The story about the motorbike tells of the importance of maintaining and respecting clan and kinship ties and traditional cultural practices, or what modern social scientists refer to as social capital. As we move from this story to a discussion of identity, it is relevant to ask if such modes of thinking still exist. Such an investigation inevitably touches on modernization and globalization approaches to change at the community or local level. This example poses critical questions helping to explain linkages between traditional identities and modern situations in Lisu communities. The example can be used heuristically to help us understand the following questions: how do traditional practices play a role in a young man's life? How are traditional practices adapted to accommodate modern ways of life, or how are modern ways of life adapting to traditional practices (the purchase of a motorbike)? How are modern technologies such as the telephone affecting the extent to which these practices are sustained? How did the young man make sense of what he was told? Will the grandson listen to his

grandfather and buy a different colour? A decision has to be made. The grandson decided to follow the advice of his grandfather. He chose a blue motorbike, but before he purchased the motorbike he performed another ceremony to make sure it is safe.

II

Interpreting Identity

Explorations of alternative notions of identity are fundamental in the conceptualization of marginality and the politics and relations of power that exist in marginal spaces. Investigating these issues will enable understanding of how notions of space and place continue to shape the politics at the margins and the relations of power at play in the local community and in the larger social context, and investigation of the extent to which identity can be viewed as a construction of internal and external factors. This will provide the foundation for further examination into the dynamics of every day lived experiences and life histories in the context of current development discourses allowing us to identify specific sites of contestation.

Ethnic identity can be analyzed from two different theoretical perspectives, that of essentialism and cultural relativism. Essentialism primarily denotes ethnicity and identity as constants; they are fixed in time and place with unchanging social and political domains. Cultural relativism on the other hand looks at these issues in terms of constantly changing variables, following the position that the values and standards of cultures differ and deserve respect (Kottak 1997:46). Following this Leach's (1970) example of inter-group interaction argues that the Kachin of Burma have a social structure and system that 'oscillates' resulting in effect to what can be considered as continual processes of identity adaptation and change. This point is further supported by Lehman (1963, in Evans 1993:240-241), adds another element when analyzing the Chin of Burma, suggesting that identity is not only adaptable to the natural environment and neighboring groups, but also to lowland Burman civilization and the state. This paper will similarly focus on the assumption that identity is not fixed, static or homogeneous. It is dynamic, adaptable and continually constructed and reconstructed as a response to both internal changes in the environment and social organization, and external pressures such as state policy, and to a greater extent ethnic classification.

By using race and ethnicity as the unit of analysis in social relations, the construction of identity can be viewed as a two way process. Power to determine and construct identity lies with both the contemporary state through codified laws and territorialization, and by minority communities' response to the state based on the degree of perceived acceptance and legitimacy. This information suggests that the conceptualization of race and ethnicity is often

problematic; the subject tends to be viewed as static. This representation lends support to the argument that as long as we view race and ethnicity in abstract terms without giving sufficient attention to the complexity of identity construction, actors involved, inter-group interaction and promoting the notion of adaptation and negotiation in power relations, the significance of diversity will remain at the conceptual level.

Migration and movement results in contact between groups within the framework of a politically and economically bounded geographical and political area of the state. Therefore, the examination of the nature of relationships between the groups is essential in the analysis of the level of acceptance and legitimacy of state authority and that of rights to self-determination of the diverse groups. This requires a multidimensional analysis of the interactions and relationships not only between the minority and majority power relations within the framework of state mechanisms, but the role of the state in international systems involving economic and political relations. This is a valid point raised by Fee and Rajah (1993: 255) showing that ethnic minorities cannot be viewed as particular to one state and not another, for ethnic groups are found straddling national boundaries which has effects on the understanding of the dialectic between the contemporary state and ethnicity identity.

Concepts of ethnic groups, ethnic communities and ethnic identity have been put forward in order to explain cultural differences as well as ethnic relations, in terms of minority and state, and inter-group relations. As issues of protection and maintenance of identity and in turn boundaries emerged so to have incidences of conflict violence within the modern state. In summary, the meanings and functions of race and ethnicity depend less on unilinear definitions based on physical and behavioural characteristics than with greater acceptance of "*ethnicity*" as constructed and negotiated through a continual process of adaptation and negotiation. Power relations, those within and between social groups and the state, continue to remain the central elements in the analysis of ethnicity and diversity.

The concept of identity presented here is not essentialist, but is strategic and positional. Therefore identification is a process of articulation not a submission. Discussions on identity need to be situated historically, culturally and socially. Identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies (Hall 1996:4). Following Halls argument (1996:4), and specifically related to the objectives of this paper, identity emerges within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the making of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of

an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation).

III

Marginalization

Marginal places, those towns and regions that have been ‘left behind’ in the modern race for progress, evoke both nostalgia and fascination (Shields 1991:3). Their marginality may be geographic, communities in out-of-the-way-places², socially excluded, or perhaps the ‘other people’ to a dominant cultural center. Marginality is as much a part of geography as a constant companion in an individual’s family, clan or groups social and cultural existence. These people have through historical processes been placed on the periphery of cultural and social systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other (Shields 1991:3). The analysis of marginality and marginalization can begin to illuminate the extent of cultural and social categorizations of geographic spaces and places. And, more importantly, the extent to which the classification of one’s geographical location or ‘situatedness’ (imposed or decided) has become a part of social and cultural identity. Geographical classification runs much deeper and wider than lines on a map. These lines---blue to represent water, green to represent forest, and red to indicate a border a political, social and cultural divide between people and resources---are critical in a symbolic sense. As opposed to being merely a topographic margin, the development of cultural marginality occurs through a complex process of social activity (Shields 1991:4).

This argument is highlighted through the connection between identity construction and the concept of place. Essentially the classification or labeling of ethnic groups is just one representation of power relations. By focusing on the classification of terrain or boundary demarcation and the categorization of cultural, agriculture and resource management practices of ethnic minorities; it can be argued that such identification has social and political significance. Identity is therefore considered a consequence of social, political and historical processes that are equally contested and negotiated. This has significance with reference to identity formation, both regarding state classification and self or vernacular identification. The construction of identity, as outlined by Karlsson (2000:20), is not a once and for all act, but an ongoing practice of self-identification. In essence, identity formation is a process of

² Phrase adapted from Anna Tsing, 1993 “In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-place”

interaction developed through both internal and external social, political relations of dominance and resistance.

Arbitrary classification spreads deeper than government labeling and policy towards different ethnic groups, but penetrates social realms where highland people are negatively portrayed as destroyers of the forest, involved in the narcotic trade and pose a threat to national security. As outlined by Hylland (1993:60), ethnic classifications are also social and cultural products related to the requirements of the classifiers. They serve to order the social world and to create standardized cognitive maps over categories of relevant others. The important term here is 'others' with relation to the Thai state emphasizing the connection between ethnic classification and the concept of place. Therefore ethnic identification in the case of Thailand covers not only labeling of different groups, but incorporates social and geographical categorization of cultural and agricultural practices which are exemplified through state discourse of inclusion and exclusion and the majority, minority dichotomy. Alternatively the process of state-sponsored ethnic classification according to Keyes (1996:04) has created a situation where a people's own formulation of their identity has been made more credible. This in turn, states Keyes, has resulted in intensified discourses in contestation for power between the majority and minority.

There have been increasing political nuances to the perception and representation of high land people and indigenous knowledge. Issues such as traditional culture, local knowledge and ethnic identity have moved from social constructs into the realm of politics. Indigenous knowledge is now an approach for the promotion of rights, no longer expressed at the local or ecosystem level, but promoted at the national and international level for policy change and cultural recognition. Consequently, local knowledge is located both at the symbolic and practical level. The symbolic representation of indigenous knowledge is located in the context of 'primitive ecological wisdom', the image of non-industrial communities living in harmony with the environment. This representation is predominantly found in both indigenous and environmental discourse. Environmentalists cling to this image, of non-industrial societies as paragons of ecological virtue because it is the basis for their most cherished argument, particularly for the environmentalist critique of industrialism (Milton 1996:31), just as those followers of the scientific paradigm oppose it. Where do the indigenous people themselves fit into this debate? This is an extremely contentious question and one that involves the cultural survival and identity of indigenous peoples.

The construction of identity is closely correlated to the concept of place, conceptualized with geographical, social and political orientations. This is highlighted by the above example of

highland people in Thailand being classified as 'hill people'. As previously discussed this concept has significant social as well as geographical importance. Following the dominant ethnic discourse in Thailand since the emergence of the modern state people have been categorized into specific ethnic groups and more significantly assigned to a fixed geographical place or boundary, '*hill people*'. These boundaries can be distinguished by physical lines on a map demarcating National Parks, Wild Life Sanctuaries and Conservation Areas, perceived as a political and geographical domain through government policy initiatives. This conceptualized social, geographical and political place assigned to ethnic minorities finds its origins in the emergence of the modern Thai state.

The modern nation state as argued by Hylland (1993:109) unlike many other political systems, draws on the notion that political and cultural boundaries should be consistent with national ideology. Thus a national collective identity is constructed through education, media and government policies of assimilation and integration. This 'new' collective identity attempts to identify all of the nations subjects as 'citizens'. The concept of citizenship for highland people in Thailand is a controversial topic, and it outside the scope and 'boundaries' of this paper. Such strategies of control, to borrow a phrase from Foucault, can be illustrated as technologies of power. These terms are now used by different ethnic groups and indigenous peoples' organizations to promote positive meanings, collective identity and unity in their negotiation with the state and international agencies. Language terms which once had a negative or derogatory meaning have been reinvented and given new significance which now reflects a shared collective identity creating both social and political space for these communities (Karlsson 2000:30).

Tapp (in Turton 2000) raises the point that if the construction of cultural discourse can be seen in terms of the creation, maintenance, and adoption of distinctions of tastes and manners, and therefore notions of cultural essentialism are finally abandoned, then definitions of ethnic minorities are in fact integral to the construction of a Thai national identity – both for the Tai *as* minorities, and for minorities within Thai states. In this sense the periphery defines (or determines) the (changing) center. Leach (1970), identities oscillate; they are not fixed in time and place. Identity is a product of internal and external responses to changes in environment, social organization, political systems and inter-intra group interaction. Ethnic classification is a powerful tool used to maintain uneven power relations and dominant discourses on ethnicity and minority groups. However, this also produces an opportunity for these individuals and groups to redefine themselves in terms of these power representations, promoting a collective identity and group unity. How these groups respond to these

classifications in terms of negotiation and adaptation will play a significant role in creating a voice at both the local and international levels.

IV

Narratives and Life Histories: “*Tell me the story of your life*”

“Imagine a world without narrative.

Going through life not telling others what happened to you or someone else, and not recounting when you read a book or saw in a film.

Not being able to hear or to see or read dramas crafted by others...

Imagine not even composing interior narratives, to and for yourself.

No.

Such a universe is unimaginable, for it would mean a world without history, myths or drama”

(Elinor Ochs, in van Dijk 1997:185)

We tell stories situated in the present, and as we tell them, we transport the memories of the past into the present through memory and imagination. Narratives are responsive to context, audience and more recent events; stories unfold differently on each telling, if only slightly. Each telling brings new elements and joins different elements together in the telling of important stories of one’s life. Through the analysis of ‘telling a story’, the past as remembered and retold sheds light on the present and implicates the future. The narrative projectory, a central ingredient of this paper, implicates and in turn illuminates not only the present but also the future. Concepts of ethnic groups, ethnic communities and ethnic identity are put forward in order to ethnic relations, in terms of minority and state, and inter-group relations. In summary the meanings and functions of ethnicity depend less on unilinear definitions based on physical and behavioral characteristics than with greater acceptance of “ethnicity” as constructed and negotiated through a continual process of adaptation and negotiation.

Narrative is particularly relevant to the field of transpersonal studies. Our stories form the core and nuances of our personal identities. “Although rooted in specific historical, psychological, or spiritual events, stories plumb the depths of the human psyche, as if searching among the many narrative possibilities for interpretation and subtleties of meaning (Brand and Anderson 1998:23).” Such concepts of narratives are closely linked to investigating life histories and the social construction of life worlds, which will be examined,

in the modern context of internal village interactions and relations and external representations.

Scholars of narrative have argued that narratives are authored not only by those who introduce them but also by the many readers who influence the direction of the narrative. The interactional narrative maintains and transforms persons and relationships. How we think about ourselves and others is influenced by both the message content of jointly told narratives and the experience of working together to construct a coherent narrative (Ochs in van Dijk 1997:185). Therefore the task is to consider how narrative is rooted in cultural systems, represented by space and place, beliefs, values, ideologies, action, emotion and other dimensions of social order.

Story telling is not just for the amusement of small children by night and researchers by day. Rather it plays a strategic and serious role in the life of communities. Stories have the power to frame and create understanding; to create and maintain moral communities; to validate current actions; and to empower, encourage and relieve their tellers. The understanding of past and current events shaped by stories forms a discursive strategy through which struggles are waged (Frontmann 1995:1054). Stories have at least three kinds of work; the first is to create meaning and validate action, second to mobilize action and finally to define alternatives. Telling a story over and over again can confirm people's common memory that at one time they had access to land and resources or that their right to land and resources was acknowledged. Thus the story of the past serves as a marker for the present (Frontmann 1995:1055).

All societies contain within them a repertoire of different life styles, cultural forms and rationalities, which members utilize in their search for order and meaning and in which they themselves play a part in affirming or reconstructing. Therefore the strategies and cultural constructions employed by individuals do not arise from nowhere, but are drawn from a stock of available discourses (verbal and non-verbal) that are to some degree shared with other individuals (Long, in Long and Long 1992:25). It is at this point that the individual is transmuted metaphorically into the *social actor*, which signifies the fact that the social actor is a social construction. One needs also to distinguish between two different kinds of social actors: the first, that which is culturally endogenous in that it is based on the kinds of representations characteristic of the culture in which the particular social actor is embedded; the second, that which arises from the researchers' or analysts' own categories and theoretical orientation. Social actors are not simply seen as disembodied social categories or passive recipients of intervention, but active participants who process information and strategies in

their dealings with various local actors as well as outside institutions and personnel. The different patterns of social organization that emerge result from the interactions, negotiations and social struggles that take place between the several kinds of actor. This social construction of actors touches crucially upon the issue of agency (*ibid* Long, in Long and Long 1992:25).

The key concepts to understand such phenomena are articulation and collaboration. According to Stuart Hall (1996), an articulation is the way in which two things are linked together. Often, an ideology or discourse will represent different things as though they were all part of the same unity (e.g. tribal rights and land). But from the point of view of research, “the linkage is not necessary or absolute: you have to ask under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made?” How do discourses link with other social forces? How do different elements come to be fixed together to form a discourse? How did these ideas come to be articulated at specific times to certain political subjects? Therefore study of articulation means to analyze how some persons or groups that have specific interests tried to connect other people, groups, economic arrangements, ideas, and property to carry out their interests. Even more specifically it is an analysis of how such a person or group tries to force different sorts of objects to act or envision themselves as a group (a ‘unity’) even though that ‘unity’ is in fact made up of many different elements. In this process they will need to try to collaborate with other groups or objects or discourses. One other important aspect of articulation is that it is a focus on practice rather than just ideas or economics. There is always someone who is doing the articulation (speaking, organizing, advertising, etc.). It is not an abstract analysis in the same way that studies of ideology, or cultural or economic ‘systems’ can seem to involve no real, live, interested human beings. The importance of this is that it makes it much more usable for anthropological understandings of culture, in as much as it views culture as the acts of human beings (articulations) rather than as an abstract set of ideas.

For a subject whose central right of passage is fieldwork, with significance placed on the exploration of the remote (“*others*”), whose critical function is seen to lie in its juxtaposition of radically different ways of being (located “elsewhere”) with that of the anthropologists’ own, usually Western culture, there has been surprisingly little self-consciousness about the issue of space in anthropological theory (Gupta and Ferguson 1999: 33). By theorizing concepts of place and space through postmodern and feminist theory through notions of deterritorialization, borderlands and marginality; we need to re-evaluate previous preconceived central analytical concepts in anthropology such as “culture” and, by extension, the idea of “cultural difference” (see Gupta and Ferguson 1999).

The notion of articulation allows one to explore the richly unintended consequences of colonialism, with which loss occurs alongside invention. Yet by taking the preexisting, localized “community” as a given starting point, it fails to examine sufficiently the processes that go into the construction of space as place or locality in the first instance (Gupta and Ferguson 1999:36). Therefore by focusing analysis on the spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations, we can better understand the process whereby a space achieves a distinctive identity as a place. Keeping in mind that notions of locality or community refer both to a demarcated physical space and to clusters of interaction, we can see that the identity of a place emerges by the intersection of its specific involvement in a system of hierarchically organized spaces with its cultural construction as a community or locality. People have undoubtedly always been more mobile and identities less fixed than the static and typologizing approaches of classical anthropology would suggest (Gupta and Ferguson 1999:37). However, the irony of modern times is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more important. It is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities (see Anderson 1994) come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality. The special challenge here according to Gupta and Ferguson (1999:39) is to use a focus on the way space is imagined as a way to explore the mechanisms through which such conceptual processes of place making meet the changing global economic and political conditions of lived spaces – the relation, between place and space.

Changing our conceptions of the relations between space and cultural difference offers a new perspective on recent debates surrounding issues of anthropological representations and writing. As illustrated by Gupta and Ferguson (1999:42) the new attention to representational practices has already led to more sophisticated understandings of processes of objectification and the construction of otherness in anthropology. What is needed are alternative approaches to capture and orchestrate the voices of “others”; what is needed is a willingness to interrogate, politically and historically, the apparent “given” of a world in the first place divided into “ourselves” and “other”. A first step on this road is to move beyond naturalized conceptions of spatialized cultures and to explore instead the production of difference within common, shared and connected spaces (Gupta and Ferguson 1999:45). The move Gupta and Ferguson (1999: 46) are talking about, is a way from seeing cultural differences as the correlate of a world of “peoples” whose separate histories wait to be bridged by the anthropologist and toward seeing it as a product of a shared historical process that differentiates the world as it connects it.

National, regional, and village boundaries have, of course, never contained culture in the way that the anthropological representations have often implied. But the existence of a transnational public sphere means that the fiction that such boundaries enclose cultures and regulate cultural exchange can no longer be sustained (Gupta and Ferguson 1999:58). Physical location and physical territory, for so long the only grid on which cultural difference could be mapped, need to be replaced by multiple grids that enable us to see that connection and contiguity – more general, the representation of territory – vary considerably by factors such as class, gender, race, and sexuality and are differentially available to those in different location in the field of power (Gupta and Ferguson 1999:59). Conventional thinking of ethnicity, even when used to describe cultural differences in settings where people from different regions live side by side, rely on the unproblematic link between identity and place (Gupta and Ferguson). While such concepts are suggestive because they endeavor to stretch the naturalized association of culture with place, they fail to interrogate this assumption in a truly fundamental manner.

V

The Concept of Indigenous

In sociological and political vocabulary the term “indigenous” is employed as a reference to groups of the population that occupy a determined position in society as a result of specific historical developments. The very term indigenous has gone through a process of modification. It has been transformed from a word with discriminatory connotations (used principally as a form of stigmatization by representatives of the dominant societies) into a term which cultural and sociological differences are recognized and which, moreover, in many occasions has been turned into a symbolic appeal to resistance, the defense of human rights and in the extreme the transformation of society.

The question of what does the term *indigenous* signify is in fact difficult to answer, and even more difficult to analyse; how does the interpretation of this term link with identity? The implication of the concept operates at many different levels simultaneously. However, the power of the concept lies in its perceived meaning not only by local peoples but also internationally. Indigenous is seen as ‘real’, authentic and traditional. ‘Indigenous peoples’ as a classification first came into existence as a reaction to the legacy of western European colonialism, has proven especially problematic in postcolonial Asia (Barnes 1995). Equating or even comparing the term indigenous with tribal is a useful starting point for a pragmatic approach, but this analysis also has its limitations. In the case of India, tribal is an

administrative term that links territorial and cultural factors in distinction to the state. Where as in Thailand the term tribal has been commonly associated with ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’. Therefore the question of; why has the usage of the term by ethnic minorities increased becomes significance. On an analytical level, the term indigenous presents two related problem. When the definition is fairly coherent its application is difficult. It is possible to stretch the meaning of indigenous to cover the peoples of Asia but as an analytical category it does not help us understand more than a very general outline of who these people are.

On a political level, the term indigenous is more an imperative than a descriptive category. It refers to a discussion of the fundamental rights to which peoples in the world who have been colonized are entitled: self-determination, freedom of cultural expression and control over territories and resources. Indigenousness arises when people recognize these issues as pertaining to their own struggle. As indigenous is the principle term used currently to express these issues, the importance of not denying people the means with which to demand these rights becomes critical. When asking peoples in Asia whether they are indigenous in this sense, few will deny it. On the level of common usage, indigenous is not a word encountered frequently in Asia except among leaders who are familiar with international developments. However, the growth of indigenous organizations and the increase in peoples claiming their rights would lead us to expect that the term will become more common in the future.

The language of indigenous rights has become increasingly popular for the expression of rights claims in national and international context (Barnes 1995). At the national level little practical significance is given to the implementation of national laws concerning highland peoples. Article 46 of the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand advocates, the “Protection of the rights of traditional local communities”. This article has been used by highland peoples to promote rights based issues from citizen (personal status) to resource access and control. As alluded to previously, the current government rhetoric used to classify the high land peoples of Thailand is strongly dictated by language. Language and ethnic representations of highland people and the social, religious and economic organization has now political in nature. No longer are issues such as rights, resource management and cultural survival played out solely at the local level. The power of language regarding the concept of indigenous is embedded not only in the social and cultural imaginings of the state of ethnic groups but in the political representation and presentation of meaning.

The modern nation state as argued by Hylland (1993:109) unlike many other political systems, draws on the notion that political and cultural boundaries should be consistent with national ideology. Thus a national collective identity is constructed through education, media and government policies of assimilation and integration. This 'new' collective identity attempts to identify all of the nations subjects as 'citizens'³. The term indigenous it has been argued, is not a thing or a person but an attribute of both personal and collective identity. That some non-indigenous people should find the concept incoherent is not surprising, since they are looking at the term as something substantive rather than something that people identify in themselves. The meaning is bound to shift in terms of the geographical and historical context of the referents (Barnes, Gray and Kingsbury 1995:40). Indigenousness is therefore considered as something that is experienced. It is actually a self-reflective notion, which means that people have looked at themselves from the outside, identified the problems that face them, and understood why an assertion of their identity is a prerequisite for their survival.

"Indigenous" is an assertion by people directed against the powers of outsiders. The incoherence of the term indigenous reflects the incoherence of the notion of state, which is bound with identity and power (see Gray, in Barnes et al 1995:41). As such, the indigenous movement is a challenge to the state because it argues that the existence of a single inflexible entity is not sufficient reason to take control out of the hands of the people who live within its boundaries. Similar to other concepts used in the analysis of ethnicity, the two concepts of minority and majority are both relative and relational. Following this argument a minority can only exist in the relation to a perceived majority and vice versa, whereas the structural opposites between indigenous and non-indigenous, as well as the rights, social and political organization associated with such a distinction are unclear and 'fuzzy' at best. This is primarily due to the problematic definition of who is and who is not indigenous. Power relations that are created, strengthened and maintained along with the construction of the nation state define those who are in the minority and majority. However, such a situation is in fact reversed when exploring the notion of indigenousness. For it is through self-definition and recognition of one's "indigenusness" that such power structures are challenged. Indigenous is an expression of cultural identity, connection with a land or territory, affirmation of rights and freedoms expressed not only at the local level but strengthened as a part of the global indigenous identity.

³ In the context of Thailand the issue of citizenship and ethnic minorities is a controversial topic, the scope of which is outside the 'boundaries' of this paper.

Indigenous is not just a semantic issue but also one that involves identity and political mobilization. On the abstract level the term indigenous may be useful for a general description of one's orientation--- geographical or social---, but to then apply this term in practical situations it is essential that we understand it as a more than a political tool within a global social movement. Such a definition will take away the significance that such a term has in the everyday life of those who associate themselves as such. Ultimately, indigenous people in Thailand have found themselves in a dialectical situation, in addition to redefining whom they are in an attempt to adjust to new conditions; their identity continues to be defined by members of wider society, through the '*politics of indigeness*'.

It is through the analysis of identity and of every day lived experiences expressed through narrative that the role of internal and external factors in the contestation and construction of identity can be investigated. In order to understand these concepts we need to construct new methods and frameworks for examining cultural differences that consider the complexity of the *culture*, situating it not as a localized and static concept but as fluid, heterogeneous and dynamic. From the analysis of Lisu, as shown by the case of the young Lisu man and his decision to purchase a motorbike, it can be said that the articulation of power, or links, are quite clear and flow past the level of the community (local) to an intra-community level, spirit world and further through the expression of one's identity as indigenous there are international networks of relations. The theoretical and methodological issues that I have explored in this paper are, to some extent a reflexive journey and have practical social and political implications that for myself are of significance. By way of conclusion, I wish to turn again explicitly to the issue of identity and attempt to bring together the themes laid out in this paper, around suggestions and alternative ways to understand our encounters with identity. From this analysis I contend that there are several useful directions for the further examination of ethnic group and state relations. First, what will be the nature of the relationship with the dominant society and the minority group? Second, will indigenous people who retain their identity be accepted as equals by members of the dominant society and be afforded opportunities for advancement? And, finally where do the ethnic people fit into this debate? These are extremely contentious questions and one that involves the cultural survival and identity of indigenous peoples.

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