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Thailand's Plural Identities: Contesting the National Imagination in Fiction and Ethnography

Hjorleifur R. Jonsson*

This article examines notions of national identity and diversity in Thailand during the twentieth century. It draws on ethnographies, historical fiction, jungle adventure, romance, and official documents to question common notions of Thai identity and of what constitutes socially relevant Thai-language writing. The focus is in part on so-called hill peoples, whom scholarship has generally regarded as irrelevant to an understanding of Thai society. The study suggests a recurring debate among rival Thai perspectives on society, identity, and inequality. I divide the range of social imaginaries into three groups. Some manifest unambiguous pluralism and interethnic equivalence. Others express a class-based critique of the harm that derives from hierarchy and social inequalities. The third view insists on Thai distinction from and superiority over other peoples. The implications of this chauvinism are often elitist, sometimes racist, and also at times authoritarian. Of the three views that I identify, the emphasis on pluralism and interethnic equivalence has never received any notice from scholars of Thai society and culture.

Keywords: Thailand, literature, ethnography, pluralism, racism, national imagination

Thai-language fiction and ethnography manifest local understandings of society and diversity at particular moments. These works are not policy statements in any direct sense, but many of them have political implications. For the most part, they are interesting pieces of creative writing that are each very unique. Taken together and situated historically, however, these individual works can be read as clear evidence of considerable traffic in diverse and contested social visions between Thai intellectuals and the Thai (reading) public during the twentieth century.

The research behind this study focused on representations of ethnic and other diversity in Thai writings during the twentieth century. My examination found a range of perspectives on identity and difference, which for analytical purposes I have divided

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into three groups. These different perspectives manifest divergence and debate about Thai social principles and priorities. One perspective prioritizes hierarchy and inequality, another critiques hierarchy and inequality as the source of social ills, and a third emphasizes plural belonging and denies any categorical convictions regarding hierarchy, ethnicity, class, gender, language, or any other lines of identity and difference. The three angles, I suggest, occur not only in fiction or ethnography. Instead, they express pervasive diversity in Thai notions of society and identity. I assert no Thai uniqueness; any society may be based on conflicting principles.

Sons of the Forest, a young adult novel by Mala Khamjan (2008 [1982]), gives some sense of the interethnic realities in Thai writing that have been persistently overlooked or ignored.[1] The story follows two boys in Thailand's North, a lowland Northern Thai boy named Muangkham and a highland Karen boy named Yachi. The two are about 12–14 years old when they get to know each other and become friends. At a boarding school in town, they later come up against certain problems. In one episode of bullying at school, someone calls Yachi a "smelly Yang." "Yang" is a Northern Thai reference to people who call themselves Pga k'nyau. They are known as Karen in English and Kariang in Central Thai; "smelly Yang" is certainly an offensive slur.[2]

In reaction, each boy evokes what he has been taught: the lowland Northern Thai Muangkham says that according to his father, "You must fight," while the upland Karen boy Yachi counters that according to his father, "You must endure things." Yachi follows up on this with what seems a complete reversal of Thai stereotypes:

> "You lowlanders refer to yourselves as more advanced than us. Instead of talking through your problems like we [Pga k'nyau or highlanders] do, you fight each other. My father says that settling differences through the use of force is the way of animals." (Mala 2008, 89–90)[3]

Thai society and worldview are conventionally understood in terms of a universal hierarchy where Buddhist Thais are inherently superior to animist ("tribal") hill peoples, city people are above rural populations, and humans are far above animals (Hanks 1962, 1257). From the regular academic angle, Thais are the dominant national majority and Karen the marginalized minority. In this novel, however, highland peoples such as the

1) Mala Khamjan was born Jaroen Malarote in the northern province of Chiang Mai in 1952. He is best known for young adult fiction. As of 2007, *Sons of the Forest* was in its 13th printing. The author had by then published 36 books and received 13 awards, mostly national but also one IBBY—an award from the International Board on Books for Young People. He received the SEA Write Award in 1991 and was made National Artist in 2014.

2) Yang, Kariang, Karen, and Pga k'nyau imply the same people but from different angles and in different languages. There is no neutral or context-free reference to identity.

3) All translations from Thai in this article are my own.

Karen qualify (from their own perspective but in Thai writing) as human and civilized. Compared to them, lowland Thais are subhuman brutes, because they use force to resolve their differences. Calling someone an animal (*ai-sat* or *i-sat*) is a vulgar insult that combines disdain and anger. The Karen boy never manifests such an attitude, but the assessment that he attributes to his father and to his ethnic group is squarely transgressive and also refreshingly funny.

The late 1970s was a violent time in Thai society. In 1976 a brutal and deadly attack on the Thammasat University campus in downtown Bangkok brought a sudden end to (a few years of) democratic government. A right-wing military government took over, and all discussion, debate, and even news reporting on the violence was banned except from the military's perspective that the perpetrators were Communist vandals who had threatened national security. There were—and had been—frequent attacks across the country on those advocating for labor rights and democracy. These included assassinations, and it seemed that right-wing vigilante groups had been given a free hand (Anderson 1977; Morell and Chai-anan 1981). Ethnically non-Thai highland settlements also came under military attack for suspected political subversion. Nobody could publicly criticize the authoritarian and right-wing violence. The novel *Sons of the Forest* came out of this historical moment. It is a relatable and entertaining work of fiction that upends some standard expectations but does not point an accusatory finger in any alarmist way. The book does not hammer out any political convictions. Readers can take it any which way they like.

The story's ethnic or cultural pluralism and its ability to shift perspectives and see Thainess from the angle of another identity are somewhat common in Thai writing, though I have not found any recognition of this in studies of fiction or of society. One reviewer for this journal found my reading overdrawn: This particular novel "by a lowland Thai writer [could] surely not [express] the Karen's own perspective." This is an important and debatable point. I do not agree that a Thai writer cannot draw a convincing or credible Karen character, any more than a female writer cannot create credible male characters or a middle-class writer create credible characters across class lines. This issue of representation across difference (in writing or otherwise) has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. It is equally unfounded to assume that no Thai writer can represent a Karen perspective as it would be to assume that all Thai writing about Karen perspectives or characters is equally realistic or successful. All fiction is teeming with characters who do not match their writer's identity. In the episode that triggered the reviewer's alarm, the Thai writer used a Karen perspective in order to convey a sense of lowland Thai peoples as subhuman brutes. This was not an attempt at an ethnographic characterization. It aired, I suggest, a critique of (a) a violent society and (b) the common

and racist sense of Thai superiority over hill peoples.

In a book on literature and politics in Thailand during 1950–80, the political scientist Benedict Anderson (1985) called attention, in passing, to the issue of Thai knowledge of hinterland ethnic minorities. His book contains 13 Thai short stories in translation. Two of the stories focus on hinterland peoples, one each on Chao Le "sea gypsies" in the South and Hmong hill farmers in the North. The two stories manifest historical change:

> [T]he entry of state and capitalism into the lives of these minorities has simultaneously brought them into the field of vision of the Thai intelligentsia, and for the first time into a serious Thai literature which they themselves are unlikely soon to read. (Anderson 1985, 74)

Anthropology came to Thailand in two ways, both of which manifest American influence on Thai society. Anthropologists were brought in to study "politically labile" populations in Thailand's Northeast, North, and South as part of anti-Communist counterinsurgency measures. Also, anthropology became a subject

> in universities and research institutes . . . One unplanned side-effect [of field studies among the "non-Thai Thai"] was a new sympathy for such minorities among Thai students, and a concomitant awareness of the need for a less narrowly ethnic, and more generously political, conception of the Thai nation and national identity. The marks of this changing consciousness are visible all over [the two short stories]. (Anderson 1985, 75)

Anderson deserves credit for calling attention to the issue, though his understanding of Thai knowledge about hinterland peoples was not based on familiarity with the subject matter. During the almost forty years since the book was published, other scholars have not called attention to or corrected Anderson's ignorance of the topic. The book has since been published in Thai translation with additional essays (Anderson 2010). It shows no indication that Thai scholars have attempted any correction regarding assertions about Thai knowledge of ethnic diversity. This suggests that we have all been equally ignorant.

Anderson's book engages with interesting issues that cross academic disciplinary lines between politics, history, anthropology, and literature. Anthropologists have generally confined their research to fieldwork and have not paid much—or any—attention to literature or other Thai-language writing. Scholars of Thai politics, history, and literature have in general not shown any particular interest or familiarity with regard to hill peoples or ethnography. A more grounded understanding of the relevance of diversity in Thai society, history, literature, and political life requires interdisciplinary investigations. My case is intended to encourage and contribute to such efforts.

This study makes no claim to being exhaustive. It insists, however, on the impor-

tance of a recurring diversity among societal perspectives in Thailand that has, to my knowledge, had little or no recognition in studies of Thai society or history. I looked for images of diversity in fiction and ethnographic writing in order to comprehend Thai notions of identity regarding hill peoples. I used to think that there was a particular Thai perspective on hill tribes. Most studies of Thai society associate Thainess with ethnic chauvinism, authoritarianism, and state control (Reynolds 1993). When I failed to affirm my expectations, I searched for a different understanding. I was already familiar with some Thai ethnographic writing, but the juxtaposition with novels and short stories put these Thai ideas in a new perspective.

The assumption that Thai people have certain ideas about hill peoples or ethnic minorities implies that these positions are to some extent unproblematic or even fixed. In the course of my research, my view shifted to the question of how Thai people imagine their own identity and society in relation to matters of diversity. How does one study notions of national identity and ethnic frontiers? Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) offers one angle in his structural analysis of myths, with the suggestion that one must include all versions of any particular narrative.[4] This is an impossible goal, considering the tens of thousands of writings that are potentially relevant regarding Thai views on Thai identity and diversity. However, the ambitious aim can still counter the tendency to select only examples that best fit one's analytical expectations and ignore the rest.

This analysis considers Thai ethnographic reporting in relation to fiction from three periods: the 1930s, 1950s, and 1970s. I also briefly discuss examples from before the twentieth century, since premodern cases also differ from what is commonly expected. My study takes each piece of writing, fictional or ethnographic, as an individual entity that needs to be studied in its particulars (what are the components, how do they differ and relate, what is the outcome of their interactions?) before it can be compared with other such entities that together make up what I have assembled under the rubric of "Thai writing related to identity and diversity."

One inspiration for my research focus is the historian O. W. Wolters's (1982) study of border poems from fourteenth-century northern Vietnam. He suggested that each poem had to be treated as a coherent and unique entity, and that its meaning had to be read from the relations among the components and the social and historical context. The poets, state officials in an ethnically diverse region near the border with China, were "witnesses" who expressed their individual understandings of society and history at a specific moment. They did so for a particular audience and in the spirit of political

4) Lévi-Strauss suggested that myths could be analyzed without any particular knowledge of the society, the historical moment, or even the original language in which the story was rendered. My approach to Thai narratives emphasizes all these elements, so my use of his perspective is selective.

intervention. My sources are twentieth-century Thai intellectuals of various backgrounds. Their Thai-language ethnographies, historical fiction, jungle adventure, romance, and official documents offer a range of socially relevant writing about identity and difference. My research question makes them "witnesses" to what could be imagined and expressed in Thailand during the twentieth century.

Pluralism Before 1910

Across island and mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent southern China, trade in forest products (horns, hides, spices, orchids, beeswax, fragrant wood, etc.; in certain hinterland areas peoples also mined gold and worked other metals) was an important component of trans-local and then interregional and international trade for millennia (Cushman 1970; Dunn 1975; Manguin 2002; Tran 2010). Ayutthaya and Malacca were among the many Southeast Asian courts that derived significant wealth from such trade. This trade relied on alliances and exchanges linking different environments and peoples, and it involved marriage relations and the granting of semi-royal titles to hinterland and ocean-people leaders (Andaya and Andaya 2015). Nothing about Southeast Asian prehistories suggests that hinterland peoples had ever been isolated or remote from the region's social and political dynamics. Anderson's notion that capitalism and modernity brought Chao Le and Hmong peoples out of their previous isolation—and that they were unknown to various lowland and coastal peoples until Western anthropology and capitalism entered the scene—draws on (Western and Thai) social theory, particularly the notion that historical change comes from urban dynamics that transform the otherwise-inert countryside (see Braudel 1972; and Chatthip 1999).

There is considerable indication that pluralism was a customary perspective on the social landscape across Southeast Asia and adjacent southern China; multiethnic networks were common (O'Connor 2009; White 2011; Le *et al.* 2016; Cushman and Jonsson 2020). However, each place had its particular networks and dynamics. The court of Ayutthaya may have been ignorant of the forest people who produced many of the trade goods that sustained its economy. Ayutthaya was cosmopolitan and multilingual in relation to trade partners from Java, Japan, Korea, China, India, Persia, and the Malay Peninsula but ignorant about the people in its hinterland. Other courts, such as Chiang Mai, Khorat, and Kamphaeng Phet, maintained relations with Lawa, Karen, and other forest peoples and may have been correspondingly ignorant of Java, Japan, and the other trade partners of Ayutthaya. In the Ayutthaya-era epic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, one episode relates how a Siamese couple initiate relations with Lawa people with an exchange

of jewelry. Another one shows Lawa and Siamese attending each other's festivals and young people joking and flirting across these ethnic lines (Baker and Pasuk 2010, 386, 485).

The literature scholar Suvanna Kriengkraipetch (1995) studied images of otherness in Thai poetry around 1800 and found no sign of a stable notion of Thainess or selfhood. One striking example of pluralism is in a segment of the epic poem "*Phra Aphai Mani*" by Sunthon Phu:

> [All the enemies in a battle] listened to the teachings of the great [hermit] in order to call a halt to protracted fighting. After the teaching, which concerned Buddhist ideas, those who listened . . . explained their understanding in their own way, based on their religious beliefs and the cultural practices of each group. Sunthon Phu, as a Buddhist himself, did not clarify the meaning of this teaching, as if wishing to suggest that differences between "us" and "the others" . . . had no need for set criteria to distinguish each group, permitting one to enjoy the differences and become acquainted with each other. (Suvanna 1995, 145)

Thai Field Marshall Jaophraya Surasakmontri wrote about his military missions in the 1880s, when he was involved in fighting against "insurgent" groups in the borderlands of northern Laos and Vietnam. His account of "various groups of forest people" emphasized identifiable traits such as language, dress, and hairstyle. It showed no sign of ranking people by ethnicity or of insisting on any Thai superiority; there was only a plurality of peoples (Lathi 2015).

King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910) wrote a travel poem about the Karen peoples in Kanchanaburi that did not suggest any ethnic prejudice but rather interest and familiarity. He noted that the Siamese recognized the Karen for their midwifery skills and herbal medicine (Renard 1980, 104). He also wrote a verse-drama set among the Koi hunter-gatherers in the far south toward Malaysia (Chulalongkorn 1968 [1906]). In this, he gave an ethnographic background and noted that both Thai and Malay peoples valued herbal medicine from the Koi peoples. He also provided a glossary of dozens of terms from the Koi language and sprinkled the Thai text with these terms. The mention of the midwifery skills and herbal medicine that were valued and traded across ethnic lines is indicative of a pluralist tradition, where ethnic difference is maintained in part to cross it with mutually beneficial exchanges. Multilingualism was a regular component of such dynamics.

King Chulalongkorn's verse-play is not about ethnic difference. Instead, it is a drama about young lovers who are not allowed to marry because the woman's parents have decided on a wealthier suitor for her. At the end of the play, the male rivals have both been killed and the young woman has committed suicide. In my reading, the tragedy offers (directly or indirectly) a critique of parental overreach, such as was manifest in the

Thai law that a woman's parents decided on which man she married (Loos 2006, 138). King Chulalongkorn could write a drama with Koi characters about contemporary Thai concerns (e.g., could a woman marry for love?) because he assumed that peoples were to some degree equivalent. Nothing in the play asserts Siamese superiority over the Koi or suggests the latter's deficiency.

The historian Thongchai Winichakul (2000) argues that during 1885–1910, members of the Siamese elite engaged in nation building in part through an ethnographic project. He asserts that this project established distinctions through an elite-Siam-ization of ethnography. Allegedly, the elite established its superiority through an ethno-spatial hierarchy of the civilized city, the civilizable but rustic countryside, and the strange and uncivilizable ethnic others in the forest and mountains. Thongchai further asserts that King Chulalongkorn's verse-play, *Ngo pa* (Frizzy junglee), was one expression of this project. Prior to 1885, supposedly, the Siamese elite and Siamese society were ignorant of the hinterland peoples.

It is possible that some writings by certain members of the Siamese elite express the views that Thongchai found. But this is far from uniform or obvious in the sources. There was considerable diversity and debate among the elite on a range of matters. Prince Damrong, Chulalongkorn's brother, often expressed ethnic chauvinism in his writing, but his writings are not representative of the views of the elite in general. My reading of the report by Jaophraya Surasakmontri, for instance, differs from Thongchai's understanding. Some of his entries draw on considerable first-hand familiarity, others on rather reliable and unprejudiced informants, and yet other entries suggest unreliable and prejudiced gossip about peoples which the Siamese official had no knowledge of.

Thongchai's study views the Siamese elite as a singular entity with a unified and racist project of nation building and hierarchy. It suggests a critique of the monarchy and affirms a clear social divide between the elite and the public, both of which are significant items in contemporary Thai debates about society and politics. However, I question the claims regarding Siamese ignorance of ethnically diverse peoples prior to 1885, and about the shape of ethnographic knowledge production to boost the elite's claims to social superiority during 1885–1910. Thongchai's article raises important issues. His case, however, makes it impossible to recognize an indigenous Southeast Asian tradition of pluralism, including a practical interest in ethnic diversity, that is evident in premodern times and could still be found during 1885–1910, even in writings by members of the Siamese elite.

Assertions of Essential Difference

In 1932 a democratic revolution changed Thailand from an absolute monarchy to a democracy with a constitutional monarchy. A book from 1933 introduced the northern province of Nan to a national readership. The book has a long chapter on history, written by a "Mr. Good-Luck Lotus" (Nai Bua Chok-di). He opens by stating that in the past the land of Nan was a small kingdom and thus it was at various times under the administration of stronger powers that surrounded it: to the west lay Chiang Mai and then Burma; to the north and east were Sipsongpanna (in Yunnan, China) and Luang Prabang (Laos); to the south were Sukhothai and Ayutthaya:

> Whenever Nan was under the administration of either the Ayutthaya or Chiang Mai kingdom then there was tranquility and happiness among the citizens, because these kingdoms were governed by justice and kindness. This is very different from the waste and destruction that came with being under the Burmese administration, when there was much despair among the people. The Burmese never built anything up, they only destroyed things . . . At times, Nan was also attacked by its neighbors, such as Phrae, Luang Prabang, and Sipsongpanna. (Nai 1933, 212–213)

Prior to the 1780s, Ayutthaya was the Siamese capital, and Chiang Mai was the predominant kingdom in the North and then the administrative center of the Northern Division (Monthon Phayap) of the Siamese nation-state. The expression of preferred subordination to Chiang Mai and Ayutthaya comes across as a declaration of allegiance to the new nation-state.

The chapter on the ethnic groups of Nan is more of a surprise. Siri Phetyaprasert (1933), who represented Nan in the national parliament, writes on the various ethnic groups in the province.[5] There are sections on the lowland Northern Thai population as well as on the Meo (Hmong), Yao (Mien), Khmu, Thin, (Tai) Lue, and Phi Tong Leuang (Mlabri). The entries on the ethnically non-Thai peoples stress their unfamiliarity: "Seven hundred years ago the Lawa people fled from the Thai into the forests and mountains, and they have had no way to progress" (Siri 1933, 283). Peoples are situated in terms of "blood," their supposed racial linkages.

Significantly, the chapter on the peoples of Nan opens with a plea to correct a misunderstanding about "Lao," which was a common Bangkok reference to the population in the North: "In truth there are no Lao people in Nan [The Lao people live in French Indochina] . . . In general, the lowland population is Thai, of true-Thai flesh and

5) I have not yet learned any biographical details of this politician. He credits district governors in Nan with his knowledge of various ethnic groups, which suggests that he may have been unfamiliar with the province.

blood and ancestry." It continues with a mention of "the period when the Thai fled southward from the oppression of the Chinese [and split into two groups: northerners who initially were centered on Chiang Saen, and southerners (the Siamese in the Central Plains)] at Sawankhalok and beyond . . . The leaders of both groups were true Thai" (Siri 1933, 273, 274).

The Meo and Yao are said to be very similar, and both their origins are in China. There are White Meo and Black Meo, who differ mainly by dress. "Their important occupation is opium cultivation, and this activity creates considerable burden for the administration. [The Meo also grow rice and corn and raise animals.] Their dogs have a silky fur, and the lowland peoples buy lots of dogs from the Meo" (Siri 1933, 278). The entry on the Yao is much shorter. It mentions some vocabulary, typical dress, weddings, and that "the position of women is similar to that of slaves" (Siri 1933, 279). The racial emphasis is persistent in the entries: "The Lue are of Thai ancestry, but since ancient times there has been much mixing of blood with the Lua" (Siri 1933, 281–282).

Siri was conjuring untruths for a national audience with his exaggeration of the alienness of the various ethnically non-Thai peoples in Nan. The exoticization of hill peoples went hand in hand with the declaration that the lowland population was racially "true-Thai." In the 1880s the leader of a group of Mien (Yao) and Hmong (Meo) people (most likely a few thousand) negotiated with the king of Nan to settle in the mountains of his domain (they had earlier had similar relations with valley lords in Laos, Vietnam, and southern China). They agreed on annual tribute or tax payment, the leader was given a semi-royal *phaya* title, and the farmers in five settlements were allowed to grow and sell opium to the Royal Opium Monopoly. The Mien leader was well known to the authorities, and he often visited the city and the palace. He delivered tax every year, and he became quite wealthy from the proceeds of taxation and opium cultivation. When France took over neighboring Laos as part of Indochina in 1893, the Bangkok authorities placed Thai soldiers in garrisons along the border in Nan. The Mien population in Nan sold rice to the military camps (Jonsson 2005, 74–94).

It appears largely unknown nowadays that in the 1920s and 1930s, so-called forest and hill peoples were considered regular members of Thai society. One indication of this is an announcement in the *State Gazette* from January 1927 that extends the period for collecting taxes in order to accommodate the hill peoples. They had difficulty traveling in the rainy season and the hot season, and thus the tax collection would be extended (Suphayok-Kasem 1927, 603–604). Importantly, the people are referred to as *ratsadon jamphuak Meo, Yao, Musoe, Liso*.[6] The term *ratsadon* defines them as "citizens" or the

6) I owe my knowledge of this document to Suchon Mallikamarl, who is currently conducting research on interethnic political history in the National Archives of Thailand.

"general public"; there is no indication that members of these ethnic groups were considered alien or somehow outside of society. Nor were they labeled "hill" or "forest" peoples. During the 1920s, the Thai press favored the term *ratsadon* in reference to "people as the opposite of rulers" (Baker and Pasuk 2022, 128). The People's Party, the group behind the rebellion that established democracy and ended the absolute monarchy, referred to itself by this term, as *Khana ratsadon*.

In early 1927, King Prajadiphok (Rama VII, r. 1925–35) made an official journey by train from Bangkok to the north of the country. The governor of Chiang Mai orchestrated a grand reception that gave Mien, Hmong, Lisu, Karen, and other "hill peoples" important place. There were parades with floats celebrating each ethnic group, and there were music and dance performances by Mien, Hmong, and Lisu peoples. The governor had hosted a large number of hill peoples for a month prior to the event.

In the National Archives of Thailand, photos from this event show interethnic mingling among cheerful and interested Hmong, Mien, and Northern Thai audience members. The photo captions refer to the people as *ratsadon* (the general public). There is every indication that the ethnic diversity of Thai society was seen as a normal thing. The *ratsadon* suggests that there was no firm ranking of peoples that would mark Hmong, Mien, or Karen as in any way less central or less important than the other local populations. Nothing indicates that hill peoples were being viewed or treated as strange or as inferior to ethnically Thai peoples. The documentary film from this event suggests a sense of a plurality of peoples who were not being ranked by ethnic identity (Sadet Neua 1927).

A fiction film, *Kariang Sai-Yoke* (The Karen people of Sai Yoke), filmed in Kanchanaburi Province in 1936, offers further support for Thai pluralism and interethnic parity during this era. The film is set in a Karen village during New Year, and it combines daily activities with a staged drama of tension between the two suitors of a Karen maiden. Most of the actors are Karen villagers playing themselves, but the role of the Karen woman is played by a Siamese beauty queen, Miss Ayutthaya 1936 (Anake 2003, 146). This film shows no sign of exoticism or of a ranking of peoples where Thai are superior to others.

The pluralism that is apparent in various Thai writings from the early twentieth century suggests the continuation of a sense of the Thai as just one of many equivalent ethnic labels in a diverse region. However, there are some clear signs of an alternative insistence on an ethnic divide between Thai and others. These views represent simultaneous and rival perspectives on Thai identity and society. Prior to this research, I had not encountered expressions of Thai national identity as inclusive and diverse. This Thai material suggests parallels to the inclusive, multiethnic sense of modern

national identity in Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia. Correspondingly, the apparent emergence of Thai racism and mono-ethnic chauvinism in the 1930s has some parallel with the situation that developed in Burma around the same time.

Some scholars have suggested that the Thai government used the nationalist label "Thai Islam" (Muslim Thai) to deny Malay identity in the South from the 1940s onward (Jory 2007; Dalrymple *et al.* 2023, 205–206). Photos in the National Archives from the 1927 visit of King Rama VII to Chiang Mai indicate, however, that people were identifying deliberately as Muslims before that time. Some photos show delegations marching in a parade, with signs declaring their ethnicity. One group holds a printed sign that says *khaek* and a hand-painted banner saying *Khana-chat-islam* (delegation of Muslim people). My guess is that the organizers printed the *khaek* label and that the people responded by writing their own preferred alternative. As discussed below, *khaek* is a common Thai gloss for South Asians, Indians, and Malay peoples that suggests a contrast to the Thai. "Delegation of Muslim people" asserts belonging and equivalence and clearly counters the otherness implied by *khaek*.

The above material on identity discourses in Thailand during the 1920s and 1930s shows clearly that notions of Thai identity as singular, exclusive, and superior to that of hill peoples coexisted with notions of identity as inclusive and diverse. The notion of various groups of highland peoples as *ratsadon* that is expressed in a state gazette suggests that at least some agents of the state and national integration were invested in a plural and diverse Thai society rather than being somehow uniformly focused on ethnic chauvinism or on the ranking of peoples through an ethno-spatial hierarchy.

Thai Perspectives during the 1950s

In 1950 Bunchuai Srisawat (2004a [1950]) published the book *30 Peoples of Chiang Rai*, which was in many ways an introduction to the northern province of Chiang Rai for a national readership. The author was a member of the national parliament, representing Chiang Rai.[7] It appears that the ethnographic impulse was triggered in reaction to Bangkok notions of northerners as "Lao" and a discourse on national credentials in terms of pure Thai blood. The people in the province are of three kinds. The bulk are northerners as well as Thai Yai, Lue, Tai Ya, Indochinese Lao, Karen, and Lawa. There

7) Bunchuai Srisawat (1917–73) was a businessman, politician, and writer, born in Chiang Rai Province. His travels in that province and in neighboring Burma, China, and Vietnam informed many books on ethnology that are still popular.

are also foreigners (*chao tang chat*, "people from other countries") and mountain peoples (*chao khao*) such as Khmu, Khamet, Meo, Yao, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Kui (Bunchuai 2004a, 2). The account stresses that the Yao, Meo, Lahu, and others are from other countries (China, Laos, Burma). The lowland Northern Thai population is "true Thai. There has been no mixing of blood from other groups . . . The Thai in the Central region [however] have blood mixed with that of other groups" (Bunchuai 2004a, 12). In the ancient past, Thai people migrated southward from China and came into conflict with the Lawa, who were the previous owners of the land. The Thai were victorious in this encounter (Bunchuai 2004a, 7).

Bunchuai declared that the Mountain Karen (*Yang doi*) "are filthy, and they do not like to bathe. They are fond of their family and relatives. They cling to their customary ways and live in little shacks" (Bunchuai 2004a, 186). The impression he leaves is that the more any Karen group (*Yang daeng, Yang khao, Yang kaloe*) resemble their lowland Northern Thai neighbors, the cleaner and more civilized they are. This account of the peoples of Chiang Rai conjured untruths for a national audience as it exoticized the ethnically non-Thai population, like the earlier account of Nan Province. The untruths were most blatant when it came to hill peoples' sexuality:

> The young [Ko, Akha] people meet up in the evenings at the *kalalasoe*, "the maiden-hugging grounds," where there is a bench where they can hug . . . [and if they like each other] they will continue and have sexual relations. [The villagers elect a man to serve as deflowerer, *khajirada*, who must initiate all the young women in the ways of sexuality. There is also a woman, *mida*, who initiates young men in the same way.] If the young people are reluctant to engage in sexual activity, then the elders must pull them by the hand to the hugging grounds and get them to embrace. (Bunchuai 2004a, 384–392)

The book *30 Peoples of Chiang Rai* went through several reprints, with various changes in the text.[8] Bunchuai (2002 [1963]) then produced a different book on "hill tribes of Thailand" that had no content on Thai peoples. However, the exoticization and sexualization of Thailand's hill peoples continued in much the same form in this book. In Bunchuai's (2004b [1954]) book on the Tai Lue in Yunnan, China, there was no sexualization in the accounts of Yao and Akha. However, "The Ko like to eat dog meat. They trade goods for [dogs] that they then kill and eat all the time. The women dress beautifully. They wear a short skirt, Hawaiian style" (Bunchuai 2004b, 377). The sexualized racism regarding Thailand's hill peoples manifested a particular intersection of author, topic, audience, and historical moment. When the topic was the same (Ko and Yao, or

8) Suchon Mallikamarl (personal communication, April 2022) has found four different editions, which are, however, never identified as such in the title. The 2004 reprint is made from the second edition.

Akha and Mien peoples, in the context of Thai) but was situated outside of modern Thailand, the sexualized racism was absent. That is, the sexualization was contingent on claiming true-Thai credentials for Chiang Rai lowlanders in relation to Bangkok through the deliberate othering of hill peoples.

The exoticization of the hill peoples in Chiang Rai was not the only ethnic-frontier imagery available to a national audience in the 1950s. In his historical novel on Kamphaeng Phet, *Thung Maharat* (The great ruler's plains), Malai Chuphinit (under the pen name Riam Eng) focused on the river-trader Reun, who later became a local leader.[9] Early on, Reun is at a Buddhist temple with his love interest (and future wife), Sutjai. He mentions to her that the buildings were long dilapidated but then two brothers, Phaya Taka and Phapo, financed the restoration. "Don't forget that they are Kariang, not Thai," says Reun (Riam 1975 [1951], 48). The topic later recurs, about the two brothers restoring the temple to its former glory: "They are not Thai persons, but they love Thailand and love the Thai people, because it is here that they established themselves, it is among these people that they found happiness" (Riam 1975, 294).[10] Further on in the novel there is an outbreak of smallpox. An elderly woman mentions that when she was young, there was another such outbreak. She recalls that the people in a "Kariang and Meo village had burned their houses to ashes" (Riam 1975, 455). This is the strategy that Reun then has the people follow. This shows the interethnic familiarity through which the Siamese in Kamphaeng Phet can learn from the neighboring Karen and Hmong peoples about responding to a debilitating and deadly epidemic.

In a short story that is also set in Kamphaeng Phet, Malai writes about an elderly upper-class woman attending the opening of a health station that her late husband worked on establishing in his lifetime. Her mind drifts to their decades together; she recalls the brothers Phaya Taka and Phapo and the idea that by establishing a lowland trading center the "Kariang and Meo hill villagers" would have easier access to trade goods (Riam 1961, 412). This suggests how certain lowland traders actively contributed to plural belonging by placing a priority on enabling relations that were of value to their highland neighbors.

Karen and Hmong people appear repeatedly around the Thai in this fiction, and this representation of diversity seems quite deliberate. Malai grew up in Kamphaeng Phet,

9) The story was translated as *The Field of the Great* (Malai 1996). Malai Chuphinit (1906–63) was a journalist and writer recognized for his skill with short stories and novels.

10) Phaya Taka was a titled chief, and Phapo was a wealthy trader married to the daughter of the Siamese subdistrict official. They were important local characters around 1900. Their one-time importance is celebrated in the National Museum of Kamphaeng Phet. Their posthumous recognition has everything to do with the novel *Thung Maharat*, which is recognized as among the greatest of Thai novels. It places Kamphaeng Phet Province on the national stage.

where there is a long history of relations between Thai and Karen peoples. By situating the Kariang and Meo together in these narratives, in the vicinity of the Thai, the author insists on ethnic diversity as ordinary and important. People were familiar with one another across ethnic lines, they could learn from each other, and they cultivated good relations in ways that sustained plural belonging and precluded interethnic conflict and discrimination. This fiction directly countered Thai chauvinism such as in Bunchuai's assertion that hill peoples were aliens on Thai soil.

Under the pen name of Noi Inthanon, Malai wrote a jungle adventure series in 1955: *Jungle Trails*.[11] The stories center on three men: the Thai Mr. Sak Suriyan, his Karen mate Ta-Koen ("Old Koen"), and the Thai army captain Reuang Yuthana. Sak is the central character and narrator. The series does not romanticize jungle life, but it is notable for never suggesting the superiority of Thai over Karen or other forest people; for not depicting forest people as filthy, ignorant, or somehow inferior to the Thai; and never suggesting that education, urban ways, and Thai Buddhism are superior to the knowledge, behavior, or religion common in forest communities. Each of these elements is common in the standard chauvinist binary formulation of Thai people as superior to the hill tribes.

The association of forests with illegality, disorder, filth, backwardness, and wildness has often been conveyed in scholarship as "the Thai perspective" on forests and forest people (Davis 1984; Stott 1991; Thongchai 2000, 38; Turton 2000), a claim that I used to accept. This makes *Jungle Trails* quite significant in relation to the politics of Thai culture and society. Sak, the main character, declares near the beginning of one story:

> As for myself, I can say this: the forest is the kingdom of my life and the field of my life. Every year I must leave and seek it out. If I stay for too long in the city then I am like a tree that is in the wrong place. City life weighs me down and drains my mind. The city and I cannot mix for too long at a time. It is not peaceful and refreshing like the enlightenment that I derive from the forest and the forest people. (Noi 1990 [1955], Vol. 1, 103)

This work links "civilization" or "enlightenment" (*arayatham*) with forests and forest people, which is unusual in Thai writing. Noi's Sak makes this statement very plainly, and the attitude rings true for the character in the stories. In one story, Sak has been hunting when he meets up with Ta-Koen. Before they leave for a trip together, Sak wants to hold a feast for the Meo people who have been assisting him. He notes, "it is

11) The series started as a radio play in 1955 that became very popular. Then the stories were published in book form and in 1961 also made into a television drama. The books were published as five volumes in 1974; I do not know whether that was the original format. I cite from the 14-volume reissue (of about two hundred pages each) in 2012, which was first published in 1990 and remains in print.

in the character of the Meo people to never tell you anything that isn't true" (Noi 1990, Vol. 3, 161). This is as far from exoticization as can be. The hill peoples are reliable and honest, they are an ordinary part of society, and there is collaboration and trust across ethnic lines. Sak's feast indicates that he treats the Meo like partners or equals.

In this particular story, a young Karen man gets drunk and begins wielding a torch near some dry vegetation. A forestry official calls out to him to be careful, otherwise the forest and the villages are at risk. The Karen man says that he does not care: "This is not my forest. The big people are the owners; what do I have to fear?" The forestry official, an agent of the state and capitalist expansion, replies:

> "That is wrong, Maowa. All the people are the owners of this forest, not just the company that has the license, not just the likes of me who have come here for work. This also belongs to everyone, Karen and Thai—they are the owners of this forest and of this land. The forest gives shade and livelihood. Please don't let it be destroyed." (Noi 1990, Vol. 3, 183)

Things turn out badly, and the next morning the village headman despairs over the future: "It's all gone, the orchards, the hill fields, what will we eat?" Sak replies that there is taro and tapioca in the ground, there are fish in the rivers and birds in the sky, and lots of game in the forest, so why fear starvation? The two talk this back and forth, and then the Karen leader declares: "I will not forget this; the forest official understands that all the people are the owners of the forest and of this Thai land" (Noi 1990, Vol. 3, 186). This states very clearly that Thailand is not the exclusive domain of ethnically Thai people. Nothing in this fiction ever associates strangeness with forest or highland people, or presents them as inferior to Thai.

A different societal and interethnic configuration appears in Lao Khamhom's (2020 [1958]) short story "*Phrai Fa*" (The lord's serfs).[12] The story is set in a logging camp in Lamphun Province, near the Ping River. The narrator is Chert, a Thai man. Intha, an ethnically Khmu elephant keeper (mahout), is central to the story. Intha is in love with Bua Kham, a young woman from a nearby Northern Thai farming village. Intha has never been to school, and he cannot understand the hierarchical system of Thai society—how someone can be considered a lord and be treated differently from other humans. Chert has no success explaining the logic of this, which would be obvious to any Thai person

12) "*Phrai fa*" was included (as "Dust Underfoot") in Damnern Garden's translation of the short story collection *Fa bo kan* (The sky is no hindrance) (Khamsing 1973). Lao Khamhom (1930–) is the pen name of Khamsing Srinok, who is from Thailand's Northeast. He has written several collections of short stories and one novel. He worked for some time as a journalist and then as an assistant to anthropologists from Cornell University's Bang Chan research project (near Bangkok) in the 1950s. The short story collection *Fa bo kan* was for some time on the secondary school curriculum. Thai assessments of it range from a masterpiece to Communist propaganda (see Platt 2013, 54).

(Lao 2020, 33–36). The logging camp receives a visitor, an elite man of royal descent who is the company owner's nephew. While the loggers are away in some forest, the elite visitor takes Bua Kham for his pleasure, with the intention of leaving her behind when he returns to Bangkok.

Chert learns of the affair and tells the visitor to back off. The elite man takes offense that a mere commoner is trying to tell him, a Mom Rachawong (his royal rank), how to behave (Lao 2020, 42–43). Chert insists that it is all about love and human decency (*manusyatham*, commonly glossed as humanitarianism). The royal person blows off that notion as nonsense and then adds, "Intha! Since when has that Earholes been as human as the rest of us? He is a Khmu through and through!" (Lao 2020, 44). During a storm that night, when the river has swollen with the rain, Intha has his elephant push the hut where the royal and Bua Kham are sleeping into the river. By the next morning Intha is gone, and the villagers find the two dead bodies and wreckage of the hut washed up on the river's banks.[13)]

"Phrai Fa" is a unique and individual story, but it shares a plot structure with some critical writing from this era that portrays the old order (royalty, the upper class, officialdom) as an obstacle to progress. This old guard kept reform, justice, and humanitarianism at bay. Short stories and novels by writers such as Siburapha and Seni Saowaphong pitted enthusiastic young people against the agents of privilege and inequality who stood in the way of a just Thai society (Thak 2018, 57–59). This conflict was never resolved. It drew on rival views about the implications of hierarchy. The fiction rests on sharp moral contrasts, and it is in this comparative light that I see the innocent goodness of Intha, who cannot comprehend the status inequalities of Thai society. Readers will recognize the elite man as an agent of appropriation and harm.[14)] As with the fictional Karen character Yachi from 1982, the fictional Khmu man Intha from 1958 enables a displaced Thai reflection on Thai society and its problems.

In his scholarly work on relations between Lawa (Lua') hill peoples and the lowland Tai population of Chiang Mai, Kraisri Nimmanhaeminda (1965; 1967) called attention to centuries of political, economic, and religious exchanges and cultural mixing across these ethnic lines. His work struck some of the same notes as the pluralist fiction that I discuss,

13) The names of the people in the story are somewhat intriguing. Chert is a common name. However, Bua-kham (Golden Lotus) is a somewhat common female name in folktales. Intha refers to the god Indra. Meanwhile, the royal person is named Paipiin Rachaphreuk (Climber-Royal-Plant), which a Thai friend suggested means "Royal Monkey" and thus constitutes a thinly veiled mockery.

14) For overviews of social criticism in Thai fiction and the leftist "literature-for-life" tradition, see Manas (1982), Harrison (1994), Ruenruthai (2000), and Thanapol (2011). The class-orientation of this discourse tends to leave out the gender-based social critique that was common in works by female authors such as Ko Surangkhanang (1994 [1937]).

and—somewhat similarly—it has generally been ignored.[15]

Social Imaginaries in the 1970s

Khajadphai Burutsaphat (1975), a career bureaucrat concerned with national security, published a book called *Hill Tribes* in 1975. A second edition followed in 1985, and a third in 1990. The book claims to represent a neutral, learned view on hill peoples. It notes that opium cultivation and forest destruction are important problems. Hill tribes are recent immigrants to Thailand and are the source of these problems; their crossing of national borders is a significant security concern. There are chapters on individual tribes that summarize available knowledge and also draw significantly on Bunchuai's generalizations about the promiscuity of highland maidens, the maiden-hugging bench among the Akha, and the sexual freedom of Yao maidens. The book's first and second editions contain a photo of the author on the hugging bench in an Akha village, with his arm around a teenage Akha girl at night; this was a realm of masculine bravado.[16] Khajadphai's book suggests that hill people are racially distinct from the Thai, that their cultures stress young people's sexual liberty, that they are recent immigrants to Thailand, that their traditional ways cause many problems for Thai society, and that things can only improve to the degree that hill peoples take on Thai ways.

At one point I read this book as presenting the official Thai view on hill tribes. Now I see it instead as one of several rival perspectives on Thai society. Khajadphai presents an authoritarian view that is intolerant of Thailand's diversity. While he borrows from Bunchuai, his concern is different. His subtext is that Thai society is under threat, and that it is important to obey the directives of the government. The anthropologist Pinkaew Laungaramsri (1998) has analyzed such "hill tribe discourse"—how highland people and their ways (shifting cultivation, opium growing, settlement migration, etc.) were portrayed as constituting "problems" for Thai society that concerned ethnic difference.

15) Kraisri (1912–92) was born in Chiang Mai, in Thailand's North, to ethnically Chinese parents. They ran a successful business and sent him abroad for education. He received a BA from the University of Pennsylvania in 1932 and an MBA from Harvard University in 1938. Upon returning to Thailand, he was first a professor at Chulalongkorn University and then worked in government and banking in Bangkok. However, he later settled in Chiang Mai and established himself as a banker, businessman, and scholar. He sought to bolster northern-ness to counter Bangkok hegemony and Central Thai chauvinism.

16) The "maiden-hugging grounds" was an idea made up by Bunchuai. However, it was so compelling to some of his male Thai audience that it was staged for a documentary film in 1964, and then the once-fictional bench became a Thai "fact" that took on a life of its own (see Jonsson 2020).

If descriptions of hill peoples are a Thai way of engaging with identity, diversity, and society, then the subtext of Khajadphai's book can be read as an authoritarian manifesto: People are a problem, and they need to be brought under disciplinary control through state measures for national security. The common labeling of any agitation for justice, democracy, and equality as Communist propaganda and a threat, and the license to use violence against anyone so labeled, reached a horrifying high point in the deadly attack in Bangkok in 1976. However, the pattern of political abuse has been much more general (see Subrahmanyan 2021).

Sophak Suwan's (2016 [1974]) novel *Pulakong* presents an interesting counter to such authoritarian chauvinism.[17] The story is set in Patani Province in the Muslim South. The main character is Suphara (nicknamed Tun), a young Bangkok woman who goes south as a development volunteer after graduating from Thammasat University. She settles in the village of Pulakong and negotiates to stay with the family of the school headmaster. Tun becomes a substitute teacher at the school and learns sufficient Malay to communicate with others. She insists to the students that they are a Thai people and that they must love the country as a Thai people: "They simply differ in religion and language. These are just matters of local culture and language; they don't suggest that the people aren't Thai" (Sophak 2016, 138). "She also told the students to call themselves Muslim Thai (Thai Islam) instead of using the binary-contrast terms Thai and *khaek* [a common term for Malay and Indian peoples]" (Sophak 2016, 185) that would mark them as outsiders and as not Thai.

Given the common use of authoritarianism in relations between government officials and ordinary villagers, Tun's inclusive sense of Thai identity and belonging and her anti-authoritarianism stand as a clear alternative:

> If we don't bully the villagers but are instead on friendly terms with them and offer them assistance the best we can, then they will understand us better and will not believe the propaganda of that other group [Muslim separatists]. She had previously seen villagers' fear and intimidation toward the officials who insist on placing themselves above ordinary people . . . The power of that group causes real hardship for any assistance to the countryside . . . She wanted to warn [the officials] that their actions would play into the hands of their opponents. (Sophak 2016, 268–269)

Before Tun leaves for Bangkok, local people commend her on her work and the way she

17) Sophak was born Ramphaiphan Suwannasan in 1944. She studied music therapy in Vienna and was a Thai pioneer in that field. She has written dozens of novels, many of which have been made into television dramas. She was made National Artist in 2013. *Pulakong* was serialized in a magazine before it was published as a book, and in 1977 the Ministry of Education selected the book for independent (out-of-classroom) reading for students in secondary school (*mathayomsuksa*). By all accounts the story was well known.

has influenced villagers' understanding of their belonging:

> You have done a good job, teacher, not just with respect to development in the village and sub-district. You have also made this land belong to the villagers more than before. If they know that the place where they stand belongs to them, then they will help protect it. No more will anyone be able to deceive them that they are being oppressed . . . Where they live is Thai land that belongs to them, the villagers, as a Thai people. (Sophak 2016, 368)

This suggests an echo of the sentiment expressed in the *Jungle Trails* adventure story: this land and this forest belong to the Thai and the Karen together. In *Pulakong*, southern Muslims are not alien *khaek* but are as Thai as any other people; they belong in the country, and the land belongs to them too.

The novel *Under the Deep-Blue Sky* by Sifa (1977) concerns the Hmong man Li-Jeng and the Bangkok Thai woman Matsi, who fall in love while at Teacher's College in Thailand's South.[18] Li-Jeng is from a Hmong village in the mountains of Chiang Rai in the North, and he wants to establish a school there so that the Hmong people will not be inferior to the Thai. He is adamant about being of Hmong ethnicity and Thai nationality. When he graduates and wants to move north, Matsi decides that they will get married. Her father gives his consent, but her mother is in tears and never accepts that her daughter has married a non-status hill person. She wants her daughter to divorce him and to instead carry a family name that brings status. Correspondingly, Li-Jeng's mother never takes to Matsi, but his father is very approving and thinks that Matsi has sacrificed greatly by leaving the city and the lowlands to live with Li-Jeng in a mountain village.[19]

The novel was published at a time when hill peoples were portrayed as alien immigrants and the Hmong people in particular were vilified as a Communist threat, as "Red Meo." Matsi's parents ask Li-Jeng whether he is a Red or a White Meo. "I am Black Meo," he says, adding that there is no such thing as Red Meo. Then he tells them that the diversity of Tai/Thai groups is comparable, and it turns out that educated and affluent urbanites are completely ignorant of ethnic diversity in Thailand and beyond. The text is sprinkled with Hmong phrases that are translated into Thai in footnotes. It seems a

18) The story was serialized in a magazine prior to being printed in book form, and it was later made into a film. Sifa (1930–2013) was born Mom Luang Si Fa Ladawan. She was of royal descent: her great-grandfather was a son of King Rama III. She became recognized as a writer during her college days and went on to write dozens of novels. Sifa received many awards for her books and was made National Artist in 1996.

19) The female name Matsi is best known from Jatakas (Buddha life-stories) as that of the wife of Prince Vesandorn, Phra Wet, the then-future Buddha who gave away his wife and children as a manifestation of his extreme generosity. Matsi as the Bangkok-Thai wife of Li-Jeng, a young and modern Hmong man, may be a gentle joke by a determined Thai pluralist.

deliberate choice to have Thai readers voice the Hmong language in order to blur the lines between languages. The marriage of Matsi and Li-Jeng expresses a more obvious blurring of ethnic difference.

Before they get married, Li-Jeng visits the village on his own. He thinks of courtship in the highlands, that it is a natural thing between women and men, that it is pure and there is nothing shameful about it. Li-Jeng thinks about Matsi, who was very disapproving of highland ways. He told her:

> My group has had these customs for a long time. Your group may think of this as savage practice, as the shameful ways of stupid hill tribes. But I have heard that in Sweden there is the same kind of free sex. In the minds of your [Thai] group they are progressive and have freedom. And how is this really different? Or is it just that one group is *farang* (Westerners) while the other is hill tribe? (Sifa 1977, Vol. 1, 84–85)

This reversal undermines any expectations of Thai superiority over hill peoples. Sifa's framing counters the common notion from Bunchuai that hill people are promiscuous and thus inferior to the Thai. In Sifa's novel, in contrast, this feature is something that can also be found in Sweden, whose people the Thai see as liberated and progressive. It becomes possible to see the Thai as clueless and equally behind both hill tribes and the progressive Europeans.

Li-Jeng is not interested in hook-ups with young village women, unlike his brother. Sifa does not assume any ethnic stereotypes in her cast of characters. Matsi and Janjong, her Bangkok Thai female friend and classmate, are different people because of different class backgrounds and also simply as individuals. Li-Jeng is blind to some of the gender inequalities in Hmong culture that outrage Matsi. She, meanwhile, is not yet conversant in the Hmong language despite spending more than a year in the village. Matsi becomes pregnant and decides to give birth in Bangkok and recover at her old home. Li-Jeng refuses to accompany her there, knowing that he would be in regular conflict and argument with her upper-class parents.

Surachai Janthimathon's (1997 [1981]) novel, *Before the Light of Day*, is set among the Lua' people of Nan Province and traces their history from about 1940 to 1965.[20] They initially moved in from Laos, fleeing the war. They enjoyed a good reception

20) Surachai (1948–) is from Surin Province in Thailand's Northeast. In the early 1970s he was playing folk and protest music with friends, and his band, Caravan, became well known. After the violent suppression of democracy and activism in October of 1976, Surachai (whose musician name is Nga Caravan) and his bandmates fled to the jungle and joined the Communist Party for several years. He has written essays and short stories. *Before the Light of Day* is his only novel, but his music has been far more popular and influential than any of his other writing. He was made National Artist in 2010.

from the authorities in Nan and received some official assistance. Later, relations went sour as authoritarianism took over:

> When those fighting against French imperialism had lit the fires of a brutal war all across Indochina, the peace-and-quiet-loving inhabitants of forest villages streamed into Thailand like a flock of crows escaping a forest fire, and they settled near the farthest north of the country. Once safe from the fires of war, they arrived from all directions to be quickly registered. The District Office was crowded with people of many ethnic groups. (Surachai 1997, 23)

Once the people were settled, the *kamnan* (subdistrict official) came to visit them. He said:

> Now listen all, for the improvement of the locality. You are living on royal land. For the making of fields there is a tax of 7 baht per year. For wood, 20 baht for big trees, mid-size 15 baht, small ones 5 baht. Tax on making alcohol is 25 baht, cold season tax is 2 baht, constitution tax 2 baht, tax on selling buffalo 15 baht, selling pigs 20 baht, on teak trees an extra tax—20 baht for small trees, 50 baht for large trees. The announcements went on and on. It looked like nobody there could remember it all, but everybody stood stiffly listening to *kamnan* Thi. He was like the main actor of some play on stage. (Surachai 1997, 40–41)

Things went from bad to worse for the Lua' because of abuses and oppression by the Thai authorities. All the men were sent away to prison in Thai towns and cities, and the only remaining hope was that people bringing red cloth would bring justice to the Lua' (Surachai 1997, 136). There had been a Lua' holy man on the Laos side who carried a red cloth. The Lua' people's access to him was thwarted by the Thai authorities' border control. There was, however, hope for a new group of people carrying the red cloth. Surachai wrote his novel while with the Arts Division of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) guerrillas in the jungles of Nan Province, and while taking shelter with Lua' highlanders who had been alienated from any contact with lowland society. In the novel, the history of the Lua' predicts how the CPT will carry the hope for the future, through the implied match between the Lua' holy man's red cloth and the CPT's red flag. The innocent goodness of the Lua' villagers is repeatedly highlighted through the contrast with the oppressive Thai authorities.[21)]

A very different witness to ethnic-frontier conditions in Thailand in the mid-1970s

21) The moral-binary setup is common in Thai fiction from this time (see Khammaan 1992 [1978]). It is also common beyond fiction writing, in the focus on Karen people's alleged eco-wisdom (Hayami 2006) and in the more general emphasis on "community culture" that imagines traditional Thai villagers as endangered by the erosive force of modernity and globalization (Yukti 2005). The most scathing internal critique of the Thai romanticization of village life may be Chart Korbjitti's (2001 [1981]) novel *Kham phiphaksa* (The judgment) (see Chusak 2014).

appears in Thommayanti's (2019 [1976]) novel *Jewel of the Deep Forest*.[22] The story is about a Thai man named Songphao and a Karen woman named Miyawaddi. Songphao is hunting in the forest with his friends, and Old-Jan, a Karen man, is guiding him. Old-Jan is fatally injured by a tiger as he saves Songphao's life. Before he dies, he asked Songphao to take care of his daughter, Miyawaddi. Songphao wants to kill the tiger, and though Miyawaddi doubts his skills, they set off into the jungle. There, however, they come upon a group of terrorists. Songphao becomes sick, Miyawaddi nurses him, and meanwhile she kills three of the terrorists. Later the authorities defeat the terrorist group, and Songphao is declared a hero. He takes Miyawaddi to live with his parents in Bangkok; he tells her that the urban jungle will overtake the other jungle, so she would be better off living with him. An upper-class woman, Wan, is interested in him, but in the end Songphao and Miyawaddi become a couple.

Miyawaddi returns to her forest-village but then does not want to marry any man in the village. Songphao goes after her. "Do you love me, Miyawaddi?" he asks when he finds her. "My father entrusted me to you," she replies. "You know that if a woman is entrusted to someone then she must live with that man" (Thommayanti 2019, 470). The novel says nothing about politics. There is no indication of who or what the terrorists are; all the reader knows is that they are evil. Nor does the novel try to convey anything about social life among the Karen villagers when the story begins.

Miyawaddi is a clearly Burmese name that also had currency among Karen peoples. However, I see no sign in the story that the novelist has paid attention to Karen culture, society, language, or history. Given this lack of familiarity, I think that Thommayanti simply borrowed from Noi's *Long Phrai* series (the radio play or the book version), where a significant female Karen character has this name (Noi 1990, Vol. 1). In contrast to Thommayanti's token nod to interethnic relations, the novels by Sophak, Sifa, and Surachai describe communities and social life among Thailand's Malay Muslims, Hmong, and Lua' peoples with familiarity and interest.

Thommayanti's novel contains an extended slapstick segment about the difficulty of getting Miyawaddi to wash her hair (Thommayanti 2019, 264–280). The maid ultimately showers her by force. To me, this echoes the racist Thai notion that hill people do not like to bathe, that they are filthy savages who need Thai intervention. The ending, in which Songphao and Miyawaddi became a couple because they both honor her

22) Thommayanti was the pen name of Wimon Siriphaibun (1936–2021). She was a prolific writer, the author of over 60 novels and some short story collections. Wimon had strongly right-wing nationalist views and was a minister in the Thanin government (1976–77). She was made National Artist in 2012. Many of her novels were turned into television dramas, and *Jewel of the Deep Forest* was also made into a film.

father's decision rather than being in love with each other, fits a certain Thai perspective on romance and family dynamics. The anthropologist and folklorist Siraporn Nathalang (2000) shows how various folktales and television dramas have been understood differently by members of the Thai audience, depending on how individual people relate to family tension and conflict (e.g., between a father-in-law and son-in-law, a wife and her husband, a woman and her father, and a major wife and minor wife). One implication, she suggests, is that the "process of listening to and interpreting the folktale [or television drama] stabilizes real-life conflict situations in the family" (Siraporn 2000, 22). Most likely, Thommayanti's book has particular resonance for readers who value a young woman for following her father's wishes rather than following her own heart and making her own life decisions. Of the fiction that I have examined here, this is the only novel that concludes with the manifestation of a dutiful daughter.[23)]

Discussion

The Thai writing discussed above shows very clearly a range of simultaneous and alternative indigenous Thai perspectives on society and diversity. In the novels and ethnography that I consulted, one perspective assumes Thai identity as plural, inclusive, and diverse. Another perspective assumes that Thai identity is exclusive and singular, and that ethnic others are inferiors who do not have any claim to belonging in the country. The third perspective assumes plural identities in Thai society, focuses primarily on class divisions, and depicts the insistence on hierarchy and inequality as socially harmful. These three perspectives recur enough times in Thai writing that I view them as credible and meaningful expressions of what Thai people have imagined about their modern identity and society.

The sense of multiethnic Thai belonging is perhaps strongest in the books by Malai (as Riam Eng and Noi Inthanon), Sifa, and Sophak—but this sentiment is clear also in the official announcement by Suphayok-Kasem in 1927. Calling attention to this perspective

23) Herbert Phillips (1987) remarks that Thommayanti's fiction gets framed as politically inconsequential *nam-nao* ("stagnant water") literature by her leftist critics. He suggests that her writing "focuses on the rich inner life of women, not on the outer world of political practice and ideology" (Phillips 1987, 76). In my reading, though, the work is as political as any other. I find the supposed distinction between inner and outer worlds unconvincing. Because women's writing in Thailand often gets bracketed as romance novels of no social or political significance, I insist that there is no commonality between Thommayanti's novel and the two other "women's" novels from Sifa and Sophak. Nothing about the three novels' content would justify classifying them as the same kind of work.

on Thailand's diversity is important, given the apparent academic neglect of the pluralist understanding of society and identity in Thailand and across Southeast Asia more generally (Jonsson 2014; 2022a; 2022b).

The main emphasis of this study has been to substantiate the sense of pervasive and persistent diversity in Thai notions of society and identity. That point, however, relates to a more general issue regarding understandings of culture and society. Western anthropology's ethnographic mode, associated with Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Clifford Geertz, has since the 1930s played up understandings of culture as uniform within an ethnic label (as in "the Balinese," "the Samoans," and the like).[24] Prior to that, the ethnological perspective of Robert Lowie and many others insisted on diversity and individual variation in any society (Bargheer 2017). Lowie (1927; 1948) also showed that any social formation was likely to be based on alternative and contradictory principles. Even the smallest community, he maintained, might rest on the separate principles of territory, kinship, and voluntary associations, which might arrange people in different ways and could also lead to clashes. The ethnological focus was relentlessly comparative, regional, and historical and never took ethnic lines for granted.

The political scientist Kasian Tejapira (2009; 2015) has called attention to a range of modern Thai views on society and government among Thai intellectuals. His analysis of debates concerning government among a rather small group of intellectuals and politicians in relation to economic and political crises during 1997–2014 shows repeated diversity that he sorts into three perspectives: authoritarian, liberal, and communitarian. This diversity of views is similar to the range of perspectives on society that I have found in Thai-language ethnographies and fiction, though it is not the same. These varied perspectives are all equally Thai. Their divergent notions of Thainess are simultaneous, alternative, and at odds.

Thongchai's (1995) study of trends in Thai writings on Thai history suggests an arc that goes from Prince Damrong's royalist nationalism, which celebrated the monarchy and Buddhism as quintessentially Thai, to a Marxist critique of the premodern *sakdina* hierarchy of rank and class, and on to a localist orientation that quietly ignores any focus on Thainess, hierarchy, or the supposed superiority of Bangkok over other parts of the country. My study suggests that a similar range of rival perspectives has long coexisted in Thai discourses and social dynamics rather than being a sequence of steps that is specific to the writing of Thai history. The celebration of hierarchy, the critique of hierarchy, and the emphasis on pluralist belonging that denies categorical distinctions are all equally Thai views that have been simultaneous and at odds.

24) These examples draw on American anthropology; the foundational British anthropology on "the Trobriands," "the Andamans," and "the Nuer" points in precisely the same direction.

The airing of different narratives of history and politics or regarding interethnic relations does not produce an agreement on these matters. As Siraporn found with conflict narratives in Thai folktales and television dramas, people relate to such narratives from different and potentially antagonistic perspectives. Engagement with the stories often reinforces rival notions of identity and diversity and sustains differences that can produce conflict. The studies by these three Thai scholars resonate with Lowie's ethnological perspective: There has never been a single Thai culture or a singular social ideology. Instead, Thai society is built on alternative principles that can be glossed as elitism, anti-elitism, and pluralism, which trigger a range of rival representations and agendas that sometimes coexist without problems and occasionally generate violent conflict.[25)]

Thongchai (2000, 46) argued that the Siamese elite's ethno-spatial project was anchored to the idea of hill people's strangeness (*plaek*, *pralat*). I did not find this idea characteristic of the ethnographic writing for the period that he focused on. However, this idea helped me make initial sense of Noi's *Jungle Trails* and Sifa's *Under the Deep-Blue Sky*. There is no reference at all to strangeness in these works. Without Thongchai's analysis, I might never have made the connection or recognized this as an issue. That, in turn, gave me a perspective on the ethnographic writing by Siri, Bunchuai, and Khajadphai. Each of them emphasized the strangeness of hill peoples. Their works clearly affirm the connection of certain ethnographic writing and racial hierarchy in the Thai project of nation building. This connection appears in certain writings from the democratic period after 1932 but is not so obvious in works from before that time.

The 1932 revolution that ended absolute monarchy in Thailand triggered contestations and suppression related to tensions between democracy and hierarchy/monarchy (Ockey 2002; Thak 2007; Sopranzetti 2018). One result was creative ethnographic reporting that insisted on Thai racial divides, ethnic inequality, and an authoritarian intolerance of diversity. Most of the fiction and some of the nonfiction that I examined, however, counters this racialized view of ethnic inequalities and emphasizes instead plural belonging and the ordinariness of ethnic and other diversity in Thai society. The novels that I discuss in this article manifest a lively, diverse, and sometimes contentious discourse on Thai identity and diversity.

My study of national imagination in Thailand during the twentieth century grew out of the recognition that certain novels about interethnic relations from the 1950s and 1970s contradicted everything I thought I knew about Thai identity. This pushed me

25) Several studies by Richard A. O'Connor (1983; 1995) show the contradictory social principles behind urbanism in Thailand and in Southeast Asia more generally past and present.

toward an interdisciplinary territory where I had no particular expertise. During my research I came to appreciate the ethnological focus of scholars such as Lowie, who was relentlessly comparative, historical, and regional and never assumed that ethnic lines implied coherent societies or predictable politics. Lévi-Strauss's structural approach also offered some guidance, in the suggestion that one must consider all variants of any one narrative or topic in order to understand it. This obviously impossible goal encourages an indiscriminate search for source material.

The research project required an interdisciplinary perspective that combined anthropology, history, literature, politics, and some grounding in social life and the Thai language. The research questions defined the project and contributed to my selection of sources. The combination of romance novels, jungle adventure, leftist social realism, ethnographic reporting, and official documents came about in the process of the research; it was not something I could know beforehand. The study has an Area Studies bias, in terms of both an interdisciplinary focus and an "openness to a variety of nondisciplinary, nonacademic arguments" (Guyer 2004, 501). My disagreement with the findings of Anderson (1985) and Thongchai (2000) regarding fiction, ethnography, politics, and interethnic relations in Thai history is in the spirit of collaboration. Research is an ongoing social enterprise where we learn from one another, including through debate rooted in separate and diverse knowledge of events, sources, and histories (Guyer 2004, 501–502).

Jane Guyer suggests that an Area Studies focus can help reshape disciplinary academic practices and ideas through research encounters when "we are challenged, criticized, shamed, or inspired by 'another' to whom we are absolutely committed to listening" (Guyer 2004, 518). Reading the fiction, ethnography, and other Thai writing has changed my knowledge of interethnic realities and social imaginations in Thailand. Taking the writers and their imagery seriously by examining each individual entity in its particulars and then juxtaposing it to a range of others offered suggestions about how to revise the current academic understanding of Thailand's national imagination in the twentieth century.

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