What does it mean to be Prai? Competing definitions of identity

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Abstract

This article examines contrasting views of ethnic identity for the Prai – an Austroasiatic ethnic minority group living in Nan Province, Thailand. Collins and Blot's (2003) theory of "given" and "formed" identities is used to contrast the Thai written presentation of the Prai (given) with the Prai oral presentation of their own ethnic identity (formed). Thai written descriptions of Prai ethnic identity are presented in contrast to Prai descriptions of their own identity. Three traditional Prai folk stories are used to show how they depict their own cultural values. Research methods include document collection of written texts and the translation of previously unpublished oral folk stories. An analysis of findings reveals that the Prai have been negatively positioned as people without Buddhist merit, slow to change, or resistant to progress. In contrast, the Prai are aware of this positioning and flip the narrative to highlight their spiritual merit, communal strength, and exceptional use of forest resources among other intrinsic Prai cultural values. Such a contrast of identity narratives for the Prai has never been made in academic research and looking to the future necessitates exploring these contradictions about what it means to be "Prai."

Keywords: Prai, ethnic identity, minority language, Thailand

Introduction

This paper examines contrasting views of ethnic identity for the Prai of Nan Province, Thailand. The Prai are an Austroasiatic ethnic minority group living in Thailand and Laos. More specifically, this study uses Collins and Blot's (2003) theory of "given" and "formed" identities to contrast the Thai written presentation of the Prai (given) with the Prai oral presentation of their own ethnic identity (formed). Thai written descriptions of Prai ethnic identity are presented in stark contrast to Prai oral descriptions of Prai ethnic identity found in folk stories. A contrast of identity narratives has not previously been explored in academic research of Northern Thailand and is necessary to highlight several important differences relevant to Prai ethnic identity. This research is essential for understanding the wider context for ethnic minorities in Northern Thailand and draws attention to the objectification of culture in lieu of intangible markers of identity.

Background

The Prai are an ethnic minority group living in Nan Province, Thailand and Sayaboury Province, Laos. More specifically, the Prai live in five districts of Nan Province: Bo Kluea, Pua, Chiang Klang, Thung Chang, and Chalerm Phra Kiat. They speak an Austroasiatic

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language, also called Prai. The Ethnologue classifies the Prai as follows: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Khmuic, Mal-Khmu', Mal-Phrai. The Prai in Thailand have an estimated population of 20,000 and the Prai in Laos have a population of 28,700 according to a 2015 census (Eberhard et al., 2023).

There are many alternate names for the Prai people and language, of which the most prevalent is the term "Lua'." However, this designation has been used to reference at least five languages and people in Northern Thailand including: Prai and Mal in Nan Province; Bisu in Chiang Rai Province; and Eastern and Western Lawa in Chiang Mai Province where "Lua" is considered a pejorative name (Eberhard et al., 2023). Prai, Mal, Eastern Lawa, and Western Lawa are all Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer languages; however, Bisu is classified as a Sino-Tibetan language. Finally, Mitani (1965) notes that the name "Lua" is also used to reference a Mon-Khmer language speaking group in Laos called the Rmeet.[3]

There is general debate among historians concerning the history of the Prai people. Filbeck (1978, p. 8) writes about the Prai using the alternate name "T'in" (a term not used by the Prai, and now considered pejorative), "The T'in were the original inhabitants of this area." He argues that they immigrated from north of Nan Province to their current location before the Thai. Filbeck backs this claim by highlighting the absence of linguistically similar languages south of Nan Province. Other linguistic information has led researchers to believe that the T'in were the first inhabitants of Laos and Thailand, Even the name "T'in" actually means "inhabitant or native" (Filbeck, 1978, p. 8). Jonsson (2005) writes that the term "Thin" is possibly derived from *chao thin*, "local people," implying a low-status rural population. Schliesinger (2000) agrees with Filbeck (1978) that the T'in may have been the original inhabitants of the northeast of Nan Province, but he adds that they later moved to Laos before returning to Thailand following widespread conflict in the 1970's.

The timeline for Prai emigration into Nan Province is unclear. According to Lebar et al. (1964) the "T'in" moved to their current location between 1884 and 1924. William Dessaint (1973; 1981) claims that the Mal (also referred to as Lua' or T'in) emigrated from Laos to Nan Province around 1876 and since then have emigrated back and forth across the Thai-Lao border. The Hilltribe Welfare Department of the Ministry of Interior writes that, "the Thin hilltribe immigrated into Thailand less than one hundred years ago, along the headwaters of the Nan River" (Sarani, 1980 as cited in Satyawadhna, 1991).

Theoretical Approach

Identity has become a substantial field of research in a range of disciplines including anthropological scholarship, which highlights social negotiation involved in identity construction. In fact, many theories of ethnicity acknowledge the roles of both self-identification and the perception and attitudes of outsiders (Fought, 2006; Fried 1975:i). In other words, features used to recurrently form identity are self-selected as well as imposed by others. For this study, the term "identity" refers to groups rather than individuals. Eberhard (2018: 29) clarifies the notion that group identity is constructed by many individual acts.

> Any claim of group identity is thus supported by certain acts of identity which are shared by the group, and these can be as varied as language, accent,

[3] The name Lua' when referring to the Prai ends with a glottal stop as marked by the apostrophe. The apostrophe does not appear in the name Lua when listed as an alternate name for other languages.

life-style, occupation, ceremonies, social networks, values, shared heritage, and any other behaviors and or beliefs which distinguish the group.

Using this approach, elements of identity are "given" and "formed" as theorized by the literacy theorists Collins and Blot (2003). Multiple identities are continually constructed as part of ongoing social negotiation. "Given" identity refers to the understanding of one's position allotted from outside discourses. This can be understood using Gee's (1996) definition of "discourse," which is referred to as an "identity kit" that is historically and socially defined. Gee (1996: 66) writes, "Discourses speak to each other through individuals."

"Formed" identity refers to the agency the Prai have to form their own identity in face of the Thai who are coming from a more dominant discourse and have agency to give identity to the Prai. Similarly, the Prai internalize some aspects of given identity when forming their own identity (Diller, 2008; Jordan-Diller, 2008). The Prai continue to construct authentic Prai identities through their adaptation for survival in a modern world. In summary, identities are not only given but also formed from within. They are imposed as well as chosen.

Conklin and Graham (1995) make the claim that essentialized notions of ethnic identity are created when definitions of culture are contested between a dominant and minority culture. The dominant culture looks for and prioritizes visible markers of identity. In contrast, there is little recognition or value for internal constructs of identity from within the minority culture. Furthermore, increased contact with outsiders can cause members of the minority culture to internalize external identities. As a result, members of the minority culture begin to objectify their own culture and validate these selected ethnic identity markers to outsiders.

Objectives

Using the framework of "given" and "formed" ethnic group identity, this study compares and contrasts both narratives from the Thai and Prai respectively. More specifically, the following research questions are investigated:

1. What is the Thai view of Prai ethnic identity as presented in written texts?

2. How do the Prai present their own ethnic identity through oral folk tales?

A discernment of both research questions will provide the unique opportunity to contrast differences and similarities for Prai ethnic identity. Finally, this will lead to a better understanding of the circumstances for defining ethnic identities for the many ethnic minorities living in Thailand.

Methodology

In this study, it was important to gather source texts that highlight narratives relevant to Prai ethnic identity originating from both Thai and Prai ethnic groups. Written documents in Thai were collected, photographed, or photocopied as permitted. Thai texts were researched over a span of ten years: 2013-2023. It should be noted that only three Thai texts were used in this paper's analysis:

- A display promoting cultural tourism in Nan Province

- An educational document for teaching about Thung Chang district, Nan Province

- An exhibit label titled “Thins” from the Nan Historical Museum, Nan Province

A specific source of interest includes Prai oral folk stories that were collected and recorded in Prai by linguist David Jordan in 1980. The collection of folk stories remains as an unpublished manuscript. The folk stories presented in this study are presented for the first time in an academic setting. It should be noted that only three folk stories were used in this paper’s analysis. (Titles are added for purposes of identification and organization.)

- Origin story; Folk story #1
- Snail story; Folk story #2
- Ngo river spirit story; Folk story #3

For this study, Prai oral folk tales were freely translated into English for ease of access and analysis. Translation from Prai to English was completed by David Jordan and Kari Jordan-Diller in 2023.

Document analysis enabled the authors to gather, analyze, and interpret meanings in a way that was culturally appropriate and showed concern for the social context of the Thai and Prai. Text collection and observation were the primary methods of data collection.

It should be noted that between 2020 and 2021, Covid-19 restrictions limited contact with the Prai. However, since that time the authors’ return to Nan Province for research has been welcomed by the Prai. In sum, the methodology of text collection has allowed unique access to the Prai and a means to research their folk stories and with it the inherent presentation of Prai ethnic identity.

Findings

Situating minority groups in Nan Province, Thailand

In order to understand Prai identity, it is important to situate them within the larger given identity of highland ethnic minority peoples. Highland ethnic minority peoples in Thailand are traditionally perceived as an ecological threat through deforestation, an economic threat, a social threat, and even a political threat (Jonsson, 2003). The Thai do not have a history of colonization like other countries in Southeast Asia and this may contribute to the considerable in-class bias in Thai society toward ethnic minorities (Jonsson, 2005). Highland ethnic minority peoples (i.e., Prai, Mien, Hmong, Mlabri) have often been viewed as a threat in Thai society (Jonsson, 2003).

Their identity in the public sphere has been that of uneducated non-nationals who have illegally entered the nation’s terrain and whose agricultural practices, political leanings, and ethnic cultures are somewhere between being obstacles to progress and a deliberate threat to national well-being (Jonsson, 2004: 677).[4]

[4] The view that their agricultural practices are deleterious is particularly undeserved. Traditional shifting cultivation systems typically have a low impact on the biophysical environment. Erosion becomes a problem when increased population density (often from the influx of settlers) shortens the fallow period. See Fraiser (2007:30-31), Sanchez (1976:379), and Sajise (1991).

Until the 1980's highland ethnic minority peoples were viewed as backwards, which was a given identity viewed as "equally rooted in their culture and ethnic identity" (Jonsson 2004: 674). To overcome such backwardness and hindrance to national progress, highlanders had to become more "Thai."[5] At best, the Thai regarded ethnic minorities as "Thai-in-waiting" (Jonsson, 2003). Hayami (2006) notes that for most of the twentieth century Thai authorities approached culture, custom, and identity differences with the goal to assimilate. The solution to the highlander problem was found in either assimilation or expulsion.

Research has documented changes in policies related to ethnic minorities, which impact identity politics (Wannakit, 2018). For example, in recent years, ethnic minority cultural practices have been more accepted by the Thai, but revolve around the Thai nation as modern and progressive. Despite recent acceptance of selected cultural practices, the stigma remains that ethnic minority peoples are of the past as visible in museums, television documentaries, and books (Jonsson, 2004: 685).

However, an increased recognition of cultural diversity in Thailand does not simply mean that ethnic minorities have gained an opportunity for self-representation. Ethnic minority culture becomes a resource to capitalize on in order to strategically commercialize their differences (Hayami, 2006). Wannakit (2018: 67) refers to this as the "commoditization of culture" and adds that communities have had to adapt their traditions to appease tourists.

> Tales and local myths have become cultural capital that can be applied to create the identity of the province and used to promote cultural tourism among tourists from Thailand and other countries.[6] (Wannakit, 2018: 67)

Given a venue, ethnic minorities can take up a name given to them or form a name for themselves, where they are able to construct part of their identity not as "mere objects of others' representations and narrative" (Hayami, 2006: 289). It is true that by taking up the standardization of culture imposed on them, they are able to negotiate certain rights (Yos, 2004, as cited in Hayami, 2006). An example is found with the Karen, who have successfully formed an identity as "indigenous peoples" to negotiate space for claiming rights to land and resources (Hayami, 2006).

> Local culture can thus be standardized and appropriated through emphasis on performance and display, a misrecognition of culture as an object, which will allow the institutionalization of cultures. (Hayami, 2006: 289)

However, a real danger comes with misrecognizing culture as object and as something that can be standardized. Hayami goes on to explain the effect of standardizing cultural aspects of ethnic minority peoples. Thus, state power attempts to make use of the cultures of the marginalized by standardizing them, depoliticizing them and dressing them up, and making a display of them just as had been done to the Thai earlier in the twentieth century (Hayami, 2006: 291).

In conclusion, ethnic minorities in Thailand have traditionally experienced negative social positioning from the Thai. Historically, they have been viewed as a threat or as "Thai-

[5] It should be noted that this attitude of dominant culture to minority culture is quite common, as evidenced in the US, for example, by the attitude that has been taken toward the Navajo (McCarty 2002).

[6] This has also happened with the culture of the more dominant Northern Thai (Kon Mueang). Kemasingki (2022) relates that the *khan tok* of Northern Thailand was originally a meal taken alone by a high-status person, but has been transformed into a tourism spectacle for groups.

in-waiting." Research has documented recent changes in Thailand regarding minority ethnic identity negotiation. However, recognition of diversity has not led to the recognition of rights of those from diverse cultures, but has only glossed over the issue (Hayami 2006).

Given ethnic identity for the Prai

The Prai are categorized with other highland ethnic minority peoples in Nan Province and remain "culturally invisible" to many who are unfamiliar with Nan Province (Rischel, 1992). In this section, the specific regard many Thai reportedly have for the Prai is addressed. Satyawadhna (1991: 51-53) writes that the attitude of Thai authorities toward the Lua' of Nan Province is "depressing" as the Prai are called "lazy and stupid" or reduced to a social problem that could be solved by free birth control planning or castration. The Prai supposedly have little to offer Thai society aside from limited cultural features, and the richness of Prai culture and language remain largely unrecognized in Thai society on a local or national level.

Smalley (1994) notes that Prai self-esteem tends to be low and recalls that Dessaint describes the Prai as having a "despondent" appearance (Dessaint 1981: 107 as cited in Smalley, 1994). Smalley (1994: 231) writes that the Prai, "have been at the bottom of the pecking order of peoples for generations." It is understood that language follows suit, and Smalley (1994:) reports that the Northern Thai (Muang) often laugh at the Prai language.

Frequent interaction between members of Prai and Northern Thai communities occurs in the Thai school system, which has been a site of Prai marginalization. Historically, the Prai have heard that their language and culture are of no value. As a result, it is easy to comprehend Rischel's (1992) claim that few Prai have any desire for schooling and want to continue in their traditional ways. Boonprasert's (1988) study shows the effects of Thai school on Prai students because they learn a considerable bias against their own language. More recent research shows, "The more extensive an individual's contact with the Northern Thai community, the more negative their perception of their own culture tended to be" (Jordan-Diller, 2008).

Provincial media representations frame the Prai as peoples of the past. For example, the following text was on display for cultural tourism in Nan Province on March 2, 2017.

> Lua/Htin is the original tribe in Nan including some who moved from Chaiburi district in Laos. Htin is an official name for original community in Nan. Lua people generally locate their residence up at 2,500-3,000 above sea level. Along the sub-river of Nan such as Namwang, Namwa, and Nammang, people earn their living by growing upland rice, selling forest products, and basketry making, for instance. However, in many villages people still believe in nature-related ghosts such as forest ghost, water ghost, field ghost, and ancestor ghost. The biggest tradition of the year is "Sa-lode" or "Kin Dok Dang" which celebrates the offspring, and welcomes the new producing year. Currently, most Lua people settle down in Ampur Chaloem Prakiat, Ampur Bor-Kluea, Pua, Tung Chang, and Chiangklang.

Another example is taken from the Nan Province Administration Organization (2001:), which published the following information concerning the Prai of Knife Creek village:

> Local knowledge: Basketry. For example, weaving baskets for steaming rice, bushel baskets, or mats. (...) The cultural dress is simple. The Htin people do not

have a traditional style. A tribal specific cultural dress has just never been developed. Their language is called Lua. It has no written form. (p. 97)

A final example was found in the Nan Historical Museum, which had a display that illustrated how the Prai are viewed in the public sphere.[7]

Figure 1: The Prai (Thins) as previously presented by the Nan Historical Museum

Next to the display is the title "Thins," (a pejorative term according to the Prai), and a short description in Thai and English. The following description has been translated from Thai.

> Thins mostly live in the hills and in the valleys rather isolated from other people. They build their houses with local material for example: wood, bamboo, grass, and rattan. Using metal for house building is against taboo. They cannot use nails or tin roofs when building their houses and gathered building materials in the forest.
>
> When Thins marry the husband goes to live with his wife's father and mother. Thus there are three generations in the house: grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. An example is found in Nam Lae village in Amphur Pua where there are about seven members in a family, but among the Thins who do not yet use birth control there would be more children and grandchildren.
>
> The staple of the Thins diet is sticky rice. Otherwise, they would eat food gathered from the forest and hunted as well. The Thins have been able to process salt taken from salt wells and have traded it for necessary items. They also trade other things they gather for what they need. When they are not cultivating hill rice fields they do labor for other farmers, sometimes out of the area.
>
> Among the Thins, the belief in spirits has a large place and is especially important to follow their clan rules. Their belief in spirits is evidenced in the growing and gathering of food and many other areas such as house building,

[7] In 2016, this display was taken down and not reinstalled after extensive museum renovations.

> weddings, and funerals. There are always spirit ceremonies going on. They serve the function of preserving the culture in the village.

The Nan Historical Museum description addressed four primary markers of identity: housing, family structure, diet, and system of beliefs. Basketry is highlighted as local knowledge and artistic representation.[8]

Ethnic minority cultural practices revolve around the Thai nation as modern and progressive as addressed by Jonsson (2004). In contrast, the Prai are given the stigma of peoples of the past to be archived in museums and books. Outdated information used in the museum description furthers this idea. For example, the taboo against using metal in house construction, ancient salt well commerce, bartering, isolation as a people, and numerous children because of the absence of birth control do not accurately depict today's Prai of Nan Province. Finally, by not mentioning Prai literacy a view of the Prai as "peoples of the past" is perpetuated.

In conclusion, the Prai have long been marginalized by the dominant Thai discourse, which historically has negatively positioned the Prai as a problem that needs to be solved. The uniqueness of Prai culture and language remain unappreciated. Worse than this lack of recognition is the active presentation through local Thai schools and in the public sphere that the solution for Prai development is for the Prai to become less Prai. Prai markers of ethnic identity are perceived to be limited or inadequate at best. They are framed as peoples of the past who stand in stark contrast to today's modern Thai nation.

Formed ethnic identity for the Prai

In contrast to the three aforementioned examples of "given" ethnic identity, the authors look at selected folk stories that have never been published in an academic journal. It is understood that these stories were historically used to represent Prai identity. While many Prai in Thailand reportedly no longer tell folk tales, it is reported that Prai in Laos continue in this tradition.

The first story presented here was told by sixty-year-old Prai elder Thongdee Tankaap in 1981 to linguist David Jordan (1981). It was translated into English by D. Jordan and K. Jordan-Diller in 2023.

Folk story #1

> There is a legend that is believed to be true. A long time ago, people lived together in a great city. A group of people gathered together and built a mighty tower. A tall golden tower that reached up to the sky. At the top of the tower was placed a treasure of heavy gold and silver necklaces. These necklaces sparkled and glowed in the sun.
>
> All the people of the city wanted to climb the tower to claim the treasure. The Northern Thai attempted first. One after another they tried and failed. Lured by the treasure, they sent their best climbers to try and climb the tower. Thwarted by the slippery surface, they fell to the ground. The highest they could climb was

[8] Interestingly, the Lanna Folklife Centre in Chiang Mai depicts traditional Lanna culture in the same way, as pre-modern. The displays completely ignore the transformations in Lanna culture of recent decades, and the ways that the Lanna people have become fully Thai while retaining valued aspects of their traditional culture.

> the height of the apex of a Buddhist temple. And so, the Northern Thai decided to build temples to mark the height of their ascent.
>
> Other groups tried and failed, and it was finally the turn of the Prai people. They did not know if they could succeed where others had failed. But they wanted the treasure and the recognition it would bring. Surely, people who could climb so high must have acquired much merit! They thought if they succeeded, they would be able to choose to live in the highlands in addition to reaping the reward of treasure. And so, the Prai selected climbers to attempt to scale the golden tower. And they did! They reached the necklaces at the very top of the tower.
>
> Once the Prai succeeded a meeting was held. Everyone had to decide where to live. The Northern Thai elected to live in the valley where they would build temples. They did not want to live in the mountains since they could not climb to the heights. The Prai were given the mountains and were able to live above everyone else. This is because the Prai could climb the golden tower.

This story is what researchers of culture often call an "origin story" or "creation myth." Such stories communicate the storyteller's understanding of his and other groups' origins and of the basis for the nature of their interactions with each other (Hughes and Delohoyde n.d.). This story reveals that the Prai are aware of their low status especially in face of the specifically mentioned Northern Thai and other ethnic groups who remain unnamed. However, this story reverses the narrative. The Prai use Buddhist ideals of merit and spatial positioning (high versus low) and claim to possess superior merit. In direct contrast to being identified as backwards people who live in the mountains, they present themselves as successful people of merit who live "above" everyone else because of their spiritual superiority. Living in the mountains and far from modern cities is presented as a boon not a curse.

The second story presented here was also told by Thongdee Tankaap to linguist David Jordan (1981). It was translated into English by D. Jordan and K. Jordan-Diller in 2023.

> ***Folk story #2***
>
> Once there was a giant snail that lived in a marsh. His shell was as big as a boulder and his antlers were like those of an antelope. He crawled along the forest floor eating mushrooms that sprouted along rotting branches. Along came a deer and spied the snail. "Oh, look at you, lugging around a clumsy load. You are carrying such a heavy load that you could never catch me. If you catch me, you can eat my tongue," mocked the deer.
>
> "Really?" asked the snail. "Yes, really." Agreed the deer. "Okay, then let us begin now," said the snail. The snail was quickly able to relay the message to all the other marsh snails. He began to chase the deer, slowly following him on his trail of slime." The deer quickly sprang to the top of the first mountain. He stood there looking around him. He heard the noise of the snail dragging his shell, "Paek bik, paek bik." And there was the snail blocking his path! So, the deer ran swiftly down the hill. All the way to the bottom.

> "Well, the snail certainly cannot catch up to me now," thought the deer to himself. "That slow snail could never catch me!" Then he heard the noise of the shell scraping along the ground, "Paek bik, paek bik."
>
> So, the startled deer sprang to the top of the next peak. "Ahh, now he will never catch me." The deer paused to catch his breath and once again heard the sound of the snail's shell, "Paek bik, paek bik." The snail was once again ahead of him crossing the path.
>
> And so, the deer fled again only to hear the "Paek bik, paek bik" of the snail's shell at every turn. After some time, the deer tired and fell to the ground exhausted. He died escaping from the snail. The snail and his friends swarmed over the deer. First they ate his tongue and then the rest of his body, picking clean the bones.
>
> So now people know not to challenge the snail. "Just look at the deer," they remind each other. "He blatantly scorned the snail, saying the snail could eat his tongue if he could catch him. But everywhere he turned, the snail was there scraping its shell "Paek bik, paek bik" along the ground. The deer got what he deserved for making fun of the clumsy snail.

In Folk story #2, it is understood that the Prai are represented by the snail. Like the snail, they work hard physically for a living often carrying loads over long distances. In the recent past, it was common to see Prai bent over carrying loads of rice or corn when returning home from their fields or bearing loads of firewood on their back for cooking. The Prai acknowledge the "given" identity of backwardness or a hindrance to national progress which implies being "slow." They are perceived as slow to adapt to the modern world, slow to embrace education, and slow to change their way of living. In direct contrast to being "slow" this story highlights the Prai value of strength in community which is better than speed. Indeed, the Prai value cooperation and community that is inherent when farming rice traditionally. Indeed, their cooperation has achieved amazing feats such as farming land others consider non arable, constructing villages on mountain sides, and surviving against all odds using resources from the forest.

In comparison to the snail, the deer is quick – quick to judge, quick to confront, and quick to run out of energy. His solo jaunt through the forest is no match for the community of snails that come together to outwit him. By working together, the story flips the narrative to show that even though they are perceived to be slow, they come out ahead in the end due to their cooperation and strength in community.

The third story as follows was also told by Thongdee Tankaap to linguist David Jordan (1981). It was translated into English by D. Jordan and K. Jordan-Diller in 2023.

> ***Folk story #3***
>
> Once a long time ago, there were thirteen young maidens. Their father was the lord of the land. As the maidens came of age, he told them that it was time for them to leave their families, find husbands, and start homes of their own. Twelve of the maidens each built bamboo rafts and rode them down the river from their village to find suitable husbands. Nang Laa was the

youngest and she trailed after them on her raft. The twelve guided their rafts down the river ahead of her.

A rat-like water creature called a *ngo* was sitting beside the river. "Take me as a husband," he offered to each maiden who passed him by. "Phuey! You are just a *ngo*," they replied disdainfully. "Why are you even speaking like a person? We would never marry you!" So, one by one, they maidens rejected the *ngo*.

Finally, Nang Laa floated by on her raft. "Marry me," offered the *ngo*. "I might as well," she replied. "The others have left me behind." And Nang Laa guided her raft to the river bank and the *ngo* climbed aboard. Together they plied the raft through the water back to her home. When they returned, her father asked her. "Nang Laa, did you find yourself a husband? Why have you come back so soon?"

"Oh, Father," replied Nang Laa, "I do not want a husband after all. Just let my other twelve sisters have all the eligible men. I do not want to get married; I just want to stay at home."[9] The other twelve maidens continued down the river until they arrived at a Khmu village. There they all found Khmu men to marry. Once they were wed, they returned home.

The lord of the land was pleased. "You have all done well to marry!" he exclaimed. "Now it is time to build your own homes." He commanded the husbands to cut trees for wood to build houses. And so, the twelve Khmu husbands hiked out of the village to find wood. Alas, they did not know how to work together to cut lumber. After days of debating who should cut, and saw, and carry, they walked back to the village with not enough wood to build their homes.

Now the father-in-law was craving fresh fish. He asked his new sons-in-law to go fishing. So, together, they organized a fishing party. After a morning of fishing, they had a fine catch. Hungry from their labor, they said, "Let's roast and eat this fish we have caught. We will catch more later and take them home to our father-in-law." After they had feasted, they fished until evening. But the fish were no longer biting and they returned home empty-handed.

Nang Laa spoke to the *ngo*. "My father craves fish for dinner. He asks you to go fishing." And so, the creature hopped down to the river. He called to an otter. "Otter, please, will you please catch fish for me?" The otter immediately dove into the water and swiftly caught two baskets full of fish. The *ngo* carried the baskets over his shoulder to his father-in-law. Thanks to the *ngo*, his father-in-law had all the fish he could eat for dinner.

[9] The Prai narrative makes it clear that everyone understood that Nang Laa had indeed married. Her comment reflects that she had taken a husband from near to home, rather than from an outside language group. She was content to marry locally.

At dawn the next day, the lord of the land asked his twelve sons-in-law to hunt deer. So, they set off together to hunt. Soon, they shot a fine deer. "Oh, it is still morning. Let's roast the meat from this deer and hunt another to bring home after we have eaten." However, even though they hunted until dark, they could not shoot another deer.

(Note: The fish and deer episodes are repeated by a request for wild pig, which the *ngo* resolved with thanks to his friend the wolf.)

The father was pleased. "Well, now, I really like this son-in-law," he said. "The one married to my youngest daughter is the best of them all."

As a final test, the father asked his sons-in-law to find him a hive of honey. "Today, I want sweet honey," he told them. And so, the group of twelve set off to find a hive. As they were walking along the river, they saw the reflection of a bee hive in the water. "Look!" they cried, "A hive!" But they were gazing down into the water instead of up in the trees. One by one they dove into the water, but they could not reach the hive. They cut a long bamboo pole to push each other down deeper into the water to reach the hive that must be at the bottom of the river.

One man held the stick and pushed another down into the water. The one at the bottom was drowned. The one above him reached down to taste the honey from the hive.

"Yuck! this honey tastes spoiled!" he cried. And so, the next man in line dove into the water, while the one behind him pushed him down with the pole. He drowned before he could reach the honey. This continued until all the sons-in-law had drowned except for the last one in line. He was left holding the pole with no one to push to the bottom of the river. Left on his own, he walked home with no honey.

When he arrived home, the daughters asked, "Where are the other men? Where are our husbands?" "Oh, the bees stung them to death," he answered. "They all died, and I am the only one left."

The father was undeterred from his wish for honey, and he summoned Nang Laa. "Ask the *ngo* to find me a hive of honey." Obediently, she found her husband and passed on her father's request. "Father wants to eat some honey," Nang Laa relayed. The *ngo* quickly left for the woods. Immediately, he spied a bear climbing a tree in pursuit of a honey hive.

"Please, Bear, share some honey with me," he asked. The bear handed the *ngo* a section of the hive dripping with honey. The *ngo* deftly wove a basket of leaves to hold the honey and carried it to his father-in-law. The father was satisfied with the *ngo*.

His other twelve daughters had found husbands, but the husbands were unsuccessful in all they attempted. They could neither fish, nor hunt, nor gather honey. They were useless at providing food. As a matter of fact,

> they were so foolish that they were tricked by a reflection and all but one drowned.
>
> (This story also contains a request made by the father for the *ngo* to build a house which was accomplished with help from the termites.)
>
> Now that the *ngo* had his own home, he could reveal his true form. In the evening he took off the foul rat-like hide of a water creature and assumed the form of a handsome man. He smelled of expensive perfume instead of the stench of the river. The father suspected, and one night he snuck into his sleeping room with a candle to look at him. He saw that he was indeed a handsome man. His room was filled with fine clothing.
>
> From then on, the *ngo* kept his identity a secret. Every day he worked in the field with his wife in the form of a *ngo*. Other people despised him and ridiculed her for taking a *ngo* as a husband. The *ngo* seemed unperturbed. He continued to hop along like a *ngo*, "Ngop, ngop, ngop."
>
> "Ha ha, Nang Laa has married a *ngo*," everyone teased.
>
> One day, while working in their field, the *ngo* asked his wife Nang Laa to build a fire. "Light a fire, and I will go down to the stream to bathe." While bathing he removed his *ngo* hide and hung it on a tree branch. He slid into the water. Without his notice, the hide slipped into the water and floated downstream. Nang Laa caught it and burned the hideous hide in the fire. As the hide burned her hand fell off. But the *ngo* treated her hand, and it became as good as new. That is the end of the story.

In Folk story #3, the Prai are represented by the *ngo*, who is later identified as a river spirit disguised as a worthless despicable creature. Twelve sisters float by on their rafts with only scornful glances and rude words for the *ngo*. The youngest sister only marries him out of desperation. However, there is more than meets the eye to this river spirit. He is intimately acquainted with the forest and all the animals do his bidding. He is easily able to provide for his relatives with his expert knowledge of the forest. He can fish, hunt, gather, weave baskets, and build houses with ease. The father-in-law is quick to recognize his merit even though those around him still look down on him.

As the story progresses, we see that the *ngo* is actually a handsome man in disguise. He can remove his hide like clothing. And yet, like the Prai, the *ngo* chooses to remain a mystery. He does not want the attention of others even if that attention is positive. He prefers to quietly meet the demands of his father-in-law and prove his worth to his new wife. It is only when his hide is burned that others see him for who he really is.

This story highlights the Prai values of remaining invisible and knowing the forest. It also speaks to the specific cultural values of the youngest daughter remaining attached to her parents and staying in their house. Similarly, the story shows how a good son-in-law is supposed to behave by becoming part of his wife's family and providing for his mother-in-law and father-in-law.

It is interesting that the Khmu are brought into the story, as they are closely related to the Prai. They are a more numerous ethnic group and have higher status than the Prai.[10] The Prai are typically viewed as the ethnic group with the lowest status. This story pokes open fun at the Khmu and their inferior knowledge of the forest and their inability to work together to achieve a goal. Only the *ngo* (who represents a Prai ideal) is able to meet the cultural standards of a good son-in-law.

Discussion

A discussion of the Folk Stories can be centered on previous research concerning Prai ethnic identity. Jordan-Diller's (2008) research addresses how Prai people described "authentic" Prai identity. While this may be an idealized sentimental picture of Prai who lived independently in the mountains, it is insightful for understanding what elements are important for the Prai when forming their ethnic identity. It is clear that the Prai have firm convictions about their own ethnic identity and what it means to be "Prai."

> Authentic Prai people are described as living in the mountains, following all the taboos (including ones that have been forgotten by the current generation), speaking Prai without mixing in vocabulary from other languages, farming rice traditionally, and living a self-sufficient lifestyle with little or no reliance on money. (Jordan-Diller, 2008: 148)

The most important cultural markers for the Prai are as follows:

1) Living in the mountains (using natural resources and understanding the forest)

2) Following taboos (being careful to follow moral norms)

3) Speaking Prai without mixing in another language

4) Farming rice traditionally (cooperation)

5) Living a self-sufficient lifestyle without relying on money

All three folk stories reflect the importance of cultural marker number one: living in the mountains and understanding the forest. For example, Folk story #1 specifically addresses the reason that the Prai live in the mountains and why the Northern Thai live in the valleys. Furthermore, the story asserts that the Prai are superior to other peoples, which is an important point for their "formed" identity with respect to other groups such as the Northern Thai. In Folk story #2, the snail may appear burdened by a heavy load but is found in every part of the forest from high mountains to the low marshes. In Folk story #3, the *ngo* proves himself better than twelve other Khmu sons-in-law because of his understanding of the forest and use of natural resources.

The second important Prai cultural marker of following taboos is implicit in Folk story #3. Cultural values specific to Prai are highlighted such as the youngest daughter staying with her father and taking care of him. She ends up with a husband who provides for her, a beautiful house, and at the end of the story a handsome man. In contrast, disaster

[10] The Ethnologue lists over 825,000 Khmu speakers (Eberhard et al., 2023).

strikes the twelve sons-in-law who do not provide for their wives' parents. Likewise, the daughters suffer for marrying outside of their culture.

The third important cultural marker of speaking Prai without mixing in another language is expressed through the telling of the story itself in Prai. While many Prai are multilingual, the story is told in Prai without code switching to Thai or borrowing from other languages in contact with Prai. The story uses elegant pair words and eloquent descriptions.

The fourth important cultural marker of farming rice traditionally is better expressed as the value of cooperation. This is best presented in Folk story #2. In this story, snails from all over the forest cooperate to chase and catch the deer. They also cooperate

Lastly, the fifth cultural marker of living a self-sufficient lifestyle is best presented in Folk story #3. In this story, the protagonist (who embodies Prai ideals) is friends with all the creatures of the forest and relies on their help. The forest and its creatures meet all of his needs for food and shelter. Likewise, his knowledge of how to use resources from the forest (weaving baskets, hunting, fishing) are what bring him wealth and ultimately status in the community.

Conclusion

It is apparent that there are contrasting views of ethnic identity for the Prai. The dominant Thai discourse positions the Prai as people without merit, slow, and backwards. They are framed as peoples of the past for which the solution is to become less Prai. The Prai clearly understand their negative social position and reverse the "given" identity narratives with their "formed" identity. The three folk stories presented in this research overtly explain the reason for living in the mountains (as indicated with superior merit as detailed in Folk story #1), their value for cooperation over swiftness (as noted with snails overcoming the deer in Folk story #2), and their value of exceptional use of forest resources (as marked by the *ngo* creature who depicts ideal Prai traits). Lastly, the most important Prai cultural value of living in the mountains, using natural resources, and understanding the forest is communicated in all three folk stories. The Prai have used folk stories to reverse the narrative of their "given" identity to reinforce their own definition of what it means to be Prai.

It is evident that the Prai "formed" identity contrasts strongly with the "given" identity ascribed by the dominant culture. At the same time, it is important to note that the Prai are not limited to an either-or decision meaning they must either stick to the old ways, or leave them behind and become "Thai." Many people who consider themselves "modern" are going to great lengths to recover, preserve, and celebrate their cultural roots while simultaneously weaving them into their "modern" identity. Examples include the Thai and Khon Mueang; the *lumad*[11] of the Philippines; the Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and Bretons; and the people of Appalachia. This phenomenon suggests there is a third way open to the Prai and to other ethnic minorities—namely, that they can incorporate their traditional culture into their own chosen modern identity.

While this paper focuses mainly on Prai people and how they negotiate their identity in the context of their "given" identity, it is worthwhile to discuss how the dominant culture

[11] *Lumad* is a cover term for indigenous peoples that has been promoted and adopted by many of the ethnic communities of the Philippines. The term is both singular and plural.

can better appreciate minority culture. As Prai communities continue to coexist alongside Northern Thai communities, hopeful examples of cooperation and appreciation emerge. As Northern Thai culture becomes more removed from its agricultural roots, a nostalgia for a simpler life is reflected in agro-tourism and a desire to experience the natural world. The Prai have received positive attention for their connection to and knowledge of the forest. This gives the Prai an opportunity to curate "nature experiences." For example, the men of Knife Creek Village (Chiang Klang District, Nan Province) are locally famous for their ability to harvest honey from wild bees. A local tourist agent has capitalized on this and connects them to wealthy Thai who want to take part in harvesting honey. The Thai buy a hive of honey and may participate in the experience of harvesting it by filming the men who climb the trees, watching them extract the honey, and eating steamed bee larvae. This type of interaction does foster a positive appreciation of Prai culture and affirms their identity as those with knowledge of the forest.

Another example that shows evidence of potential positive change is a shift in attitudes among some people toward the Prai language. For example, when the head librarian of Chiang Klang (Chiang Klang District, Nan Province) learned that Prai books were being written for Prai children, she requested copies for the town library. She asked for some of the stories to add a Thai translation and featured these bilingual books in a special collection. For the Prai, having influential members of the mainstream culture show interest in their language is an important step toward bridging the cultural chasm. Our hope is that the Prai can negotiate competing definitions of identity to achieve a more successful future. Likewise, we trust that as the dominant culture learns to appreciate the knowledge and experience the Prai have to offer, the "given" identity will more closely align with the Prai "formed" identity.

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