

Songkran and Chiang Mai Tours: Interfacing Tourism, the State and Local Culture

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Abstract

Using the *Songkran* festival in April 2004 and the Chiang Mai “hill tribe” package tour as case studies, this article puts primacy on the role of the nation-state in the advancement of tourism within its territory. The state acting through its various marketing organizations packages tourism simply as a pleasurable or an exciting getaway from the pressures of everyday life. The state may also use heritage or cultural traditions to evoke a pageantry of color, harmony and unity. Of the three major interactive components of tourism – the tourists, the sights and the local inhabitants – there is the tendency on the part of the state to favor the former; this is rooted in the potential economic benefits that the state expects to gain from tourism. This article also evaluates the responses of the local inhabitants directly or indirectly involved in tourism to gauge their opinions as distinct from the state’s intention.

Keywords: Chiang Mai, cultural traditions, economic benefits, festivals, the state and tourism

Tourism and the State

The first aim of this article is to locate tourism within the economic and, more significantly, within the cultural framework of nation-state building. Thus the fabrication of national culture – a myth-making process – reflects the state’s strategy to impinge its power upon its subjects. Cultural traditions long forgotten are selectively reclaimed, revived or restored to configure a national culture reflective of the state’s – most often the ruling government’s – vision. Festivals, heritage monuments, archeological sites contribute enormously to this state activity; and in this set-up tourism provides a tremendous boost to the state’s myth-making project by appropriating state-sanctioned images evident in numerous marketing campaigns. In short, the economics of tourism

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coincide with the cultural politics of state-building, which is not an unexpected development. With the post-World War II emphasis on tourism as a veritable source of foreign revenues, the state has thus assumed almost full control vis-à-vis the direction of this enterprise. This becomes more apparent in light of present state-sponsored marketing campaigns, such as the barrage of television and print advertisements by the governments of Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. Global cable channels like CNN and BBC every now and then would flash Thailand's 'Amazing Thailand' or, its subsequent 'Unseen Thailand' campaigns. 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' and 'WOW Philippines' images would also be featured on those television channels to represent Malaysia and the Philippines' travel promotions, respectively.

The politics concerning these vigorous media campaigns, which in the case of Thailand is informed by its aspiration to become Asia's tourism hub, necessarily leads to an inquiry into the nature of tourism. Tourism has three major interactive components: the tourists, the sights and the local inhabitants. Analysis reveals that the latter two components are the constant variables. The sights, whether a beach resort, a temple or a trek area, have to be "there" always ready for the tourists' gaze or exploration. The local inhabitants inevitably make their presence felt through active and/or "passive" interaction. The tourists for their part essentially come and go; but they leave behind profound changes in the community's economy and culture.

Since the sustenance of the tourism industry depends on the presence of the tourists, the state and its political subdivisions, such as the local government units like provinces and cities, craft policies aimed at maintaining their influx. Hence, it (the state) resorts to strategically promoting its arts and culture through relentless global media exposure, and in so doing, inevitably or wittingly, constructs a harmonious, homogenized, if not exotic, locale. Therefore, the potential economic benefits which the state will derive from the tourism industry create a tendency to favor the tourists over the two other components. Moreover, this state intervention engenders certain expectations of what possible experiences the tourists may have upon their visits. The local inhabitants (at least those who directly deal with the visitors), on the other hand, often participate in this state representation by predisposing themselves to use their art or craft for the visitor's gaze. As a result, the visited assume expected roles or identities, often stereotypical, or, in Edward Said's (1978) sense, orientalist. In effect, such economic benefits can spawn varying impacts in the social, ecological and cultural fabric of the community and can significantly exert a direct bearing on the formation of identities.

Taking note of the state's role then, this article's other main aim is to address the people's response to such an undertaking. Is tourism merely a top-down matter? How do the local people and/or the private sector carry out such activity within the state's framework? Will the peoples' responses involve "elements of persistence, adjustment,

unconscious assimilation, active resistance, or alternative effort” (Williams 1977)? In other words, even assuming a strong state with regard to the conduct of tourism in a particular locale, there likewise requires an understanding of how the hosts negotiate with such reality in their community. Michel Picard’s views (1993) on Balinese tourism assist this understanding:

Seen in this light, Balinese culture is the product of a *dialogic interaction* between the Balinese people and significant others: not only the tourists, but also the artists and scholars who contributed to composing the touristic image of Bali, not to forget the Dutch officials who endeavored to fashion Balinese society according to their idea of how it should be, and their Indonesian successors who are following their leads...*it entails that instead of asking whether or not Balinese culture has been able to withstand the impact of tourism, it would be better to find out what part tourism has played in the process of shaping Balinese culture* [emphasis provided] (Picard 1993:73).

Using similar arguments, Teo and Li, while acknowledging tourism’s role in globalization, argue that as a dynamic social process it is subject to contestations and contingencies. They state that, “as much as tourism impinges, it is itself impinged upon by individual actors and social groups beyond the overpowering structure of economy” (Teo and Li 2003: 289).

Thus, this article adopts a cautious attitude towards the role of tourism in society. It is in the interest of this study to show how it becomes part of the local reality and how the local people deal with such a reality as it grows in their community. Locating tourism in this way somehow offers a middle ground between the dominant negative attitudes advanced by most scholars and the positive views trumpeted by, say, the state’s tourist managers. Such a position is partly a result of Michel Picard’s studies (1993) of Balinese tourism, which highlight the conflicting interests as articulated by the central state, the provincial leaders, and ‘concerned’ Balinese people.

The 2004 *Songkran* festival in Chiang Mai offers a suitable context within which to illustrate the interrelationship of tourism, state-building and local culture along the perspective advanced by Cohen (1996), Picard (1993) and others. Relying basically on descriptive and case study methods the research project formally commenced in Chiang Mai in January 2004. A month was spent there observing, interacting and participating in the various touristic activities offered by tour operators. The project culminated in participation in the *Songkran* festival in the second week of April 2004. Overall, the research depended upon the selection of particular areas in Chiang Mai: the areas chosen were the old Chiang Mai community and its surrounding environs, including the hill tribe villages. Thus, special consideration was given to those people who dealt with the tourists in varying degrees of association, such as those who were in direct (e.g.

shopkeepers, resort owners, entertainers, “exoticized people”, taxi drivers), intermediate (public officials, police officers, temple keepers, monks) and indirect (members of the larger community) contact with the visitors. Interviews and personal interaction with the groups of people mentioned were conducted, which in some instances needed the assistance of interpreters. Likewise, casual conversations were also conducted with foreign tourists since tourism is presumably an interactive encounter. And most of all, this research relied on a large number of news reports and feature articles as published in the print media, since the Thai media has a keen interest in examining the directions, policies, and programs of the tourism industry.

The *Songkran* Festival in Chiang Mai

In the past, festivals, especially the religious ones, provided occasions for the local people to travel beyond their communities. But often the purpose was dual, if not multiple. Aside from partaking in the ceremonies, the travel was also an opportunity to visit relatives; or, as Hiranburana (2001) points out, the more entrepreneurial ones, “make their journey worthwhile by bringing goods from their own province and on their return, they would take back the local products to sell in their own province” (Hiranburana 2001: 235). In effect, Hiranburana defines these as study visits, when business opportunities or contacts could be sought. And he says, “this is how the Thai restaurants have spread out all over the world.” In short, it is the locals who often initiate the earliest stages of touristic activities, which the state will eventually appropriate through their creative engagement with local festivities.

In Thailand’s case, the prime governmental agency in charge of the marketing campaigns, such as “Amazing Thailand” in the late 1980s and “Unseen Thailand” in 2003, is the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) – a 1979 creation succeeding the 1959 Tourist Organization of Thailand. It is presently mandated to invest in the development of infrastructure, to promote conservation and sustainability, to coordinate with neighboring countries and other functions, but marketing is its most important activity. Thailand’s success in the travel and tourism industry is undoubtedly due to the vigorous marketing efforts of TAT. Not simply content with print and television advertisements or its internet website, the Thai state has allowed TAT to establish overseas offices in New York, Los Angeles and major European cities – Paris, London, Rome, Stockholm – including rich Asia-Pacific countries, notably Japan, Australia and Singapore, in order to promote what Thailand promises to offer (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2002). Thus, for the year 2004 the TAT embarked on a 70 million baht marketing blitz to promote the *Songkran* festival.

Songkran, acknowledged as the most traditional of Thai festivals, is the Thai New

Year celebrated from April 13–15. It involves the use of water as a symbolic gesture of propitiating blessings; it is likewise an auspicious occasion to honor ancestors and ask for blessings from the elderly. But times have changed and, as a foreigner witnessing the event for the first time, the search for the traditional aspect of this festival required diligent efforts. For those who have not witnessed this event their access is mostly via the advertisements provided by TAT as published in the print media, both local and international. (Witness my Filipino friend who sent me an email stating that she had seen the *Songkran* being promoted in *Time* magazine, and that I now had the chance to see it.) However, the event has been transformed into a water splashing contest; just like other purportedly sacred festivities, a more secular emphasis has gained popular support, prompting the elderly to remind the young ones most especially of the *Songkran* etiquette—you should pour not splash below the shoulders, and for the males, avoid applying powder to girls' faces and bodies and so on. The media raised two issues about this festival. The first issue was driving safety: the media constantly reminded the public to be especially cautious while driving out of town as this Thai event has the second highest toll for road deaths and accidents—840 dead in 2003. The second issue related to the need for prudence in the use of water because of drought and water shortages, which Thailand was experiencing in April 2004.

The purpose of the preceding discussion is to foreground how tourism via marketing deliberately excludes other essential information in order to construct a seamless product. In fact, days before the *Songkran*, there was even a call for the wearing of helmets, and a proposed ban on the sale of talcum powder because it has been used as an excuse make sexual advances towards women. But after Picard's view on tourism as a dialogic interaction between the local people and other forces, the event proceeded with two divergent types of celebration: the state-sponsored 'formal' way and the more popular and spontaneous water-splashing kind. For the former, men and women, mostly local government workers wearing their traditional garb and musicians playing indigenous music, joined the grand parade; while in the latter, it was generally the Chiang Mai youth, with their carefree ways, who went out on the streets. Few heeded the warnings of the government. One declared, "I don't care if police arrest me for not wearing a helmet. The measure doesn't make sense and I won't follow it" (*Bangkok Post* 2004a). This could be interpreted either as the degeneration of an otherwise solemn occasion, or the reclaiming or negotiating of the event by certain groups, like the youth, in order to assert their identity. However, the editorial of *Bangkok Post* offered little explanation:

It is a stark juxtaposition between the traditional and the modern, between solemn ceremony and festive madness. There are proponents and detractors for both aspects of *Songkran*. But for most, they are two sides of one coin, a reflection of

complexities that comprise Thai society and culture (*Bangkok Post* 2004b).

Moreover, the 2004 TAT-sponsored *Songkran* bore the marketing title “The Grand *Lanna* Civilization *Songkran* Festival” (Tourism Authority Thailand 2004). TAT was ‘selling’ *Lanna*; but what is this concept’s position in the overall character of Thai culture?

Lanna – one million rice fields – historically refers to the old kingdom which King Mengrai formed, comprising the present-day provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiangrai, Lampang, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Phayao, Phrae and Nan. In 1296 King Mengrai declared Chiang Mai the capital and thus cemented its pre-eminent status as the major city of the upper north, centuries before the formal annexation of the *Lanna* kingdom into the kingdom of Siam in the early 1900s. Tourist brochures and literature extol the uniqueness and peculiarities of *Lanna* particularly in Chiang Mai. For instance, “Chiang Mai has its own customs, art and culture, and traditions, which are elegant and graceful. The northern language is very melodious as well. These are the unique factors that have led tourists to designate Chiang Mai as ‘the beautiful rose of *Lanna*’ (Danai 2003: 48).

This gives the impression that all is well there, culturally speaking, belying the fact that for instance the *Lanna* script language is in danger of becoming extinct (Trakullertsathien 2004). Moreover, actual visits show that the city of Chiang Mai and its environs, even if definitely less congested than Bangkok, are totally urbanized. Luxurious hotels, famous department stores, restaurants offering international cuisines, shopping sites and the like abound, and many more developments are expected since it is being groomed as an aviation hub in the North. Where, then, is the *Lanna* as promoted by TAT? Or is this a nativist attempt to look for the essential core of ‘*Lanna-ness*’? In Chiang Mai, the nostalgia for this *Lanna-ness* is evident in tourist spaces, such as the eatery within the night bazaar; or, more formally, at the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center where the tourists, basically clients of the tour agencies, are given a sample of the old *Lanna* way, such as “Authentic Northern Thai Dances” as written in the brochure, while eating the *khantoke* way – a particular *Lanna* dining practice.

Although undoubtedly this is, from the perspective of the tourist, a learning experience, what become problematic are claims or projections of authenticity. In other words, the center is where one must go to experience the “real *Lanna*,” forgetting that such a culture inheres primarily among the people themselves in, for instance, how they live their lives. Again Picard’s (1993) view is appropriated here in laying down a perspective on tourism in these situations:

for some, tourism has helped preserve the cultural heritage of Bali, while others accuse tourism of debasing Balinese culture, by turning it into a commercial commodity. Faced with these contradictory statements, one suspects the question

they seek to answer is misleading. Indeed, the mere fact of talking about the ‘impact’ of tourism entails something of a ballistic vision, which amounts to perceiving the host society as a target hit by a missile, that is, like a static object, inertly subjected to exogenous factors of change ... Such an approach is mistaken on at least two grounds. On the one hand, *it deals with tourism as if it were an agent external to the society under consideration, instead of trying to understand how it becomes part of the local reality. On the other hand, it deprives the local people from having anything to say and do about tourism, as if they were but passive recipients of some wholesale package decided and manipulated outright by the multinational firms which control the tourist industry in connection with the central state* [emphasis added] (Picard 1993: 72).

Indeed, as nation-states integrate tourism and other economic strategies into their strategic developmental planning, the culture of certain communities is definitely changed as infrastructures are built; or foreign investments are encouraged; or tourists are allowed to enter. The cultural practices of the people thus undergo transformation since, as understood, culture is a dynamic process. But in the tourism management practice – as conducted not just by TAT, but almost all marketing agencies – the traditional, the exotic, and the essential are promoted in order to project an unchanging locale. Thus, while below I deal with more informed ways of experiencing the Chiang Mai/Lanna culture, the foregoing is designed to deal with the issue of authenticity, which has attracted a number of anthropologists and sociologists to ponder on this aspect of travel.

In Search for the “Authentic,” the “Other,” and the “Exotic”

Arguably, the popularity of Thai cuisine or massage all over the world precedes an actual visit. In effect, cooking or eating Thai food outside Thailand can be treated as experiencing a mere imitation, and only by actual visits to Thailand can one experience the real and authentic. What then is the role of ‘authenticity’ in tourism? MacCannell (1989), who is known for his groundbreaking work entitled “The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class”, proceeds from the presumption that modern individuals suffer fractured identities, and as tourists they seek structures of wholeness presumably absent in everyday experience: this condition leads them to search for the “Other” – that which is the more authentic, the more structured kind totally different from everyday life (Selwyn 1996: 3). Hence the hosts, in order to provide these tourists with that unspoiled feeling, endeavor to establish tourist spaces where the stage for authenticity can be constructed. Extending this view it can apply to a particular area that has been transformed because certain locales have to be constructed, physically and figuratively

speaking, for the tourists' gaze. Examples include the creation of a tribal village complete with women weavers wearing their traditional costumes, or the displacement of a fishing village in order to give way to the construction of a luxurious hotel.

But the view of MacCannell has not escaped criticism from Cohen (1996). He argues that when tourists embark on a trip they have multiple objectives and, in relation to MacCannell's view, the search for authenticity may not even be one of them. As one writer studying Cohen states, "it is simply not convincing to see all tourists as seekers after mythological structures and implies that the 'recreational' sort of tourist is more or less happy with just building sand castles or getting laid" (Selwyn 1996: 3). Cohen thus strongly emphasizes the methodological support of empirical evidence in tourism studies. His enumeration of different motives in travel, giving way to the classification of various kinds of tourists, forms part of his contribution to the discourse of tourism. Hence, following on from Cohen and MacCannell, the concept of authenticity – the Other – is extended here in order to mean the 'exotic', taking into consideration field studies conducted in Chiang Mai. In fact the foregoing discussion validates the use of authenticity, but how authenticity has been negotiated in the context of Thai tourism is examined.

This discussion may lead to certain insights: if you are a Briton touring Rome and Florence, then later you proceed to China or India, which places would you characterize as 'exotic'? Indeed, such a description has been primarily reserved for Asian countries – the so-called 'mysterious East' or the 'Orient'. There is a long history behind this, most notably a consequence of colonialism, which Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) has succinctly explained. On the opening page he says "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, remarkable experiences" (Said 1978: 1). However, while, in the past, discourses on colonialist expansion supported the conception and propagation of the 'Orient', the growth of international tourism, especially in Asia, has further engendered the myths and images associated with the 'Orient.' And more significantly, it is the nation-states' marketing institutions that have now become the active producer of these myths. Tourism thus perpetuates orientalism. An example is TAT's 'Unseen Thailand' campaign:

There are, indeed, still parts of Thailand that are yet to be discovered. Welcome to exotic places and experiences that need to be explored. Unseen Thailand is a brand new way of enjoying the unique charms and culture of the kingdom. (*Bangkok Post* 2004c)

Cohen also noted that TAT years back capitalized deliberately on this concept to

promote Thailand, such as the slogan “Thailand – the Most Exotic Country in Asia”, or the more direct “Exotic Thailand” (Cohen 1996: 2). From the industry’s standpoint, exotification is a good enticement to tourists who want to taste something extraordinary, especially Westerners. Casual conversations with tourists like Hendrik, a 20-year-old Danish backpacker, verified this. When asked why he chose to visit Asia, aside from it being cheap, he said that it was not because it was cheap but because Asia represents ‘adventure.’ This representation of Asia has been fueled by the state’s capacity to either re-negotiate cultural differences through an official or authorized culture or by relegating certain ‘local cultures’ to the status of ‘curiosities’ via exotification (Birch et al. 2001: 59). An observer maintains that this is once again aimed at privileging the Caucasian tourists’ gaze. He writes:

When tourists travel to the Third World, it is not images of modern cities, industrialization ... they want to take away with them. Those fleeing the structures and hierarchies of modern life for a few weeks in the world of the Other want to see the exotic, the strange, the dangerous and the picturesque – all from a safe distance (Cooper 1994).

Thus, the problem with the exotic projection is its capacity to misrepresent or undervalue the culture because only half-truths are offered. In one newspaper editorial entitled “More to Thailand than Meets the Eye” there was a call for a more honest and realistic projection of the Thai culture. It said:

The question is how Thailand can bring in more tourists *without undermining its own natural and cultural charms* ...The government has to make sure that *a more sustainable way to promote tourism* is not about short-changing Thai culture or pretending someone we are not [emphasis provided] (*The Nation* 2004).

Thus, the following exposition, gathered during field visits in Chiang Mai, shows how certain practices or local responses either undermine or advance Thailand’s ‘charms.’

Touristic Practices in Chiang Mai

One main feature of Chiang Mai tourism is the dominating presence and influence of the tour operators in how they conduct tourism within the city and the surrounding areas. The most popular of the tours, as stated above, are the ones involving visits to the hill tribe areas, such as those of the Akha, Karen, Lahu, Hmongs; some of these groups have been displaced by the ongoing strife in Myanmar and thus have acquired a refugee status in the north of Thailand. They live in scattered areas within Chiang Mai and the

neighboring provinces of Chiang Rai or Mae Hong Son. Erik Cohen (1996) includes a lengthy discussion of this so-called hill tribe tourism which he classified into two types: tribal village tours and jungle tours. The former, conducted by travel agencies as part of their package tours, is further differentiated as either a one-day tour or an excursion tour (Cohen 1996: 69). These trips became a reality when some of these groups settled near Chiang Mai city. The latter type, the precursor of the village tour, is aimed at Caucasian tourists looking for a more thrilling adventure since it requires a two-day trek to more remote hill tribe villages. Cohen relates the attraction of this kind of tourism to the young and adventurous via an advertisement of a “Jungle Tour” that he chanced upon. He quotes it, and he shares his views. Cohen writes:

“Tired of the cities? Looking for a change? We know (that) many tourists are bored with city life and have been looking for new places with something new to offer them.” The hill tribes are said to embody that novelty. They are “untouched by civilization,” “remote and unspoilt,” ... This image particularly appeals to the younger tourist, in search of authentic experiences or desirous of experimentation with alternative, contrasting ways of life. Such travelers seek first and foremost the unspoilt and authentic tribal life; and they are easily put off if an element of civilization, such as a plastic cup, has found its way into a remote village. Their attitude is epitomized in the statement of a young drifter, who claimed that the motive for his visit to the tribes was to reassure himself that such a way of life still really exists. Not all jungle tourists, however, are necessarily concerned with the authentic and unspoilt. For those seeking mere recreation and diversion, the thrill and amusement offered by the colorfulness and quaintness of some tribes may be the main attraction. ... the motives may well account for the different kinds of tours taken (Cohen 1996: 68).

To experience this kind of touristic practice, I joined a group package for a day trip. The package was not entirely devoted to the hill tribes; it started with a stopover at an orchid garden next to a cave where Buddha images were located and, finally, the main highlight of the tour, a trip to a hill tribe village. As in any other tour package, a guide was assigned to lead the tourists. Upon entering this particular village, which was occupied by five different tribes, the guide led us to the entrance of first tribe’s abode, in which the tribe’s wares were displayed. In this shack, the tribe’s representatives, mostly women wearing their distinctive attire, were performing certain activities, such as weaving, caring for a child, sewing or simply gesturing to the tourists to buy their wares. All this time the guide talked about the tribe’s name and origin, gave remarks on any unusual element found in its attire, or tried to catch the tourists’ attention by pointing to a pierced ear lobe or colored teeth of a particular tribal member. Then, after a few minutes, the guide would motion us to move toward the next tribe.

The tribe that caught the most attention was the Karen, who according to the guide is of two types: female Karens, whose necks are free of brass rings, and the ‘long-necked Karen.’ The latter are the ones found within this village; they are called this because of the ten to twelve brass rings coiled around their neck. By covering the necks with these rings, the necks are stretched and they thus look more elongated than usual, making their appearance stand out from the rest of the tribes. Tourists, for their part, moved around, bought handcrafted items, posed with the tribes, or simply took pictures.

It is, therefore, important to note some salient features of this hill tribe tourism, specifically relating to its conduct, and the corresponding consequences as expressed in Cohen’s book and my field observation conducted for this research. First, the hill tribes themselves are not directly involved in the tourists’ visits to their village. Most of them are refugees and without a legitimate source of income; this situation provides an opportunity for tour operators to open their homes to Caucasian tourists looking for adventure. Such a practice easily becomes an occasion for exploitation, and interviews showed that this view was shared by academics and observers alike. Vorapong Muchaotai, president of the Northern Chapter of the Thai Hotels Association, in a published interview acknowledged such an unfavorable situation when he said that, “hill tribes have always been exploited by tour operators or left to their own devices” (Citylife 2003: 12). The tour package in which I participated cost nine hundred baht (B900) to cover the expenses of transportation, entrance fees, and lunch, whereas the amount given to the hill tribe village, as entrance fee, was only twenty baht per tourist. This was a measly sum considering that the main highlight of that tour was the visit to the tribe village.

The second feature of hill tribe tourism deals with promotion. Since the hill tribes are not in any way directly involved in tourism planning, their image is accessed via the ubiquity of advertisements posted in the offices of the tour companies found in the city of Chiang Mai. And this is where the role of the state through TAT comes in. Each of these operators needs to secure a license from the TAT, as evidenced by the signage placed outside the agency’s office stating, “T.A.T. License Number XXX”. The license indicates the operator’s capacity to render touring services for a fee, such as day-tours or treks to hill tribes. While it is never advanced here that hill tribe tourism is a blatantly wrong tourism practice, the fact that TAT issues licenses to tour operators implies that regulation must also exist. If that is the case, the current practice gives the impression that TAT gives its tacit approval to this kind of exploitative practice.

The third feature, similar to the image-making aspect, emphasizes the tribes’ cultural traits as being distinctively different from that of Western modern civilization, or from the dominant Thais in Chiang Mai or elsewhere. As part of the tourism practice of devising novel products, such image-making is crucial in marketing these tribes to

Caucasian tourists, especially the young ones, who have been Thailand's main market since the 1980s. However, in emphasizing the tribes' differences, especially their peculiarities, the meeting between the hill tribes and tourists becomes a one-dimensional affair. The emphasis on the tribes' differences hinders the possibility of a meaningful encounter between them because the romanticized and essentialist projection of the hill tribes – largely due to travel agencies' demand and influence – misrepresents their identity. Even if there are “various possible readings of the same heritage” (Urry 1997: 13) the tourists' visits to these areas, especially the ‘village’ where the ‘long neck’ Karen group dwells, serve to validate the orientalist's notions of the exoticism and strangeness of the ‘East.’

Another noteworthy feature of hill tribe tourism from a cultural studies standpoint, is the role of the assigned guide. At least based on my experience, the guide conducted her tour as if she was inside a zoo or in an anthropological museum. The hill tribes, wearing their native costumes, are there merely to project their strangeness or to passively pose for the tourists' gaze or camera. It appears that the hill tribes' identity is made visible only in this staged presentation, and the guide exerts considerable influence in making this possible. Furthermore, this gave her tremendous authority in the generation of information and the meaning of this encounter. Tour guides, in effect, assume the task of cultural workers, and it is this, an unexamined aspect of hill tribe tourism, that is highly significant in identity formation. Tour guides, together with tour operators, thus play a precarious role in shaping what tourists should see, feel, or expect. However, this does not preclude some members of various tribes implementing what they believe to be responsible tourism.

In a newspaper account a Karen woman named Wilawan traveled to Whistler, British Columbia, in Canada to represent her group in the National Gathering on Aboriginal Cultures and Tourism. Her group has an ongoing project called Responsible Ecological Social Tours (REST) which pursues cultural tourism as conducted in her village of Huay Hee, a remote mountain settlement near Mae Hong Son (*The Nation*). This REST project emphasizes active engagement between tourists and hosts, through activities such as farming and weaving that promote knowledge of the Karen's culture. This emerging response on the part of some minority groups to themselves actively engage in cultural tourism, rather than be subject to the usual involvement of tour handlers, reflects a new dimension in the conduct of hill tribe tourism in the north of Thailand. This markedly contrasts with the wishes of some tour operators. Again, Vorapong Muchaotai has this vision in connection with the development and management of hill tribe tourism:

some villages (are) becoming so modern that there are few traces left of their cultural heritage while others are nothing more than squalid hovels. If we developed entire villages for the sole purpose of tourism, encourage and support them to wear traditional dress, open restaurants, gift shops, and provide easy access, the tribes will feel proud of their heritage, make some decent money, as well as help contribute to the province's attractions (Citylife 2003: 12).

Vorapong may reflect deep concern for the hill tribes' condition, but the majority of the tour operators' stance inevitably reflects the top-down policy relative to the conduct of this controversial component of Chiang Mai or northern tourism. In other words, do the hill tribes aspire to all of those propositions he recommended? In Wilawan's case it appears that she advances a kind of tourism that offers deeper cultural experience. She says:

In our village there is no museum. But if travelers want to experience our culture and way of life, they can visit any villager's home. They can farm with us in the forest... We weave our own cloth and stitch our own clothes (Suansri 2004: 3C).

Thus, in the same editorial piece earlier cited, the article similarly advocates what Wilawan and her people have so far initiated. It says:

To encourage a better image for Thailand is a long-term engagement. The idea is to allow visitors to interact directly with a wider range of people to allow them to immerse more deeply in their appreciation and understanding of Thai culture and way of life. Greater opportunity for people-people contacts is not only good for the tourism business. It is the better and more equitable way for cultural exchange between visitors and local people (*The Nation*).

Summary and Conclusions

Following such views, it is worth mentioning that certain touristic developments – among a few tour handlers in Chiang Mai – indicate a more favorable opportunity for 'deeper' cultural interaction. In the Mae Rim district of Chiang Mai a couple, Anong and Chaleo Nilmuang, offer a homestay program (Jariyasombat 2004: 2). This practice may have originated in the West, but it nevertheless envisions a more favorable touristic encounter. Like the Karen woman, Wilawan, the couple envisioned a program that heightens cultural awareness. This includes passing through rice fields to make merit at the temple, making clay sculptures, exploring the morning market, and learning how to cook Thai dishes. The couple is quite selective in choosing guests, who are given free accommodation. So to determine the 'lucky' guest, Mrs. Nilmuang says that "I first ask

why they are interested in staying with us in the first place and if they satisfy us with their answer only then we will provide them with a room,” and she clarifies then that, “guests who are fussy and want to be pampered may just not fill the bill any more” (Jariyasombat 2004: 2).

Moreover, while homestay programs may eventually evolve into a major touristic practice in Chiang Mai, there are cultural activities that have already gained the tourists’ favor; these include learning how to cook Thai dishes in cooking schools, enrolling in a Thai massage center, practicing meditation techniques with a Buddhist monk, and learning the Thai language. Of these it was seen – during the field visits, interviews, and surveys conducted among foreign tourists – that going to a Thai cooking school rated the highest interest. The reason for its popularity is linked to the average number of days tourists spend in Chiang Mai. Unlike enrollment in massage centers which requires at least ten days to get a certificate, cooking schools, mostly established in the 1990s, offer a day’s lesson (at least seven hours) that is more convenient to most tourists’ schedules.

The brochure of Baan Thai Cookery School states “Baan Thai offers its customers the opportunity to learn how to cook real Thai food in a traditional Thai home-style setting, with skilled and friendly teachers who can impart the secrets of Thai cooking to you in a fun atmosphere.” For example, one course for seven hundred baht (B700) runs between 9:40 in the morning and 4:00 in the afternoon, and activities include a market tour, cooking sticky rice, and learning how to cook the following dishes: Thai style fried noodles, hot and sour prawn soup, green curry paste, green curry with fish balls, savory minced salad and water chestnuts in coconut milk. But why have these ‘diversions’ become part of the tourists’ repertoire of activities?

There is no doubt that the impact of travel guides, such as *Lonely Planet*, which almost every Caucasian visitor zealously clings to, have a tremendous influence on the tourists’ participation in these activities, particularly cooking. If suggestions are not written in the guidebook, some billboards in the old Chiang Mai area carry the sign, “Recommended by *Lonely Planet*.” However, attributing it simply to the travel books’ influence portrays tourists as an unthinking lot. Urry (1995) offers a more informed judgment through his characterization of the post-Fordist consumption and its relation to tourism. He maintains that in this phenomenon there is a veering away from ‘functional’ consumption in favor of the more aestheticised kind. Thus, in relation to tourism, there is the “de-differentiation of tourism from leisure, culture, retailing, education, sport, hobbies” (Urry 1995: 151). A more concrete interpretation of that view can also be found in Urry’s chapter on “Tourism, Europe and Identity”. He stated there that international tourism has spawned two major effects.

The first indicates how tourism has paved the way for familiarization or normalization of places formerly perceived with danger, similar to the routinization

theme cited earlier. This then provides tourists, especially the backpackers, with the courage to travel to Asia or elsewhere for a much longer duration. My conversations with tourists in Thailand indicated that they use Bangkok as a drop-off point in order to visit parts of Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam. The second effect, and this is the one appropriated here as a possible explanation for why tourists have become more culturally engaging, is the inclination, especially in the 1990s, towards cosmopolitanism. Urry extends this by specifically identifying it as a predilection for an aesthetic cosmopolitanism (Urry 1995: 167). Accordingly, it involves:

1. Extensive patterns of real and simulated mobility in which it is thought that one has the right to travel anywhere and to consume, at least initially, all environments.
2. A curiosity about all places, peoples and cultures and at least a rudimentary ability to map such places and cultures historically, geographically and anthropologically.
3. An openness to other peoples and cultures and a willingness/ability to appreciate some elements of the language/culture of the place that one is visiting (Urry 1995: 167).

Thus it is this phenomenon of ‘openness’ among tourists to engage with other cultures that is transforming the nature of contemporary international tourism.

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