

Neo-Tribes and Traditional Tribes: Identity Construction and Interaction of Tourists and Highland People in a Village in Northern Thailand.

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The construction of identities is a social practice performed to provide identification with or opposition to the identity of other people during a process of social interaction. Individuals within groups express similar identities to identify with the others in a group, and as a group to express a difference to other groups in order to differentiate themselves, create boundaries, and otherwise separate themselves for particular purposes. Groups form their identity from the individuals within the group. And the individuals construct their identities from the wealth of their particular experience, knowledge and creativity, from the past, present and expected future. Added to this they draw from aspects of identity in their environment, selecting, expressing, discarding, choosing and adopting those that are appropriate for a particular time and place. The construction of identities is an ongoing enterprise that comes into play continuously as an action or reaction in a social context. Examining the expressed identities during a specific interaction can lead to the understanding of the reasons for the expression of those identities, and thus illuminate not only the interaction itself but also the processes at work that have brought the individual or group to a specific point in time and place whereby the expressed identities are entirely appropriate to those expressing them.

This study concerns two diverse groups of people, tourists and highland people. In order to understand why tourists go trekking into the hills of northern Thailand to see the highland people who live there, the specific point of interaction between the two groups within a highland village was examined. The two groups of people involved are very different. For the purpose of this study, the tourists are conceptualised as a neo-tribe, and the highland people as a traditional tribe.

The Concept of Neo-Tribe

The concept of neo-tribe, first developed by Michel Maffesoli in the 1980s, is explained and expanded by Kevin Hetherington in his book *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics* (1998). Hetherington is looking at the construction of identity by examining the medium of expressionism. He sees identity as primarily an issue of wanting to belong. Neo-tribes are 'communities of feeling' (Hetherington 1998, p. 49). The basis for election is emotional and empathetic, the identification with like-minded others. It is an intentional community. Hetherington argues that the reason for the existence of these neo-tribes is as a reaction to the disruption and fragmentation of present day postmodern society. Paradoxically, according to Foucault (1984), everyday living is usually conducted in controlled environments. Modern day tourists, therefore, could be seeking both the excitement of breaking away from the rigidity of the identities performed in the 'real world' of the tourist's home, and looking for the emotional

bonding to be found in communities. On holiday, they are looking for what they lack at home.

The Concept of Traditional Tribe

According to Berger and Luckmann (1971), the formation of traditions begins with sedimentation. From the total of human experience only a small part is retained in consciousness, and this they call sediment. Sediment is that which is recollected by groups of people as a recognisable and shared memorable entity. Over time it becomes objectified in a sign system of one kind or another, usually but not necessarily linguistic, and becomes part of society. The origin loses its importance to the extent that new origins are often invented. Many sediments gathered together become part of the common stock of knowledge of a society and form the basis of the society's traditions.

The use of the word 'tradition' as that which has survived over time and has come from the historical past, is the definition and understanding in common usage. However, many scholars today refute this definition (Anderson 1983; Foucault 1984; Sollors 1989). Although it is acknowledged that 'traditions' are constructed by people over time, the time in question may not be particularly long ago, and traditions are continuously being 'constructed' or 'invented'.

According to Sollors, traditions are inventions that are widely shared as collective fictions, and continually being invented (Sollors 1989, p. xi). They are used for specific purposes, to bind together groups of people for specific reasons, and in order to provide markers and symbols to categorise a particular group in opposition to other groups. They are used within the group in the process of identity construction of individuals. However, they are often perceived as ancient cultural symbols, which can and are used to categorise nations and ethnic groups both by the groups themselves or by other groups. The word 'traditions' is aligned with historicity, and in the modern world can be used in a derogatory sense to categorise minority or marginalised groups perceived as inferior or pre-modern. Thus 'ethnic groups' are perceived as traditional, even though the group itself may have 'invented' the ethnicity in the modern era in relation to a powerful other.

The term 'Karen' for example, used to categorise an ethnic group who live in northern Thailand and Burma, was not generally in use until the 19th century, when Christian missionaries and British colonial administration first began to use the term in a collective way. Peter Hinton (1983) alleges that many cultural features regarded as essentially Karen were shared by other linguistic groups in the past, and that the Karen themselves erected no clear boundaries between themselves and other linguistic groups. Kwanchewan Buadaeng (2001) argues that the social reality of the Karen as a group has been further constructed both in Thailand and in Burma in order to contest imposed government policies, and the label is moreover lent further legitimacy by anthropologists and NGOs working today with highland people today (Kwanchewan 2001: 10). Thus Karen traditions are used collectively both by the Karen themselves for their own purposes, and by outside agencies for theirs.

In order to understand the representation of the words 'traditional tribe' more fully, it is useful to ask, in the manner of Foucault (1997, p.4), not what it means, but rather how it is used: to problematise the phrase. In this case, for the purpose of this

study, the phrase has been used in juxtaposition to neo-tribe. The word juxtaposition in this situation means something that is basically similar, but with differences.

A neo-tribe is a group of people who have chosen to come together for a particular period of time and place, for a specific reason. The people in a traditional tribe have been born into that group of people, and those that remain in the group have retained an ascribed position and have chosen to perpetuate the 'traditions' of the group. These traditions have changed constantly through time, but are validated as historical for the purpose of group bonding and in reaction to changes within and without the group. The neo-tribe, on the other hand, has no history, and the common characteristics within the group are utilised as identifications for a specific place and finite time.

A further reason for using the phrase 'traditional tribe' is because today it carries with it the colour of historicity, and this is in line with the perceptions of both the highland people and the trekking tourists. The Karen acknowledge their position as 'Karen' in juxtaposition to the Thai and the foreign tourists, and valorise their Karen way of life as different to others and connected to their group history. The tourists perceive the Karen as connected to Karen history, and in fact as living in an historical manner.

A Neo-Tribe: The Tourists

The desire to belong brings people together. In a roadside cafe in Chiang Mai frequented by tourists the conversations could be interchangeable at any table. The talk is of where one has been, and where one will go, and how long one has been travelling, with primary elements of identification and secondary of one-up-personship. Prices are endlessly discussed and details of journeys, and exchanges made of pertinent information. Questions are asked and answers given, but the focus is on the experience of the traveller, not on the place to be visited. It is the shared voracious experiences of the travellers in the cafe that form the identifications and lead to the identity of travellers as travellers, and neo-tribes are formed. In this cafe, one of hundreds similar, one will encounter people who speak English, either as a first or second language, are in the same socio-economic and educational bracket, and who will have been and will be going to similar places and experiencing similar experiences. The homology of these tourists is such that they are interchangeable. The group is fluid in the cafe, but the identities of the individuals for this space and time have produced a neo-tribe. They are comfortable with one another, they feel as if they belong together, choose to spend time together, travel together. However, when they return to their homes and their regular lives, the neo-tribe ceases to exist, and even when an effort is made to continue the association it soon fades away. Perhaps to be revived at another cafe in another foreign town, but probably with a different group of people, another group of individuals who have come together for a particular purpose at a particular time.

These tourists described above are travelling as individuals, families and in small groups, and it is this type of tourists that form the majority of trekkers. A trek can be defined as an excursion into a geographical region inaccessible except by foot. Trekking began in Nepal as a means of visiting geographical sites of awesome splendour only accessible by treks into mountainous regions. It has been practised in northern Thailand for the past twenty years, and as Thailand does not have the high and spectacular mountains of Nepal, the reasons for a trek are various. The most common trek includes a

walk through forest-covered highlands, a ride on an elephant, bamboo rafting down a river and overnight accommodation in a highland village. Today an estimated 100,000 people trek per year (Dearden 1996). Considering there are only some 3,500 highland villages and approximately 750,000 people living in the highlands (Gray & Ridout 1998), this is an external influx of some magnitude.

During an average week in the village where I stayed while conducting this study, which was on one of the many established trekking routes, 11 groups spent the night, with a total of 79 people. This was during the “high” season for tourists. According to the village people, there are less tourists in the six months of “low” season. Estimating half the amount in the low season, the total figure per year could be approximately 3,000 tourists. This particular village has a total of 42 inhabitants.

- Influences

The history of tourism follows the path of traders, missionaries and colonisers (Enloe 1989; MacCannell 1976). In Victorian England (1819-1901) the strength of that nation and the confidence of the people within it, allowed explorers to seek for unknown lands, to bring back interesting objects, animals, people from ‘other’ countries, as well as exotic hand made items to sell. Missionaries soon followed, taking the Christianity of Europe to the ‘natives’ of other countries. In the nineteenth century, with the rise in need by the Europeans for natural resources to feed industry, explorers combed the continents looking for extractable resources, and military conquests followed to harness those resources for powerful European countries. Incidentally, the explorers filled museums with objects from foreign lands to be viewed mostly by the middle-classes. Thus the culture of imperialism and the ‘exotic other’ became part of everyday middle-class knowledge in Britain (Enloe 1989).

The word ‘tourist’ was first coined by Thomas Cook in 1841, who organised tours for working-class men who travelled to see the workers of different areas (Enloe 1989). By the middle of the 1950s millions of north European tourists were travelling, at first to destinations in Mediterranean countries and subsequently to destinations farther afield. They travelled to experience a temporary change from their usual life, and in addition enjoyed the status bestowed upon those who engaged in the activity. Over ten million people visited Thailand in 2001, almost 90% of them for the purpose of tourism (TAT 2001).

The tourists visiting Thailand are of a number of different kinds. However, this study is concerned only with ‘mass’ trekking tourists, who join the most popular established trekking tours. It is interesting to note that the overwhelming majority of trekking tourists are Caucasian. Although it is well known that millions of Asians and Africans have lived for many generations in Europe and America, it is apparent that they do not choose to holiday in developing countries or visit people who live in more ‘primitive’ ways than those of their home nation. The question arises as to the possibility of a legacy from the colonial era affecting the tourists who visit primitive people today. Edward Bruner (1996) argues that tourists are seeking an un-contaminated pre-colonial past, which in itself argues the awareness of colonialism. Bruner suggests that the so-called primitive culture presented for tourist consumption today is a fantasy land of western imagery. Tourists do not, says Bruner, travel to experience the new postcolonial

subject (ibid, p.160). Furthermore, he points out that the ‘other’, the postcolonial subject, has already travelled in the opposite direction, and is established in the West, but is seen there as a social problem, and kept hidden. Bruner argues that the elite Western tourist travels to ‘exotic’ lands to view a disembodied and hypothetical other as if visiting a theatre, and to capture them on camera, echoing as an orientalist stereotype the pre-colonial explorers and their adventures and conquests of the past.

This is reflected in the advertising for visits to highland villages accentuating the differences between the modern tourist and the ‘pre-modern’ highland people. The population of northern Thailand as a whole is represented by images of highland people in traditional outfits and primitive villages (Gray 1990). Thus, for purely economic reasons, a small minority group of people is commoditised by a more powerful majority. The majority of these advertising images are of women, with some men portrayed in their roles as mahouts with their elephants, or guiding a raft for tourists down a river, showing men in a position of servitude to the tourist.

These influences are at work as the tourists experience their trek, and create a dichotomy between the tourists and the highland people. This is compounded by the differences in language making verbal communication impossible between the tourists and the highland villagers. The tourists are not able to identify with the highland people by personal communication, but can only view them as separate to themselves. This view, moreover, is greatly coloured by the fact of the sheer difference of the scene to anything within the tourist’s normal life, and the only objective identification possible for the tourists is stories of the past. Thus the trekkers find themselves in a situation that resembles a film of some past romantic explorer in a pre-colonial fantasy land. The strangeness of the setting and the people, and the disconcerting effect of seeming to slip in and out of different times, from present to past and back again, as the tourists drink Nescafe and eat toast and jam for breakfast next to a highland girl pounding rice by foot in a hand hewn wooden mortar, may produce fear. Fear of the unknown, not only of the place, but also in time. To counteract this reaction, the tourists bond together, familiar with one another, familiarity that forms a comfort zone from which to view the unfamiliar.

A Traditional Tribe: The Villagers

The village in this study is situated in the Huay Nam Dang National Park in the province of Chiang Mai. Mae Sa* is inhabited by eight Skaw Karen families. The village has been in the same valley for a number of years, though previous to the past 20 years, it was moved every decade or so to a new site.

Throughout the history of the Karen, as noted by many researchers (Keyes 1979; McKinnon 1983; Fink 1994; Pinkaew 2001) the people have been in contact with a variety of others external to their individual communities. They have lived in the jurisdiction of powerful others. They have communicated with other highland groups and with lowlanders for purposes of trade, and within their own group of Karen for trade and intermarriage. Thus contact with people outside of their community is nothing new. In the past few decades, however, four major outside groups and their influences have

* The name of the village has been changed to preserve confidentiality.

become part of the daily life of the particular villagers of this research, the people of Mae Sa.

During the last forty years government officials have sought the villagers out for reasons of censorship and control. As the area in which they live has been designated a national park by the state, their traditional methods of rotational swidden agriculture have been curtailed. They are no longer able to choose their own areas for swiddening, and although small fields are permitted, fallow periods are not sufficient to return the soil to maximum nutritious value, and agriculture can no longer supply the village with a sustainable livelihood.

The Skaw Karen of Mae Sa have been issued with Thai identity cards, and are legally accepted as Thai citizens. Children attend a Thai government school, and are taught a Thai syllabus and in the Thai language. The school is in a nearby town and is attended by both highland and Thai students from the district. The headman of the village, who can now speak the Thai language, is expected to represent the village at district level and attend meetings on a regular basis, which are presided over by Thais. Thus influences from the dominant Thai society are evident in village life.

A third influence has been Christianity. Most Karen are animist, some are Buddhist, and a few are Christian (Tribal Research Institute, 1986). The villagers of Mae Sa are Catholics. About 20 years ago they were visited by some Catholic missionaries and the whole village converted. Since then they have been visited by many Catholic missionaries, and in the year 2000 the whole village went to Chiang Mai to be formally Christened, the visit to the city being a first time and extraordinary experience for most of the older people.

A fourth major influence has been the advent of tourists and tourism. Some twenty years ago the first tourists made their way to the village, and since then they have been arriving at a steady pace down the mountain pathways. They have provided an income, filling a gap in the agricultural production of sustenance caused by the curtailment of traditional swidden farming. Today, tourism is the only source of income for the village.

Thus the villagers of Mae Sa have needed to adapt and negotiate with four major external influences. With the state, the villagers have had no choice in some edicts that have been imposed, but they have negotiated these edicts in ways that have allowed them to live in manners acceptable to themselves. The villages have used their involvement with tourism, for example, in negotiations with the state, as the tourist dollar is of great importance to the nation. Connection to tourism has aligned the villagers with a more powerful other than the state. In addition, by becoming Catholic, the village has created another powerful alignment. Thus globalisation can be seen to have become firmly entrenched in the village of Mae Sa, as it enters the 21st century.

Although modernisation and globalisation are features of the village today, the community remains an ascripted society, with many social practices and behaviours that have been similar for generations. This is in the main due to the similarity of habitat prescribing a particular everyday style of life. On the emotional level, this particular group of people maintain a daily contact with a moral code and valorisation of Karen-

ness that is transmitted within families, and also over the radio in the form of chants in the Karen language. While these chants, or *tah*, are constantly changing with influences imposed both externally and internally on the Karen community as a whole, they transmit a community position with regard to how Karen people should think and behave. A chant for women suggests that:

*We must take care of our hair
As our hair represents our values.
Today, many women cut their hair
It curls, like the hair of prostitutes.
Don't cut your hair: let it grow long.
Long hair has great value.
You cannot buy it with money.*

Even though this group of Skaw Karen has been in contact with other highland groups, Thai lowlanders and government officials, tourists and missionaries, they have chosen to remain in their village community, and retain much of their traditional culture and practice. Looking for example at the clothes worn by the village people, it is evident that individual identities are under construction. In the manner of bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1966), the adoption of signs representing desired aspects of identity taken from the surrounding social environment, a young 15 year old girl sits on the floor weaving with a traditional back-strap loom, wearing a baseball cap, and a tee shirt displaying Thai writing over baggy Thai style trousers. Her sister wears the long white dress of an unmarried Karen women. They are making conscious choices of what they adopt from their social environment, and creating their own identities. They are not, for instance, copying the short shorts and thin strapped tops of the tourists.

The Guides

Guides are an essential part of a trek. Most of the literature on trekking tourism acknowledges the pivotal place of the guide (Cohen 2001; Dearden 1991; Meyer 1988). Apart from leading the group down the correct jungle pathways, they are responsible for buying and cooking the food, paying for the accommodation, elephants, and rafts during the trek, and for the safety and pleasure of the tourists. The pleasure of the tourists could very well be reflected in the tip to the guide at the end of the trek, and as the cost of living in Thailand has risen dramatically, but the price of trekking tours has remained the same, the extra money gained in tips has now become a vital component of the guides' salary. Bertram (1999) examined the financial involvement of the guide and believes that the level of accuracy and time spent on explanations and interpretations of social transactions reflects the monetary transactions involved.

All guides must hold a certificate proving attendance at a three month government arranged course for guides. The guides in this study were both Karen and lowland Thai. From the point of view of the villagers, there was no difference. The tourists, however, felt that they were gaining more knowledge of the Karen by having a Karen guide. All the guides are in a unique position being familiar with and able to move between the traditional tribe and the neo-tribe. They do not belong to either group, but are necessary to both, and bring to the encounter their own identity created for the purpose of the tour, with historical biases based on their position *vis a vis* the highland people; whether the

guide is a highlander or a lowlander for example. If a lowlander, the guide could well be biased by the national discourse about highland people (Pinkaw 2001; von Geusau 1998).

Discrimination against highland people is also present in the attitudes of the Karen guides, who, while possibly internalising the perceived inferiority status *vis a vis* Thais (Thongchai 2000; McCaskill 1997), are however in a powerful position over the villagers as guides. Power conferred by their position is the primary component of the identity of the guide. The guides control the trek, having a considerable affect on the satisfaction of the tourists, and power over the highland people, whose need for the income gained from tourism puts them in a position of vulnerability to the guides. In relation to the tourists, the guides oscillated between power in their position as guides, and attitudes of inferiority, possibly as a result of internalisation of perceived inferiority to a western, affluent and superior society.

As the tourists and highland people do not share a common language, the guide is in a position to interpret words and meanings, which may or may not be accurate to the situation. Toyota (1993, p. 47) calls the guide a ‘culture broker’, in acknowledgement of his power as interpreter. Thus, the guides are in a position between the two ‘tribes’. Moreover, they are in a position of power over both groups of people. Due to the lack of common language between the two ‘tribes’, the guides are the translators and transmitters of information from one to the other. The veracity and quality of that information is solely in the hands of the guides.

Tourist Expectations

The tourists interviewed for this study, chosen randomly in Chiang Mai and questioned before they went on a trek, were looking for adventure, for the total experience of the advertised trek, elephant riding, bamboo rafting, trekking through the jungle and staying overnight in highland villages. None of them expected authenticity, and most expected some kind of staged authenticity in order for the villagers to generate income, and they were quite happy with this expected transaction.

I don't know how authentic this is anymore, like they'll blow the whistle, before you get there, and they'll quickly all change into their hill tribe clothing so they can be more authentic for you. I guess that's just part of becoming a tourist attraction.

Keith, 40s, American, a teacher.*

I get the impression that its probably more show than reality when you see it. You're not like seeing authentic ways of life while you're there, well that's what I guess.

Pete, 30s, Australian, a sales executive.

Most of them expressed the view that the villagers would have been changed by previous visiting tourists, and by a certain amount of modernisation. However, the majority held a romanticised belief that the villagers were living happy and contented lives in ascripted communities, with simple and stress-free life styles.

* All names changed to ensure confidentiality.

These tribes, from what I can understand, are very primitive, and still they're completely happy and content with their lives and probably have a lot less to worry about than everybody else does really, because of the way that they live their life. I have this idea, I guess, that they're living a bit more happy a life just because everything is so simple, you know, everything just seems so simple. Canada somehow seems to be quite complicated. It doesn't seem like they do very many different things, from all the information that I've read. Not that I've read very much, but from the information that I have read, the way they get their money and the way they live not having electricity and things. Gathering from all that information I can't imagine them stressing about a rainy day or something like that. I could be totally wrong though! (laughs)

Clare, 20s, Canadian, a massage therapist.

Some of the tourists felt that they would be able to learn something from the highland people, learn how to live simple stress-free lives. They also seemed to be fascinated by the fact that several generations lived in one house. This observation was made by tourists before the trek, as well as tourists during the trek. However, the Karen have traditionally lived in nuclear families, and in the village under study the majority of houses were lived in by a couple and their children. This perception therefore had nothing to do with reality: neither was the origin to be found in guide books. It is possible that it points to a desire of the tourists to be part of an extended family themselves. It could denote a perceived lack in their everyday lives. It is also possible that it could be connected to the past in the country of the tourists. Families might have been portrayed in history books as living many generations to one home. Being faced with a situation that evoked the past, the past of the tourists could have been imposed onto the present of the villagers, who were perceived as 'traditional', living unchanged for hundreds of years.

- Authenticity

All of the tourists had read the popular guide book, Lonely Planet: Thailand, and many had also read the Rough Guide. The Lonely Planet (Cummings & Martin 2001: 452) states that "anyone who promises you an authentic experience is probably exaggerating at the very least, or at worst contributing to the decline of hill-tribe culture by leading travellers into untouristed areas". The Rough Guide (Gray & Ridout 1998: 239) speaks of the disturbance caused by large numbers of tourists, as well as pressures created for the "traditionally insular hill tribes". Thus 'authenticity' is portrayed as existing, but being seriously impacted by tourists.

However, is the search for authenticity the main objective of the tourist? This stance is popular (MacCannell 1976; Cohen 1983; van den Berghe & Keyes 1984; Meyer 1988). Van den Berghe and Keyes posit the probability of staged authenticity, created for the tourist by the touree, in response to the tourists' demand for authenticity. But Bruner's study of tourists in Bali found that they were not particularly interested in authenticity *per se*, that they were more interested in their subjective experience of being tourists. Thus the setting, the ambience, the show being staged was part of that experience, and the fact of the show's claim to a particular level of authenticity was not particularly relevant provided it was unusual and maintained their interest. The tourist,

according to Bruner, is a willing collaborator in the illusion of authenticity (Bruner 1996).

If the authenticity is staged for the tourist, the tourist would not have any qualms about looking at the highland people as they stage their daily lives for the purpose of the tourist gaze. However, if the tourees are in fact genuinely living their day to day lives, and the tourists gazing at them while they do so, this could be perceived as disturbing to the tourist. All the tourists in this study were very concerned about ‘intruding’.

Yeah, I had a little look around. I didn't like to go too far ... didn't want to intrude. I felt a bit ... didn't know whether I should have been there.

I took photographs of scenery mainly. Not really of people. Buildings.

Joanne, English, 30s, a physiotherapist.

In the first village (Mae Sa) I sat down and had a look, watched people going about their business. I didn't want to impose. I think it was more a personal thing for me. I don't think they would have minded me looking around, but I didn't want to kind of troop around like some sort of ignorant westerner, so I was quite happy to sort of sit and observe them.

Nick, English, 20s, a teacher.

Thus the everyday lives of the villagers were perceived as authentic, and the tourists hesitant to intrude. Intruding into another's living space is a strong western middle-class value. Before going on the trek the tourists expressed reservations about intruding, and during the trek they evidenced strong reluctance to break the boundaries that were perceived by them, boundaries that were part of their own culture. If they had perceived the villagers everyday lives as being staged specifically for them, they would not have felt as if they were intruding.

A Trekking Experience

In order to understand the complete experience of the trekkers, I joined a trek. I chose a company whose trekking route included Mae Sa, the village where I had stayed for two weeks previously, thus experiencing the same space but from a different angle.

Ten of us met in the early morning to begin the adventure. We travelled in a converted pick-up truck, with a canopy over the truck back section and two benches running along the sides. As each person got into the back of the truck, the guide introduced us by first names and countries. There were six British people, an Australian, and one a Frenchman who had spent the past 30 years in Britain. The two others were Japanese, and they spoke very little English. We ranged in age from 20s to 50s. I myself, I should explain, am in my 50s and am British. Everyone said hello and lapsed into silence. We drove for about an hour to Mai Ma Lai. The journey was undertaken mostly in silence, and I felt uncomfortable being squashed between two complete strangers.

At Mai Ma Lai we stopped at the market while the guides shopped for our food. Here the group began to talk together, and I went with Bill, the Australian, to have a coffee. Probably he had approached me because we were similar in age. I bought some *kanom crock* and my companion decided to try some too. We went back to the area

where the tourists were waiting for the truck at concrete seats under a tree, and shared our snack with the other tourists from our bus. This sharing and discussing of food broke some of the ice, giving us something in common to talk about. The group now began to talk more normally, beginning the business of expressing some aspect of ourselves, and waiting for responses, which when positive, lead to the possibility of going a stage further. At one point Bill began to talk about ballroom dancing. I responded that I loved ballroom dancing but had not done any for twenty odd years. We discussed ballroom dancing for the next 15 minutes. It was interesting that though there were other tourists nearby obviously also going on treks, no one made any contact with them, and neither did they with us. It was as if we had enough to occupy ourselves with initial identifications within our own group to even have the energy to smile at anyone else.

Back in the truck everyone was much more relaxed and talking continued as well as relaxed silences as we craned our necks to look at the passing scenery. We discovered that one couple were physiotherapists, and another had just been teaching English in China. There was a sales executive and one young woman who had just completed a university degree. Next stop was lunch at a roadside cafe about 40 kilometres towards Mae Hong Sorn from Mai Ma Lai on Highway 1095, and talk continued, each of us expressing aspects of our identity as we interacted.

After lunch a half hour walk took us to a waterfall, our first experience trekking. At the waterfall cameras came out and there was a certain amount of clowning and general laughter and good feelings as we became more familiar with one another. The next stop was the hot springs at Pong Duet, where we relaxed in the hot water. Then came the difficult walk up the mountain to Mae Sa.

Ten exhausted tourists arrived at the village. As I was familiar with Mae Sa from having spent about two weeks there previously, I distanced myself from the other members of our group. The guide showed the tourists the sleeping house first, and then indicated the wash house. He explained that water, beer and coke could be bought, and indeed, the headman's wife was sitting beside a big plastic tub of cool water within which were the drinks for sale. She was dressed in Karen clothes, as she always was. She smiled at everyone, and they smiled back. The group had become very silent. Talking to them later, I realised that most had not at all expected to be sleeping in one big room all together and on the floor. I think that the experience of being in a highland village, the lack of modern amenities, the rustiness - although they had read about it and heard about it - the reality of it was a shock. They sat under the sleeping house, at benches around the table and scattered about. Some of them bought drinks, but no one stayed near the headman's wife. She seemed perfectly at ease. A few people used the wash house. I was the only one who took a bath. It was very noticeable that everyone had become very quiet and introverted as they struggled to come to terms with this very alien place and person sitting nearby in strange and colourful clothes. Nothing was familiar. Except the other tourists. Slowly they began to talk, but conversation was not about what they were experiencing but again, it involved presenting themselves in ways to identify with the others in the group. After an hour or so, people began to relax, and two of them went for a short walk around the village. The others stayed under the house, talking amongst themselves, but observing the village preparing for the night. The cows

were driven off to sleep in the forest, the pigs were fed, and baby chickens collected and closed into baskets. All this happened within just a few yards of the tourists.

It began to get really dark, and the young Karen girls from the family brought out the food which had been cooked in the village house next to us. Everyone ate ravenously and there was plenty of talk about food and other innocuous subjects. After dinner, I moved over to sit by the fire adjacent to the table where we had eaten. A group of young Karen girls were there, none of them in Karen clothes, but rather in Thai clothes, mismatched trousers and tee-shirts. The headman's wife was with them. This was quite unusual and I took it to be because I was there and they were familiar with me. All the girls spoke Thai and we talked for a while. One of the young girls, Seh Serh, could also speak some English, and I had heard her banter with tourists on a number of occasions on my previous visits. Then the young Japanese men joined the group and Seh Serh began speaking some Japanese words. The Japanese, who were having a very hard time in our group with their lack of English, were extremely happy to speak some words in their own language. We joked for a while in Thai, English and Japanese. The young girl decided that one of the young men was 'cute' and she knew the word in Japanese and English too. The Japanese man was delighted, and the two Japanese talked together in a flood of Japanese, seeming to relax for the first time since the start of the trek. This language identification seemed to be of great importance to them, their first real point of interaction with anyone. They seemed more at ease, sitting there around the fire with the Karen women, than they had been with the other tourists. The young girls too seemed at ease with the Japanese men, perhaps because they were Asian, and young.

None of the other tourists joined this group at first. But they were standing around and observing. Finally, one young woman came to sit next to me, then the others began to come over. The Karen girls then left the group, saying they had to get back to the kitchen, but perhaps with the advent of the other tourists they did not feel quite so comfortable, or they could have just been polite leaving space for the remainder of the group, who now filled the benches round the fire. At this point the guide came up and began talking about the highland people in general. Several people asked questions. Some talked among themselves. Everyone went to bed early.

The next morning talk was about how everyone had experienced the night and about the cockerels that woken us all up in the very cold hour before dawn. The English speaking people were now very comfortable together, and joked among themselves. The two Japanese, while seeming to be at ease with each other, were not part of the group because of the language barrier. After breakfast, the group geared up for the day's trek, brought their bottles of water from the headman's wife, and said thank you in Karen to the young girls for serving, orchestrated by the guide. We took off down the path out of the village.

As can be seen, the verbal interaction with the highland people was negligible, and this was common to all the treks that I had seen come to the village. But the interaction on other levels was profound on the part of the tourists. They were overawed by the village and the few people that they had seen, a way of life totally outside of their previous experience. They bonded together strongly, I believe as a reaction to the alienness of the situation, seeking to find familiarity with each other, perfect strangers just a few hours before, but now emotionally close as they shared experiences, and made

similar observations and gave similar opinions. Even though I had explained to them all that I was a researcher and stayed in the village before, the only difference in their interaction with me was that sometimes, but surprisingly rarely, someone would ask me a question.

After the trek was over, I interviewed my fellow trekkers. It was obvious that the village had made a strong impression on them all.

It was fascinating how the western world has not intruded on them at all (except for) torches and blue pipes for water... fascinating. The lack of wealth, from a western point of view, and they were all completely happy. And healthy.

Mark, English, 30s, a physiotherapist.

I did not expect the village to be so basic.

Alain, French, 50s, marketing executive.

I expected it to be more touristy.

Lisa, English, 20s, just completed degree.

From the point of view of the villagers, who had experienced the visiting tourists for the past 15 - 20 years, they were offering a service in exchange for an income.

We like the tourists to come because we can earn some money from them, to buy food and for our living.

Saw Pah Thu, 50s, village headman.

The village people never had time to get to know individual tourists. They told me that the tourists were polite, and that they did not mind them coming, and in fact were glad that they came so that they could earn an income. The experience was part of village life, something that happened almost every day. Over time they had negotiated spaces for themselves, separate from the tourists, an arrangement that suited both parties.

The tourists fear of intrusion was evident from their behaviour, and thus they colluded with the villagers in creating specific spaces, those for tourism, and those for the villagers. The tourists were comfortable within their spaces and rarely ventured beyond them. From the tourist's point of view there existed a very firm boundary between the area reserved for them and the spaces for the everyday lives of the villagers. This boundary, while certainly physical, was also constructed by the tourists for their own reasons. One reason could have been the projection of western culture onto the highland village. In a western society, one's home is one's castle, and no stranger has the right to come within the boundaries. This is very clear in American culture, where one can shoot a trespasser dead with impunity. An average westerner would be horrified if a stranger were to come into their home in order to look at their living arrangements and their way of life. This discomfort could well be transferred to the highland people. Projecting one's culture on to people of another culture indicates a lack of cultural sensitivity. It shows however, that some kind of sensitivity is present which could be called 'people' sensitivity. In the past explorers and missionaries saw indigenous people as 'other' and less than human. Today, due to education, the media, and the massive immigration of third world people to western industrialised countries, the majority of middle class people from industrialised countries are sensitive to the fact that all people are similarly human.

The sensitivity rarely deepens from this level of ‘people’ sensitivity to include the culture other people, and simply imposes the cultural values of the majority onto all people.

From the point of view of the highland people, the tourist business generated necessary income. This must have bearing on their projected attitudes of friendliness and accommodation. However, I was able to observe, while staying in the headman’s house, how Karen friends who came to visit were greeted and welcomed. This was comparable to the welcome given to the (very) few tourists who ventured into the headman’s house. The headman’s wife was equally friendly and all were encouraged to sit by the hearth and drink tea. This mirrored her behaviour towards me. Thus her own culture could be seen as dictating her attitudes and behaviour, imposing her own cultural values and manifesting ‘people’ sensitivity.

Another reason for the tourist’s construction of a psychological boundary around their designated physical spaces could be in order to justify the tourist’s hesitation and fear to venture into the unknown. One evening, sitting with half a dozen tourists round the camp fire during my stay in the village, a middle-aged French woman asked me why the villagers did not come to join them around the fire. She was one that had not walked around the village, but stayed in the tourist area since she had arrived. The request could have been because that she felt to go to seek out the villagers would be intrusive, but for them to come to the tourists would have given her the opportunity to interact without feelings of intrusion. However, as we saw with the incident with the young Karen girls, even when the villagers were around the camp fire, most of the tourists felt inhibited and did not join in, but observed from the periphery. Only the young Japanese came to the fireside, interacting with their identifications of youth and Asianness.

Time

Before the trek, the tourists had heard and read about the highland people, and seen photographs of women and children in clothes that depicted them as belonging to this or that ethnic group. “Primitive”, “traditional”, “isolated from the modern world” and other such words and phrases adorn the advertisements in tour companies, commercialising the highland people in a particular way, a way that denotes them as from the past. Guide books speak of them being “caught between the 6th and 20th century” (Cummings & Martin 2001, p. 512), and preserving “a way of life with little change over thousands of years” (Gray & Ridout 1998, p. 239). Thus the tourists embarking on a trek have been indoctrinated with the belief that they romanticise, that the people they will be visiting are ‘ancient’. Obviously this is not so. The highland people are alive and well in the 21st century, not embalmed and mummified beings a few hundred years old. The impressions the tourists bring with them, however, are of a culture that has been embalmed and mummified. Although surely more isolated than lowland Thais or the tourists themselves, the highland people have nevertheless been changing and adapting to their own particular circumstances for the same amount of linear time as the lowland Thais and the tourists (Pinkaw 2000; Fink 1994). They have changed through the years and have become the people they are today, 21st century highland people.

These accumulated impressions coloured the expectations of the majority of the tourists before going on their trek. One American tourist explained that he thought the highland people might be “what’s left, what was the American Indians, which there isn’t

much left of now". This tourist had brought another place into the space of the highland people, as well as another time. He felt that:

... indigenous people are similar throughout the world, they seem to have some of the same patterns, tribal organisation, their own tribal rituals, meaning within a tribe .. and their own particular way of dressing, and their own traditions I kind of wanted to understand the primal roots, you know, what was it, where did we really come from You can read about the past, but its better to go to the past. And most of the time you can't do that.

Tourist before Trekking, Keith, 40s, teacher

During the trek this idea of highland people as living in the past is compounded by the images that the tourists see when they get to the highland village, such as the bamboo huts and rough hewn wooden houses, absence of electricity, absence of beds, images that reflect standard western ideas of cultures from the distant past, both in the west and in other countries portrayed in museums and books. The image is one of time, a time before the time lived by the westerners today.

A Swedish middle-aged man kept repeating that the village was like Sweden, two, three hundred years ago. I wondered if this was his way of dealing with the strangeness. By identifying Swedish past with the Karen village, he was in a sense laying claim to a kind of familiarity. He was imposing his own culture on the alien one, his own three hundred year old culture.

The tourists on the treks were stunned by the experience of the highland village. Although they had heard about it and read about it the experience left them shocked into silence when they first arrived at the village, and created a need for the familiar, which they found in each other. The feeling of journeying back in time, constructed by their expectations, was initially uncomfortable psychologically in its strangeness, an experience none of them had previously known. It became more familiar as the hours went by, and the tourists could be seen to relax more, talk more fluently and laugh, only suddenly to be brought up short, or transported backwards, as a woman in brightly coloured traditional dress wearing a turban walked past with a hand woven basket full of pieces of wood on her back, just a few feet from the benches on which they sat. Once more they would become conscious of where they were, sitting on split logs of wood on uneven hard-packed in a 'primitive' village. The juxtaposition of a can of coke or a bottle of beer was one they coveted, the familiar within the strange, comfort within the uncomfortableness.

In the early morning in Mae Sa, one of my fellow trekkers, Bill, was up before the others like myself, and we sat talking as the sun pushed its way up behind the hill, hot glasses of tea to ward off the chill in the air. He told me of a mental devise he had used for many years. When he had a problem, he would create in his mind the image of a primitive society, the men hunting, the women in the fields, babies strapped to their bodies, the kids cared for by grandparents. He found that often his problems would assume new dimensions in such a space, and solutions could be found. He felt that the society in which he lived was filled with broken families, his own in particular. He did admit that his imaginary society was idealistic, but said how wonderful he was finding the experience of being in his dream. This was a very interesting example of both space

and time being crumpled and folded back on itself, projecting the past on the screen of the present, and the present on the screen of the past.

The experience of going back in time seemed to be a most important expectation as well as an actual perceived experience of most of the trekkers. The difference in the culture that they were visiting was different because of the ‘primitive’ i.e. back-in-time element. What was it that attracted these people to the experience? A number of them mentioned seeing a culture that was ‘lost’ in western societies.

(American people) don't have social relations because they have to move, they move their job, and its all about job and money, car. They did a survey where they, American men, rated their automobiles as more important than their wives.

Tourist before Trekking, Keith (an American)

He felt that people would be lucky to:

...be part of a strong family or part of a little culture in various places. There are pockets of survival of this more primitive culture. But in the western industrialised world not much of it remains. And I think that some of it was a really good thing..... I think the community is valuable. And now what we have is the community of the television. Its not a real community, which is strange.

Tourist before Trekking, Keith.

Another tourist, before he had been trekking, described the way of life of the villagers as situated in a previous time from the time he was now living in the west. Talking of himself perhaps living in the same way as the villagers, he says “I don’t think its possible to go back”.

There's an underlying, if not message, there's an underlying implication that we don't need all this stuff that we have. I mean do we need all these things that are above and beyond the basics, I mean do they equal happiness? I don't know. Maybe the less opportunities there are to pursue this greed, maybe the easier it is to carry on and have a fairly.. what's the word? .. contented life-style. I don't think its possible to go back. Well not without a bit of pain. Not voluntarily maybe. Its fine doing what we're doing now because you know its only temporary. If someone said, this is it, you've got to live like this for the rest of your life, I'm not sure I'd be delighted about it.

Tourist before Trekking, Mike, Irish, 30s, chemical engineer

Time then, was a dynamic element on the trek. The elephants and the bamboo rafts allowed the tourists to play at being explorers in the wild and untamed jungles of the past, evoking imperialist histories. The highland people were seen as past societies projected onto the screen of today, more real in their ancient-ness than in their today-ness, the projected image designed by the construction of their expectations.

For both groups of people obviously linear time exists. For the tourists, their perception of linear time is coloured by the past. For the highland people the linear aspect of time is tempered by cycles. Having in the past lived life intrinsically connected to the production of crops for sustenance, their past imposed the climatic cycles of the

region, the cycles of organic growth. In the present, the cycles are still a part of life, even though agriculture no longer provides all their food. It is still necessary and practised continuously, cycle after cycle.

The *tah* chants remind the villagers that they are connected by right of birth to a culture that validates the ‘past’. Even though, as we have seen, the present has crept into the chants, they are presented and received as ‘ancient’. They bring the cultural past of the villagers into the present. According to Hayami (2000, p. 576), Karen people, particularly the younger people who perhaps have a greater awareness of ‘modern’ life, have gained a certain perspective on their traditions, and are able to select, strategise and promote what is ‘traditional’ among them. Voicing their Karen-ness can be a valuable asset in some circumstances. Ethnic endogamy, argues Keyes (1979, p. 14) is one of the main structural mechanisms for maintaining boundaries with other groups. The villagers could conclude that the boundaries between the tourists and themselves enhance their opportunity for income generation, and for the sustainability of the process of tourism.

Thus the village people, familiar with tourism for many years, may have consciously incorporated their past, or aspects of it, into their presentation of themselves in the present in order to maintain the difference between the tourists and themselves for the purpose of earning an income. The past is imposed onto the screen of the present. The tourist experience is immediate without the necessary time for reflexivity, and thus spontaneous in its folding and crumpling of time. Time, as can be seen, is a pivotal factor in the interaction between the tribes. It is crumpled, bent and twisted to inform the moments of reality.

Conclusion.

The construction of identities on the part of both the highland people and the tourists is informed by their knowledge and perceptions of the past, present and expected future. The village people could be seen to express these identities with their choice of adoption of aspects from their social environment; the tourists, by their bonding together in a neo-tribe.

The expectations of the tourists and the villagers set the scene for their interactions. From the villagers’ point of view, their expectations are for the continuation of the smooth and profitable interaction that is present today, worked out over time through many adjustments and negotiations. Spaces have been constructed for themselves and the tourists that they find acceptable. They have reached a stage of construction where they can tell me that they ‘don’t mind’ anything about the tourists.

For the tourists, this is a first time experience. Even with the knowledge gained from guidebooks, tour agencies and previous trekkers, the experience itself is novel and full of unexpected and surprising deviations from their expectations, giving rise to fear of the unknown and a consequent reaction of bonding with fellow tourists to create and maintain identification with the familiar. Time appears to be crumpled and folded, and reality blurred. As the tourists walk into the jungle, they perceive themselves as leaving the 21st century behind on the bitumen road, and entering an historical era, and this fantasy is actively encouraged by the tour industry.

Thus the construction of identities can be seen to create a viable space for the interaction of these two groups of people, which is presently of profit to them both.

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