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Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand: Viewpoints of the Akha and the Karen

Alexander TRUPP

1. Introduction

Thailand, receiving more than 20 million international tourists and around 35 billion US dollars revenues in 2012 became one of the leading tourism destinations in Asia. The main destinations are the capital of Bangkok, the “SSS areas” (sun, sea, and sex) in the south, and the mountainous northern region including the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son. The hilly to mountainous northern landscape is home to nine officially recognised ethnic minorities called “*chao khao*” in the Thai language, or “*hilltribes*” in English (see Table 1). The minorities are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct from mainstream Thai society. Their attractiveness to tourists was discovered early on by backpackers and somewhat later by the tourism industry which presented the ethnic groups as exotic as possible in order to fulfill the tourist’s quest for authenticity (MACCANNELL 1973).

Ethnic tourism is defined as a type of travel aimed at visiting “alien” and “aboriginal” cultures and highlights the local inhabitants and their cultural practices as main objects of interest. WOOD, in his definition of ethnic tourism (1984, p. 361), points to the cultural uniqueness that is marketed for tourists. Ethnic tourists are led to groups that do not fully belong culturally, socially, or politically to the majority (national) population of the state within whose boundaries they live (COHEN 2001a, p. 27; see TRUPP and TRUPP 2009). Ethnic tourism in the mountain areas of Southeast Asia is also referred to as *hilltribe tourism*.

The primary purpose of this article is to examine the phenomena of ethnic tourism as seen from the points of view of two specific minority groups. Close inspection reveals that different stages of contact between the hilltribes and tourists have developed over the last few decades in northern Thailand. Two villages with different touristic intensity have been chosen for this empirical analysis:¹

1. The Akha village *Jorpakha*: About 100 tourists per day visit this village for about 20 minutes as one stop on a package tour. Thus the village shows characteristics of mass tourism.

¹) A more detailed description of the villages and the occurring forms of tourism can be found in chapter 6.

2. The Karen village *Muang Pham*: This village is also touristically well-developed, but tourists reach the village either through an organised trekking tour or by their own means. Ninety percent of the tourists stay overnight in the village.

In the past, the host perspective has been less investigated by geographical tourism research and represents the main focus of this study. The approach is action oriented, placing the perceptions and actions of the hilltribes at the centre of observation.

The following research questions are the foundation of this empirical analysis:

- What are the ethnic minorities' perceptions and images of tourism and tourists?
- What is their attitude towards tourism and how is tourism evaluated?
- How do they act within a touristic context?
- What meanings, intentions, and interests underlie these actions?
- Within which sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts do these actions and perceptions take place?
- What differences can be ascertained between these two types of touristically developed villages?

Before the theoretical classification, method, and results of this study are presented, it is necessary to take a closer look at ethnic minorities and the development of ethnic tourism in northern Thailand.

2. The Hilltribes' Involvement in National and International Contexts: Consequences and Complications

The total hilltribe population in Thailand is estimated to be more than 920,000, or 1.4 percent of the overall population of 66 million (2010). In comparison, the hilltribe population in Thailand was estimated at 222,000 in 1960 (KUNSTADTER 1967), at about 331,000 in 1974/77 (HUSA and WOHLISCHLÄGL 1985), and at about 793,000 in 1996 (KAMPE 1997). This enormous increase can be attributed on the one hand to natural population growth and on the other hand to immigration and refugee movements, mainly from Myanmar and Laos.

The name "hilltribes" is not self-designated, but was introduced by the Thai government in 1959 and is often seen as problematic. First of all, the term does not refer to a "tribe" in the ethnological sense, as it is neither an ethnic group with a defined settlement area nor an overall tribal organisation (see KORFF 2003, p. 122). Secondly, the term has developed a negative connotation and "hilltribe" is often associated with the wild, primitive, and uncivilised (WINICHAKUL 2000). Despite a thorough awareness of the complications surrounding this name, the term "hilltribes" will be used for the purposes of this research due to a lack of viable alternatives.

The settlement areas of these groups cover broad sections of the mountainous regions of northern Thailand and are accompanied by frequent migratory processes. It is thought

that some of the mountain peoples, such as the H'tin or the Lua, migrated to what is now Thailand by the beginning of the second millennium, well before the arrival of a Thai-speaking population. The presence of Karen settlements for at least the last 300 years has been verified. The Hmong and Yao have been living in this region since the mid-19th century, and the Tibeto-burmese ethnicities including the Lisu, Lahu, and Akha immigrated to what is now northern Thailand in the early 20th century (KUNSTADTER 1983, p. 28).

Table 1: "Hilltribe" populations in Thailand 2003

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Number of villages</i>	<i>Number of households</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Percentage of total</i>
Karen	1,912	87,628	438,131	47.47
Hmong	253	19,287	153,955	16.68
Lahu	385	18,057	102,876	11.15
Akha	271	11,178	68,653	7.44
Mien	178	6,758	45,571	4.94
H'tin	159	8,496	42,657	4.62
Lisu	155	6,556	38,299	4.15
Lua	69	4,361	22,260	2.41
Khamu	38	2,256	10,573	1.14
Total	3,420	164,574	922,957	100.00

Source: Tribal Museum Chiang Mai 2004.

Before the foundation of the Thai nation state, these different ethnic groups had various types of interaction with the neighbouring majority of the population. Contact ranged from almost total autonomy to trading and neighbourly exchanges to tribute and allegiance affiliations (BUERGIN 2000, p. 8; KEYES 1995). It is inaccurate to speak of the total isolation of the hilltribes, since there have always been shared influences and contact with the Thai, Burmese, or Chinese ethnicities predominant in Thailand, Myanmar, or Yunnan (see PLATZ 1995, p. 105).

Initially, the government showed no great interest in hilltribe affairs, but this changed drastically in the 1950s. Several factors underlie this change and the resulting "hilltribe policies":

- Politically, the hilltribes garnered attention because of their supposed susceptibility to communist and other ideological influences. Thailand feared developments similar to those in neighbouring countries. While in Myanmar there was strong resistance to communism by the Karen and the Shan, the increasing communist influences in China, Laos, and Vietnam were a source of worry for Western-oriented Thailand.
- Strategically, the hilltribes also gained importance because they are settled in the vast and difficult to defend mountainous border regions. Their nomadic life often brings them across borders, and they were seen as a security risk by officials.

- Economically, the hilltribes came under scrutiny (especially in the 1980s) because of their farming practices (shifting cultivation), which erode the natural resources of the land. This centuries-old and sustainable farming method has come under increasing criticism in recent decades because it requires large areas if used extensively.
- Last but not least is the drug problem. Following the Second World War, the “Golden Triangle” border region between Myanmar, Thailand, and China (Yunnan) became an important opium cultivation area. Due to climate conditions and the isolated and uncontrolled location, the hilltribes’ settlement region proved to be ideal for opium cultivation. Initially producing only opium, the region gradually began to produce opium-based heroin and finally synthetic methamphetamines, called “Yaba” in Thailand.

Due to these developments, the hilltribes were labelled as troublemakers and forest-destroying drug dealers by the Thai government and in public opinion. Thai government measures to “develop” the mountain peoples and the creation of a series of institutions dealing with this issue and (fabricated) problem of hilltribes on various levels must be seen in light of this labelling (see HUSA and WOHLISCHLÄGL 1985, p. 19).

First, the Border Patrol Police (BPP) was founded at the initiative of the US Special Forces (see KUNSTADTER 1967, p. 381). Established in 1959, the Central Hilltribe Committee became the first organisation to be responsible for a coordinated hilltribe policy on a national level. Meanwhile, the Thai Council of Ministers went through with the so-called “*nikhoms*” or planned relocation projects. The goal of the *nikhoms* was to create permanent settlements for the various ethnicities, facilitating their integration into the Thai administration and thereby making them more easily controllable.

In 1961 and 1962, the first official *Socio-Economic Survey of the Hill Tribes* was undertaken with the help of Austrian ethnologist Hans MANNDORFF (see TRUPP and BUTRATANA 2009). The survey aimed to obtain reliable information as a basis for further development plans and projects. The establishment of the Tribal Research Center (TRC) in Chiang Mai in 1964 was recommended in a Socio-Economic Survey report (GEDDES 1967; MANNDORFF 1967). The TRC’s purpose was to collect statistical data and complete scientific research by 2003. Today, the Social Research Institute (SRI) of the Chiang Mai University is the most important institution for scientific discourse on the topic of hilltribes.

Even today, many hilltribe members still lack Thai citizenship. Without citizenship, they are forbidden to leave their district or need a special permission to do so. Moreover, they are not allowed to vote, work, or buy land; they are excluded from the social security and health care system and have no access to higher education. According to their own statements, the law that most affected the hilltribes is the Logging Ban of 1989. This law enacted a general ban on felling timber for the commercial timber industry as well as for the “simple” farmers of the hilltribes. Theoretically turning their primary agricultural method of slash and burn into a punishable crime, the law wrenched away an integral part of the hilltribes’ livelihood (see MCKINNON 1997, p. 131). Lack of land use rights and the ban on shifting cultivation are the two most important factors contributing to the increased migration of hilltribe peoples to urban areas.

3. Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand – Development and Actors

Domestic forms of tourism in the area already started in the early 1930s when the royal family and the bourgeoisie of central Thailand visited the highlands for recreation purposes (LEEPREECHA 2008, p. 225; also see LEEPREECHA in this volume). The first international tourists to Thailand's mountainous areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, were adventurers, backpackers, and young alternative tourists who discovered the hilltribes and the surrounding trekking trails through word of mouth and later through unconventional travel guides and agencies (see MEYER 1988, p. 411). At this time, the northern Thai cities Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai were the only cities in the entire Southeast Asian mountain region that could be easily and – above all – safely reached.

With the increase of tourists in the 1970s, a low cost tourism establishment arose first in Chiang Mai and then to a lesser degree in Chiang Rai (COHEN 2001b, p. 37). This smaller traveller community served the “cheap charlies” who wanted to distance themselves from the increasing numbers of mass tourists in Chiang Mai. The new tourism segment consisted of cheap guesthouses, street vendors, and coffee shops tailored to the needs of this type of travellers. This sector was catered to with “authentic” experiences and real life far from civilisation, at first by independent local guides and later by small agencies referred to as “jungle companies”. These tourists liked to see themselves as superior to mass tourists and were not aware of the way they pioneered the rapidly developing mass tourism to come.

In the late 1970s, the tourist sector interested in the exotic hilltribes began to grow, a fact rapidly recognised by the tourism industry. Large tour operators began including “hill-tribe excursions” in their program. At the same time, a multitude of new travel agencies sprang up in Chiang Mai. Competition kept prices low (COHEN 2001b, p. 39). Because of growing tourist demand for “unspoiled” and “authentic” regions, new hilltribe areas were constantly being developed. Once a mountain village no longer provided the desired grade of authenticity, it was taken out of the tour program and replaced by a new “back region” (DEARDEN and HARRON 1994, p. 88). It was calculated that 100,000 trekkers spend an average of four days and three nights in the area annually (*ibid.*, p. 85).

This development of tourism occurred alongside a plethora of national and international “development programs”. The assumption that the touristic development of the mountain areas was also a political tool in the integration and assimilation of the hilltribes into Thai society is thoroughly plausible (see MICHAUD 1997, p. 131). Today, ethnic minority tourism in Thailand exists in the form of one or more days lasting trekking tours (COHEN 2001b, pp. 70f), one day excursions to easily reachable minority villages (COHEN 2001b, pp. 69f) including the highly controversial “Long-Neck-Karen villages” often criticised as human zoos (TRUPP 2011) and ethnic minority souvenir selling at markets (FUENGFASAKUL 2008; ISHII 2012) as well as urban or beach-sided tourist destinations (TRUPP 2014a, b).

Hilltribe tourism can be seen as a form of ethnic tourism leading to hilltribe peoples, although the visited ethnic groups are no longer the sole object of touristic interest.

COHEN (2001a, p. 27) talks about a “variety of site-seeing tourism” and DEARDEN (1996, p. 211) confirms that “in such tourism, ethnic people are no longer the prime focus of interest, but constitute just one item of interest within a broader landscape”. This shift becomes clearly evident when examining current posters and advertising brochures for travel agencies. There are almost no organised excursions or trekking tours that offer a visit to the hilltribes alone. Instead, the visits are one of many attractions consumed between lunchtime and a waterfall (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Advertising poster for a trekking tour



Photograph: A. TRUPP 2006.

Figure 2: Advertising poster for a one-day tour



Photograph: A. TRUPP 2006.

Organised and individual hilltribe tourism can be differentiated into two groups. COHEN (2001b, pp. 69ff) designates two main groups in the category of organised tourism, “tribal

village tours” (excursion tourism) and “jungle tours” (trekking tourism). The case studies in Jorpakha and Muang Pham introduce examples of these two groups in detail.

4. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The research questions in this study are focused on the actions, perceptions, and interests of ethnic minority villagers. Human actions are seen as the “product of individual preferences, societal game rules, and physical surroundings” (REUBER 2001, p. 81). However, it must be taken into consideration that it is not a given structural framework that determines a human action, but rather that structures are created by individuals in order to realise and support their actions (see WEICHHART 2004, p. 47). In this case, structural framework means the socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts that the Akha and Karen act within. For “everything that a subject does is always in reference to the socio-cultural and material contexts of the action, without being determined by these contexts in the causal sense” (WERLEN 1998, p. 10). Moreover, this section draws on emerging concepts of the host gaze that aim to further the understanding of how local residents in the field of ethnic tourism perceive and gaze upon the various actors and dimensions of ethnic tourism.

On the Term “Action”

The term “*action*” in the action oriented approach includes the aspect of reflexivity as well as the element of intention. REUBER and WERLEN reference Max WEBER’s concept of “social actions”. The assumption that the acting person sees his or her actions as meaningful is a central aspect of this concept. WEBER (⁶1984, pp. 44ff) defines four action types that each follows a different determinant:

1. Instrumentally rational actions focus primarily upon a goal and the means and consequences thereof.
2. Value rational actions are independent of success and determined by cultural and societal values and norms, i.e. belief in the intrinsic value of a specific circumstance.
3. Affectual or emotional actions comprise, for example, an uncontrolled reaction to an uncommon stimulus.
4. Traditional actions focus upon established or routine habits and are on the fringes or even beyond what can be perceived as social action.

Power and Forms of Capital

The power of the actors is another important aspect, “above all researching about the accessibility of material objects, their spatial configuration, and their availability for the

realisation of actions” (WERLEN 1997, p. 64). REUBER’s (2001) definition of power seizes upon GIDDENS’ (1997, p. 45) divisions of “authoritative and allocative resources”. *Allocative resources* refer to capabilities – or, more accurately – to transformative capacity generating commands over objects, goods or material phenomena. *Authoritative resources* refer to types of transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors (ibid., p. 45). Therefore, power itself is not a resource, but resources are used by actors when exercising power. REUBER supplements GIDDENS’ theory with a third, strongly individual component encompassing personal charisma, leadership qualities, and negotiation skills, among other things. This “three-pillared concept of power” attempts to “take structural and individual characteristics into equal consideration” (REUBER 2001, p. 86).

Pierre BOURDIEU’s forms of capital can be used to clarify the handling of these resources. Economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital are differentiated thus:

- *Economic capital* is defined as all forms of material possession that can be exchanged with money.
- *Cultural capital* occurs in three different forms – incorporated, objective, and institutionalised. In its internalised, incorporated form, cultural capital consists of the cultural knowledge, faculty, and skills of an individual. The accumulation of incorporated cultural capital, generally termed “education”, is tied to a high level of personal commitment and time (see BOURDIEU 1997, p. 55). This type of cultural capital can only be internalised by an individual and therefore cannot be transferred like money or material cultural artefacts. Cultural capital appears in its objective state in the form of books, pictures, lexica, instruments, machines, and other visible and tangible cultural goods. Institutionalised cultural capital manifests in the form of titles or degrees.
- *Social capital* can be defined as “the total of current and potential resources bound to the possession of a permanent network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or acknowledgment” (ibid., p. 63). This refers to a social network of friends and acquaintances that can be asked for help, advice, and / or information.
- *Symbolic capital* “is made up of chances to gain and retain social recognition and prestige” (FUCHS-HEINRITZ and KÖNIG 2005, p. 169).

The forms of capital listed here are closely connected and mutually dependent. Actors can also transform one form of capital into another. Chapter 7 portrays how the Akha and the Karen change their cultural capital into economic capital in each of the villages studied.

Perceiving and Gazing Tourism

Especially in the area of ethnic tourism, tourists search for seemingly exotic or strange images of the hosts ranging from constructed exotic (and erotic) beauties to noble savages. Seen from the other side, the hosts’ images of their guests can also be diverse, constructed or over-simplified. Individuals take in a multitude of existing stimuli (visual images, smells, sounds), but not all stimuli are consciously registered. Perception is a selective process, wherein stimuli are selected through a so-called perception filter. What is

or is not filtered out depends upon personal variables of the individual such as motivation, needs, attitudes, and values (TZSCHACHEL 1986, p. 24). In practice, stimuli “do not exist in their objective truth as limited and conventional triggers, since they are only effective if they reach actors that are conditioned to recognise them” (BOURDIEU 1987, p. 99). In tourism studies, gaze studies have become popular in order to understand how tourists perceive places or people they visit.

Since the 1990s the concept of the “*tourist gaze*” has broadened the understanding of how tourists perceive and gaze upon tourist attractions. The tourist gaze is usually constructed by Western society, especially by the media, postcards, guidebooks or travel stories from others which all direct the gaze (URRY 1990). The concept “highlights that looking is a learned ability and that the pure and innocent eye is a myth” (LARSEN and URRY 2011, p. 110). In that sense tourists arrive at their travel destinations with pre-designated images of the people and areas they visit and compare those with “real” experiences and impressions during the trip. They thus do not assess their tourist experiences according to reality, but reality to their pre-constructed image (STEINBACH 2002, p. 42). It is highlighted that the tourist gaze is a dynamic concept and that its construction varies by society, social group and historical period, and that it is constructed in relationship to its opposite, thus non-tourist forms of daily social experience (URRY 1990, p. 2). This thoroughly used, discussed as well as criticised concept (see MACCANNELL 2001) describes the power Western tourists hold and exercise over the inhabitants of the places they visit.

In recent years, however, scholars started to increasingly recognise that there is also a gaze of the inhabitants who are visited by tourists and that the question is not only about how “we” see “them” but also about how “they” see “us” (PRITCHARD 2000; MAOZ 2006). Studies show that as soon as travellers reach a tourist destination it is not only the local inhabitants who are on display and to be scrutinised but also the tourists who “constitute part of the visual reality of the local landscape”, and are exposed to local gazes (CHAN 2006, p. 194). It is argued that the local or host gaze is more complex, as it is based on a “two-sided picture, where both the tourist and local gazes exist, affecting and feeding each other, resulting in what is termed ‘the mutual gaze’” (MAOZ 2006, p. 222). So there is the gaze of the gazer and the gaze of the gazee (MOUFAKKIR and REISINGER 2013a, p. xi).

The concept of the host or local gaze focuses upon the host community in tourism destinations and how its members perceive tourism and tourists, and moreover how the local gaze is constructed, how it has developed, how it may differ between countries or ethnic groups and how the tourism industry can affect it (MOUFAKKIR and REISINGER 2013a). Similar to the tourist gaze, also the host gaze is dynamic and thus changes depending on the type and form of tourist as well as on the characteristics of the host communities in terms of socioeconomic status, cultural traits and historical period.

MAOZ in the context of a study about Indian host gaze upon Israeli backpackers argues that “locals construct their gaze upon previous and numerous encounters with tourists” (MAOZ 2006, p. 229). Therefore the local gaze differs from the one of Western tourists whose gaze is pre-designated by media and other information before the encounter between hosts and guests takes place. Still, their gaze is based on images and stereotypes often connected to the colonial past, and many locals perceive tourism as a source of

money and tend to overlook perceived social misbehaviours in return for monetary benefits (MAOZ 2006, p. 224). CHAN who studied Chinese tourists in Vietnam found out that Vietnam tourism workers perceive Chinese visitors as stingy, arrogant and chauvinistic (CHAN 2006). Both MAOZ' and CHAN's study found the gaze of the tourism workers towards Israeli and Chinese tourists rather negative while that of the rest of the local residents was rather positive.

Moreover, there are different gazes from the same gazer upon different gazes / tourists and thus speaking of a general host gaze would be misleading (MOUFAKKIR and REISINGER 2013a, p. xi). MOUFAKKIR criticises that most of the studies on local residents' perspectives remain descriptive and limited to rather simple quantifications. It is thus necessary to deconstruct the host gaze by deepening the understanding of the whys of those attitudes and perceptions (MOUFAKKIR 2011, pp. 77f). This article relates to the emerging literature on host perspectives and host gazes and shows that the hosts in ethnic tourism are not passive objects but are active agents who construct their own gazes upon various actors of the tourism industry including different types of tourists, tour guides or travel agents.

5. Methods and Challenges in the Field

“The goal of qualitative research is to describe a lifeworld ‘from the inside out’ – from the point of view of the acting person” (FLICK et al. 2004, p. 14). This is also my research goal, to first comprehend and then present the actions, impression, interests, and values of the visited Akha and Karen within the context of tourism. The underlying methodological principles are openness, flexibility, communicativeness, and explication (see LAMNEK 2005).

My research stay in northern Thailand began in early January and ended in early May 2006. Further information and data was collected during shorter follow up-visits between 2008 and 2012. I spent approximately a third of these four months in the villages. The rest of my time was used traveling to the villages, initiating contact with the inhabitants, preparing interviews and observations, transcribing, making initial evaluations, participating in talks and discussions at the Social Research Institute (SRI) of the Chiang Mai University and with representatives of various NGOs and other institutions, and for intensive literature research in the different libraries of Chiang Mai. Support by the SRI and from Prof. Prasit LEEPRECHA was of great advantage to my research in many ways.

The main research methods used to gather information were qualitative interviews and participant observation. A problem accompanying me throughout the entire journey was the language barrier. Since my Thai language skills are still limited and I only speak a few phrases of Akha and Sgaw-Karen, I was accompanied by interpreters in each village. My research assistants and translators Khun WISOOT, MAI and KOSITA were very important in order to establish contact to the communities and very committed to providing exact English translations. I also attempted to minimise misunderstandings by frequent questioning and discussion of the translations. However, the process of translation always includes

the possibility of losing or skewing information. The disadvantages of this language filter were unavoidable due to my insufficient language proficiency.

Qualitative interviews are not standardised and generally exclude a fixed series of pre-formulated questions. The interviews emulate the characteristics of an informal conversation and encourage the person questioned to do the talking. Requests to tape record the conversations were either resisted by the interviewees or led to an overly artificial and forced atmosphere, meaning that this measure had to be dropped. Although it would have been possible to record the conversations secretly, it was decided that this would be unfair towards the informants. As a result, each conversation or the simultaneous translation thereof had to be protocolled immediately. I chose to give priority to the creation of a familiar everyday conversation over the exact documentation of each and every word. A total of 28 qualitative interviews with 23 different interview partners were conducted. Key people such as the headman as well as persons who simply enjoyed talking about the matters at hand were interviewed twice.

While the qualitative interviews served to ascertain opinions, attitudes, expectations, and intentions, I also used participant observation to determine actions and behaviours. "Observation as a sociological method focuses upon social action, however this may be defined" (LAMNEK 2005, p. 549). As a participant observer, I attempted to take part in the everyday life of the Akha and Karen both within and without the touristic field, and to record the situation in an observation protocol. LÜDERS (2004, p. 396) points out that observation protocols must be taken for what they are, "texts by authors who meaningfully record their observations and memories after the fact using the language skills available to them, putting their observations into context and pouring them into a text form to create a comprehensible protocol".

The entirety of the material can therefore be seen as text in the broad sense, including in this case transcribed interviews, observation protocols, essays, drawings by villagers on "tourism in my village", field notes, and photos.

The evaluation procedure for this extensive data is supported above all by the user-friendly guidelines of STRAUSS and CORBIN (1996). Data analysis was done in a shortened and modified manner aiming at breaking down the broad range of data gathered into categories that shed light upon the ethnic tourism phenomena from the perspective of the hilltribes.

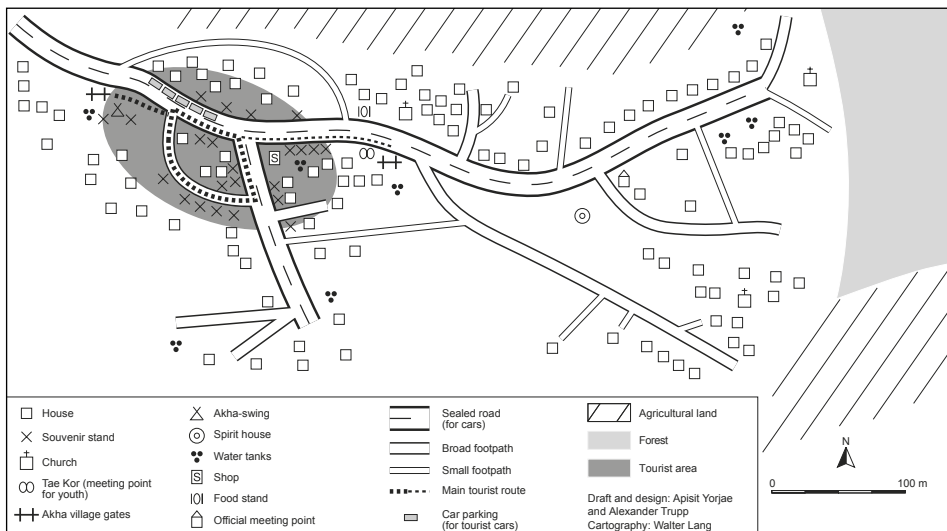
6. Two Hilltribe Villages – A Brief Description

The two villages chosen for this study, the Akha village *Jorpakha* and the Karen village *Muang Pham* have very different characteristics: They differ in terms of location, accessibility, ethnicity, economic starting position, and in terms of the type, intensity, and infrastructure of their tourism.

6.1 The Akha Village Jorpakha

Jorpakha lies 800 m above sea level in the Chiang Rai province and can be accessed quickly and easily on a paved road from the main highway. In 2006, 108 households and approximately 650 inhabitants were in the village, all members of the ethnic sub-group *Akha-Ulo*. In 1997, some sections of the village were provided with electricity. About 10 percent of the villagers did not have Thai citizenship. Within the last decades local political and religious leaders have lost their status and power as the area became increasingly incorporated into Thai administrative-bureaucratic systems such as land registration, formal schooling, national identity card system and so on (see TOOKER 2004, p. 261).

Figure 3: Structural map of the Akha village Jorpakha



Source: TRUPP 2007, p. 197.

Moreover, about two thirds of the villagers have converted to some form of Christianity and therefore have new religious leaders. There are currently three churches in the village: Evangelical, Catholic, and Baptist. The spread of Christianity and other developments such as increased urban migration, Thailand's laws, etc. are contributing factors to the dwindling of the "*Akhasang*",² the Akha's traditional way of life. The villagers' main problem is that they have almost no economic earning opportunities, since the surrounding fields and woods are either owned by Thais or under the control of the Royal Forest Department in charge of the country's natural resources. As a result, many villagers are

²) "*Akhasang*" is more than a religion; it is a way of life and philosophy that regulates all levels of the Akha life. It embodies knowledge of Akha traditions and ceremonies, cultivation of the fields, care for livestock, hunting, the origins of illness and therapies, and behavior within the group and towards others (GEUSAU 1983, pp. 249f).

forced to work either on fields or in the city at gas stations, construction sites, restaurants, and bars, earning meager 100 to 200 Thai baht (three to six US dollars) a day.

Touristic Conditions

The most noticeable manifestations of tourism are the more than 20 souvenir stands, lined up in a row like beads on a necklace. The bags, pillows, and headscarves sold are handmade, but for the most part ordered from companies in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, or in Tachilek (Myanmar). The main attraction is the exotic Akha themselves, in particular the women, who wear imposing head decorations (Figure 4). Akha-specific “cultural goods” and tourist attractions such as the village gates³ and guard statues (Figure 5) at the entrance of the village or the nearby swing⁴ (only used during the Swing Ceremony) can be seen as objectified cultural capital (BOURDIEU) or allocative resources (GIDDENS 1997). The adjacent informational plaques briefly explain the functions of these attractions in Thai and English.

Figure 4: Sales area in Jorpakha



Photograph: A. TRUPP 2006.

- ³⁾ The Akha Village Gates, which are erected at the lower and upper entrances to an Akha village, draw a clear line between the territory of humans and the “place of spirits” (see LEWIS and LEWIS 1984, p. 224). The gates are made of wooden posts adorned with protective symbols such as weapons and birds and with taboo symbols in bamboo. These prevent the entry of misfortunes such as illness, pest, and wild animals.
- ⁴⁾ The swing, made of nine-meter-high wooden posts, is a characteristic attraction of every Akha village. It is used only a few days a year, during the Swinging Ceremony in late August or early September.

All tourists begin village sightseeing at the Akha village gates. As can be seen in Figure 3, most tourists follow their guide down a marked path following selected attractions and souvenir stands. The touristic situation and actions there within are limited to a very small area, a “front stage” in GOFFMAN’s terms, meaning that a strong segregation between tourist and non-tourist activities can be determined. This protection mechanism to keep the tourist economy spatially confined to the main street of the village can also be observed at other hilltribe village tour sites (see EVRARD and LEEPREECHA 2009, p. 249).

Figure 5: Tourists sightseeing in the Akha village



Photograph: A. TRUPP 2006.

Figure 6: Tourists arriving in Jorpakha



Photograph: A. TRUPP 2006.

Type of Tourism

The type of hilltribe tourism occurring in Jorpakha can be seen as excursion tourism or as a “Tribal Village Tour” as described by COHEN (2001b). The village is visited mainly by groups of tourists consisting almost entirely of foreigners as part of a round trip tour of Thailand. The groups are generally made up of 15 to 25 people, though smaller groups of up to nine people who have booked a one-day tour in Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai also visit the village. A tour guide from the country of origin and an additional Thai guide usually accompany the large tour groups, while the smaller groups are led by a single guide. The price for a one-day excursion from Chiang Mai is about 1,400 Thai baht, no portion of which goes directly to the villagers.

The tourists are driven to the easily accessible village in minivans and small busses (Figure 6). Their length of stay varies from ten to 40 minutes. While touring the hilltribe village it is possible to take photographs and to purchase souvenirs. The tourists spend the majority of their day in an air-conditioned vehicle since it is often important to see as much as possible within a short period of time and the hilltribe visit is only one of several stops on the program. An average of 100 visitors reach the village each day. Since the village can also be easily reached during the rainy season, fluctuations in the number of tourist arrivals are minimal. The organised tour is pared down to a brief visit, taking place sometime between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. depending on the agency. It is therefore not even theoretically possible to go beyond brief intercultural contact.

6.2 The Karen Village Muang Pham

Muang Pham is in the Mae Hong Son province in the Pang Ma Pha district. Up into the 1980s, this region was partly not under the influence of the Thai state, but of the opium king Khun Sa and his Shan United Army (SUA), which controlled the drug traffic along the Burmese-Thai border. Because of this, numerous development programs meant to integrate dwellers of the region into Thai society were launched in this area.

Muang Pham can be reached from the Shan village Tamlod along seven kilometres of dirt road. A paved road goes from Tamlod to Soppong (Pang Ma Pha), which is on Highway 1095 and only about an hour drive away from the alternative tourist centre Pai.⁵ The village was founded in 1961 and is now home to about 100 households and 500 inhabitants. Most of the villagers are *Sgaw-Karen* and have Thai citizenship. Nine families have converted to Christian Baptism, a church of which is in the village. The majority of the villagers are officially Buddhists, but it can be said that Buddhist ideologies are compatible with those of the Karen. Since 2005, households have access to solar-powered electricity, a development that brought about great changes for the villagers.

⁵) Pai is still described as a “laid back spot for backpackers”, but meanwhile the development of a new tourism segment in the mid to upper price category cannot be overseen.

Unlike the Akha village Jorpakha, more than half of the villagers here have land use rights for wet rice fields or for wet rice as well as mountain rice fields. Some households also cultivate cash crops such as garlic, chili, ginger, or corn. Animal husbandry is another important economic base of the village. Most households have chickens and pigs. Some families have buffalo and cows, one family has horses, and another has two elephants used for tourism.

Touristic Situation

Tourists arriving from Tamlod or Soppong are greeted at the village entrance by a welcome board and an information sign about tourist attractions. The village attractions are on the one hand the natural landscape and nearby cultural sites, and on the other hand tourist activities such as elephant riding and bamboo rafting.

The Karen women play a central role in the tourism of Muang Pham and can be observed weaving products which are also sold to tourists. Included in the price of the trekking tour is an overnight stay in the village and meals, which are carried in and cooked by the guide. Since experience has shown that the Karen cuisine does not agree with the tourists, the Muang Pham villagers provide only rice, soft drinks, and beer.

Muang Pham has a wide variety of tourist activities that go beyond the few square meters of Jorpakha's offerings. Nonetheless a definite segregation of tourists and native Karen can be observed. The main tourist activities such as elephant riding, bamboo rafting, and visiting the caves take place outside of the village. The guided tour of the village, where intercultural contact takes place, generally lasts from 30 to 60 minutes. In the "home-stay", the tourists are lodged in an area separate from the occupants or operators.

Type of Tourism

The type of hilltribe tourism found in the Karen village Muang Pham can be defined as trekking tourism or "Jungle Tours" (COHEN 2001b). Single or multiple day trekking tours including a guide are available at guesthouses in the nearby towns Tamlod and Soppong as well as in numerous agencies in Pai, Mae Hong Son, and Chiang Mai. Muang Pham is also visited by tourists who have booked a several-week-long voyage with a high adventure and culture factor in their home country, part of which includes a several-day trek to the hilltribes.

At least 90 percent of the tourists stay overnight in one of the nine unclearly defined "homestays". Unlike Jorpakha, trekking tourism in Muang Pham is highly seasonal. Busy periods include the high season and dry season (December to February) and the part of the rainy season that overlaps the main vacation time for most travellers (July to September). During these periods, tourist groups arrive in the village almost daily. When several groups stay in the village at the same time, the guides try to avoid interaction.

7. Tourism from the Perspective of the Akha and the Karen

Given the brief characterisation of the two villages and the visible manifestations of tourism present in each, the points of view and the gazes of the Akha and the Karen can now be discussed. The focus of interest is on the hilltribe populations' actions, perceptions, and evaluation of touristic activities, as well as on the opportunities and problems that arise.

7.1 Actions

Self-Presentation in Tourism: Staging or "Real" Lifestyle

The Akha and Karen themselves are the main attraction for ethnic and hilltribe tourists. They represent the exotic and foreign flavour that the tourists are searching for, and are expected to fulfil the desired authenticity and confirm any imagined stereotypes (cf. URRY 1995). The women of both villages are of great interest, since it is above all they who wear traditional clothing and impressive jewellery. The Akha women of Jorpakha are especially resplendent in their imposing silver headdresses (Figure 4).

The question is, do the villagers recreate the traditions of the Akha and Karen just for the tourists, thereby consciously creating an artificial scenery? In a study of ethnic tourism in Namibia, ROTHFUSS (2004, p. 133) determined that this type of artificial transformation just for the tourists would be much too elaborate and complex for the Himba and would elicit rejection from the tourist. According to ROTHFUSS, the Himba therefore present their true habitus. However, in the case of the Akha and Karen, conscious strategies of self-presentation and staging can be determined, as evidenced by the example of wearing traditional clothing.

"I only wear the traditional dress for tourists. When I come home to my house I change my clothes. Then I wear Thai or European clothes, trousers, T-shirts, just like you." (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

A portion of the Akha and Karen wear the traditional dress solely for tourists. In this case, cultural capital is used solely as an economic resource or is converted into such.

"Older women wear the traditional dress every day. We, the young people, only wear it when we have to. The weaving women also wear it every day. Some of them would wear it anyway and others just wear it to make a better sell." (Interview with villager, Muang Pham)

Here, my observations are clearly affirmed. It is primarily the older generation that wears the traditional dress outside of a touristic context, therefore unconsciously practicing "the way of being Akha or Karen". While some of the villagers, especially the older generation, present their habitus in the touristic context following what ROTHFUSS would call an

unconscious logic, others present the tourists with a portion of their culture that is of very little or no relevance to themselves.

Posing for Photographs

Only in the Akha village Jorpakha are the villagers paid for posing for photographs. Generally, the guide informs the tourists that they should pay 10 Thai baht for a snapshot. The photo models are mostly female, due to the greater attraction of their jewelry and clothing. During my stay in the village, I only observed two men who posed, one with a bamboo pipe and another with an old hat. The posing men and women prompt the tourists to take a picture with the words “photo, photo”.

For the tourists, the photo models are representatives of a foreign culture, the uniqueness of which must be photographically documented regardless of whether the situation is being staged or not. Paying for a photograph is disagreeable for many tourists and they want to put the interaction behind them as quickly as possible. For the Akha, posing for the cameras is a trade with real earning potential.

“If somebody wants to take a picture of me, he/she has to pay 10 Baht. But sometimes I get more, 20 Baht or 100 Baht. One time I even got 1000 Baht. I need that money for my family.” (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

Souvenir and Handicraft Sales

The sale of souvenirs and handicrafts is the most obvious strategy for attaining economic capital. Villagers both in Jorpakha and Muang Pham use this strategy, but basic differences in production, procurement, and material of the sales items can be determined. Another variable is if the sales items are intended solely for the external public – the tourists – or if the objects are also produced or obtained for the village community. In terms of the hilltribes of northern Thailand, the commercialisation of cultural goods is generally not a spontaneous endogenous process initiated by the villagers, but rather an exogenous process introduced by agencies and private companies (see COHEN 1983, p. 8).

When profit-oriented motives and the economic pressure to earn money outweighs aesthetic standards and when it is more important to satisfy the customer (tourist) than the artist, then these artefacts can be called *souvenir*, *tourist art*, or *airport art* (GRABURN 1976, p. 6). In Jorpakha, the sale of souvenirs is predominant. Only a few items such as bracelets, pillows, or blankets are made by the villagers themselves. The majority of the souvenirs on display are prefabricated products purchased from companies in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, or Tachilek (Myanmar). The vendors repeatedly give the same rational (and easily comprehensible) reasoning for this:

“It is easier to buy the products than to produce them ourselves.” (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

Procuring raw materials and serially produced souvenirs is not an easy task. For souvenirs bought in Tachilek (Myanmar), transport costs and various fees and import taxes must be calculated into the sales price. Even though the Akha are often attributed with a low social status, they are considered to be skilful actors in trade and clearly capable of grasping opportunities (KORFF 2003, p. 122). Although involvement in the souvenir trade was initiated by external influences, the fact that the Akha are capable entrepreneurs is not a new development. The Akha's entrepreneurship is economically beneficial, but brings with it dependence on the market and touristic development. Economic profits from souvenir sales fluctuate strongly and depend on the number of tourist arrivals, the tourist's desire to purchase, and the sales skills of the Akha.

In Muang Pham, only Karen woven products such as scarves, bags, blankets, and sarongs are sold. Prices vary between 100 and 1,000 baht. Production is mainly for tourists, but the production method and the design of the woven items differ only nominally from those for personal use. Products kept for personal use are often woven with more complicated designs, while tourist products almost always have simpler designs. On occasion, private companies place special orders, for example for 100 scarves or bags. In these cases, the design is specified by the company and manufactured by the Karen women. The weavings made in Muang Pham are not only popular among tourists. Inhabitants of the neighbouring Lahu village also come to purchase products.

A weaving group made up of over 30 women produces the woven items. Weaving is a central element of the Karen culture. "The name Karen is almost a synonym of the word 'weaver', that's how spectacular their weavings are" (LEWIS and LEWIS 1984, p. 72). Weaving is traditionally performed exclusively by women (Figure 7). Since the arrival

Figure 7: Woven products are produced exclusively by women



Photograph: A. TRUPP 2006.

of tourism, this skill – which can be seen as incorporated cultural capital – can be transformed into economic profit.

“I have been selling weaving products for 11 years. Before I also used to weave but I never thought about selling it. Tourists then often asked me if they can buy this or that product. So everything started.” (Interview with villager, Muang Pham)

Collaboration and Social Networking

In both villages, social tourism networks have been developed. The Akha and the Karen cooperate with different actors. The most important of these are the guides (see Chapter 7.2) who show the tourists through the villages. The villagers of Muang Pham also maintain contacts with travel agencies in Chiang Mai and Pai, who vend their offers of elephant riding, bamboo rafting, and overnight homestays. Another important collaboration partner is the Guesthouse Cave Lodge in nearby Tamlo.

“I went to the city to travel agencies in order to make arrangements for bamboo rafting and elephant riding. Mr. John⁶ asked if I want to start elephant riding for tourists. John asked me because he does not have enough place at his guesthouse. In the beginning John came with a group once a week.” (Interview with villager, Muang Pham)

This collaboration with other players in the tourism industry is an important economic resource for the Karen and the Akha. It also confirms that it was trekking agencies and guesthouses and not the hilltribes themselves that started the tourism (see DEARDEN 1996; COHEN 2001b). However, it has to be emphasised that the hilltribes are by no means unknowing players in an inscrutable system, as can be seen from the examples above.

7.2 Perceptions and Evaluations

After outlining the actions and strategies of the Akha and Karen in the field of ethnic minority tourism, their perceptions and host gazes can now be discussed. How do the Akha and Karen perceive the ethnic tourism phenomenon? While analysing the research data, the following classification emerged:

- Perception and evaluation of ethnic tourism
- Perception and evaluation of the tourists
- Perception and evaluation of the guides

⁶⁾ John, an Australian, is the manager of the established guesthouse “Cave Lodge” in the neighbouring Shan village Tamlo.

Perception and Evaluation of Ethnic Tourism

- Relativisation of Tourism and Transculturation

One of the main conclusions of this study is that the Eurocentric perspective often overestimates the importance of tourism as an agent of cultural and social change. This overestimation is especially clear when tourism is compared with other processes and developments. LÜEM (1985) sees tourism in developing countries as a typical acculturation process, wherein tourists demonstrate their Western culture to their hosts. This demonstrative effect arouses identification, imitation, and acculturation effects on the side of the host culture.

When looking at the situation in Thailand, it becomes clear that there are many other (sometimes more meaningful) processes that contribute to transculturation. The non-Christian Akha of Jorpakha see Christianity as the most dangerous threat to their culture. Another factor is Thai legislation (i.e. logging ban, citizenship), which has a strong influence upon the lifestyle and culture of the Akha. The influence of mainstream Thai society is also very meaningful and strongly felt in both villages.

Lack of employment and educational facilities in both villages force many villagers to temporarily migrate to the city. Finally, there is the influence of the mass media, which has become stronger since the villages acquired electricity.

None of this is to say that tourism has no effect on the hilltribes. However, seen in comparison with the other processes of change, tourism plays a relatively small role. PLATZ (1995) arrived at a similar conclusion regarding the Lisu in northern Thailand: “The self-confidence of ethnic minorities is often underestimated, the acquisition of western cultural patterns does not have to be directly connected to tourism.”

- Perception of Transculturation and its Relevance to Tourism

The Akha and Karen are aware of their cultural capital, and they use it consciously for touristic purposes. Their villages are undergoing processes of change that are perceived very differently by tourists and hilltribes. The shift in building materials from bamboo and grass to cement, bricks, and corrugated sheet metal is external and quickly recognised by most tourists. The switch from wearing traditional dress to pants and shirts is similarly visible. Infrastructure developments mean that some villagers have access to paved roads, and the expansion of the electrical network allows radio and television voices to echo through the homes. These obvious observations cause “experienced” tourists to identify the village as unauthentic or even spoiled.

“The tourists don’t want development in our village. For example they don’t want to see modern roofs but modern roofs are better for us in the rainy season. Tourists always want to see the old style. They complain about modernisation but don’t understand the problems.” (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

The different action contexts, interests, motives, and attitudes here make the differences between internal and external apperception very apparent.

- Tourism as a Driving Force behind Cultural Perpetuation

The discussion about whether tourism commercialises, destroys, benefits, or even saves the culture of the hosts cannot lead to any generally valid statements. This determination depends upon a multitude of factors including the type and intensity of tourism, the economic background of the country, etc. And what are the attitudes towards and perceptions of the complex and multifaceted effects of tourism?

*“No, tourists cannot help at all. It is up to us Akha people to keep our Akha culture.”
(Interview with villager, Jorpakha)*

Much of the population sees tourism as being neither destructive nor – aside from economic profit – constructive. Looking at the perceptions and statements of the villagers, it becomes evident that the question of whether tourism destroys or rejuvenates traditional cultures cannot be generally answered even within one village. Some villagers repeatedly emphasise their joy and pride in having people interested in their culture, and see it as strengthening self-awareness of being Akha or Karen.

“I’m proud that there are tourists who travel to my village and pay attention to nature and local wisdom. These things are worthy and I will protect them forever.” (Essay of villager, Muang Pham)

- Non-Economic Interests: Language and Cultural Exchange

The predominant interest in and intention behind the hosts’ touristic actions is without a doubt economic. Beyond this, the younger generation also has a significant interest in accumulating educational capital in the form of language skills.

“I like to learn language very much, I like to learn many languages. Now I learn English and French in high school, but this is the last year for me. So I am very happy and so glad to see tourists coming to visit our village.” (Essay of villager, Jorpakha)

An interest in exchanging culture and information can also be determined, whereby the intentions of telling about oneself and of learning about the guests are both present.

According to Max WEBER, instrumental rational actions such as the above-mentioned sales strategies can be differentiated from value rational actions (cf. WEBER 1984). ATE, a Jorpakha villager, enjoys explaining Akha traditions, demonstrating traditional hunting weapons and music instruments, and readily answers the tourists’ questions. His primary interest is not of an economic nature, but can be designated as value rational, since it is not the financial value that is the deciding factor for him, but cultural and religious values.

“For me it is alright even if I get no money because it is good what I am doing and the spirits will bless me for my actions.” (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

Perception and Assessment of Ethnic Tourists

- Generalised Images – Limited Perception Opportunities

The over-simplified images that predominate among both travellers and villagers can be attributed to the brevity of intercultural contact and the physical and social segregation of both groups. The day tourists in Jorpakha stay an average of 15 minutes. In Muang Pham, the average stay is several hours, but tourists remain spatially and socially segregated from the villagers. The verbal communication skills necessary to bridge this gap are absent, since tourists generally do not speak Thai, Akha, or Karen. This language barrier can only be overcome with the help of the guide.

“As I do not speak English my only way to communicate with tourists is sign language. I would often like to talk to tourists but we do not understand each other. So we usually look at each other and smile.” (Interview with villager, Muang Pham)

In Jorpakha, as soon as red or green pick-ups (the common local form of transport, also used by many tourists), air-conditioned minivans, or rental cars are seen driving up the road, it is assumed that tourists are inside. The tourists are immediately credited with certain attributes and characteristics. Of course tourists are not recognised solely by their means of transport, but also by their appearance (skin colour, hairstyle, clothing), their cameras, their behaviour, and their guide.

The tourists, who are recognised as such at the latest upon leaving their car, have specific significances for the hilltribes. WERLEN (1998, p. 332) speaks of a “relational orientation criterion”, which serves to “apply a specific meaning to the physical elements of a specific action and in relation to specific norms and cultural values. In this way, the subject creates a significance relation between the goal of an action and the physical objects of the situation.”

As explained previously, actions within the touristic context are influenced primarily by economic determinants, which is why the image persists that “tourists have money”. The fact that tourists mean income and money is repeated in almost every conversation. I was often asked about my income, the price of my flight ticket, and the price of my digital camera. Camera ownership is another characteristic attributed to travellers. How the Akha obtain economic capital from tourists with cameras is explained in chapter 7.1. The image of the “Golden West” arises from the “openly displayed riches combined with an apparent lack of need to work (FRIEDL 2001, p. 75).

- Tourists are Entertaining and Provide Diversion

In both villages, tourists have lost their status as exciting new occurrences and attractions. Their daily appearances have become too common to incite curiosity or an urge to discover in the natives. The most important aspect of tourists remains the economic capital, but they do also provide entertainment and diversion. In the Akha village, touristic activities take place between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. at the latest. After the last tourists have gone away, the women leave their souvenir stands and return to their houses. In conversation,

it is often repeated that the times where there are no tourists are very calm. The fact that tourists break this calm is sometimes seen as positive.

“And it is exciting and interesting to meet different people every day. They have different skin, different language, and different hairstyles. That’s exciting. When the tourists leave the village it is very quiet.” (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

- Thai Tourists – a Special Case

In the classic ethnic tourism provinces Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Mae Hong Son, there are more domestic than foreign tourists. The number of Thai tourists rose together with the Thai economic boom in the 1980s (also see COHEN in this volume). Most domestic tourists are urban upper- and middle-class, travelling north to visit natural, religious, and historic attractions (BEZIC, KAOSA-ARD and WHITE 2001). Ethnic tourism plays a relatively insignificant role in domestic tourism. A typical one-day excursion from Chiang Mai can at least superficially satisfy all the above wishes, including a visit to a hilltribe village.

How Thai tourists from urban areas perceive the hilltribes of the mountain regions and how the Akha and the Karen assess the Thai tourists must be seen in terms of history and the development of negative stereotypes presented in chapter 2. The members of the hilltribes are aware that their culture is seen by urban Thai society as having a very low status. Akha or Karen who openly wear their traditional dress in the city are often confronted with negative attitudes. My observations in Bangkok support this. The image of hilltribes as being drug-riddled and a threat to security is perpetuated even in academic circles.

“Many people have to move to the city. There, they don’t learn the Karen culture. If they wear the traditional clothing people of the city look down at them.” (Interview with villager, Muang Pham)

While foreign tourists are particularly interested in the traditional, authentic, and typical hilltribe dress, Thai tourists tend to express surprise at such peculiarities.

“Thai tourists often wonder and ask me why I wear this burdensome clothing. They say that it would be much more comfortable without it. Foreigners on the other hand encourage me to wear it. They say it is so beautiful and special.” (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

EVARD and LEEPREECHA (2009, p. 250) argue that domestic tourists favour *sanuk* (fun) over authenticity. In addition to the disinterest of Thai tourists for the hilltribe cultures, the economic factor also reappears. Thai tourists spend less money and bargain harder. The Akha and Karen accept this since the dominant perception among villagers is that foreign tourists have more money than Thai tourists.

- Negative Perceptions

“Many people have already asked me about tourism. I always answered good, good and so on but I am not 100 percent sure about that.” (Interview with villager, Muang Pham)

This statement by a villager shows how difficult it is to elicit critical statements about tourism, since many villagers are dependent upon it. At the same time, the statement reveals a kind of insecurity about the effects of tourism developments, which was often noticed in my interviews. Tourism and tourists are phenomena that are seen for the most part positively, above all because they enable many villagers to improve their living standards. I stated above that the effects of tourism must be seen in relation to other developments and processes. Despite this, the Akha and Karen that I studied criticised some clearly negative aspects of tourism developments.

The younger generation in particular criticises the negative ecological effects, since above average amounts of trash gather at tourist attraction sites in the villages. The hilltribes also see a certain immorality and breach of social norms in the tourists' clothing style.

*"Some of the tourists arrive in shorts and tank tops or crop tops. And once they went swimming in our river without permission. Something like that should not happen."
(Interview with villager, Muang Pham)*

Also, some of the tourists approach the hilltribes disrespectfully and with a lack of esteem. In a few cases, villagers were even cursed at by tourists or had souvenirs stolen. Tourists can misbehave or even steal in the villages with no risk of legal consequences. During my stay in Jorpakha, I experienced one such case. According to an Akha woman, a tourist stole a souvenir. An argument ensued between the tourist and the Akha woman over an amount equal to two euros, whereby both sides accused the other of swindling. At some point, the souvenir salesperson involved turned her back on the tourist and returned cursing to her stand, and the pick-up with the visitor drove on to the next attraction.

While this conflict was a one-time situation for the tourist (who can quickly forget the village and the problem) the hilltribes are repeatedly confronted with conflict situations in which they are the weaker actors. Going to the officials would be an option, but hilltribe members avoid it because of its difficulty and because of the tendency of officials to believe the tourists instead of the hilltribes. Despite these occurrences, the negative images produced are not generalised or projected upon other tourists.

*"We don't blame these people. There are good and bad people all over the world."
(Interview with villager, Jorpakha)*

Perception and Evaluation of Tourist Guides

The tourist guides (for a detailed differentiation of tourist guides, trekking guides, and town guides see COHEN 2001b) play an important intermediary role between the tourists and hilltribes. The central role of the guides has previously been thoroughly discussed in hilltribe tourism literature (see MEYER 1988; TOYOTA 1993; COHEN 2001b), and is reconfirmed by the results of my study. The tourist guides are recognised as having a position of power, which arises from their ability to determine the actions of the tourists. Guides decide which sites will be visited and can also influence when and where tourists buy souvenirs or handicrafts. When visiting a village, tourist guides often as-

sume multiple roles, including translator, cultural intermediary, shopping guide, and orientation point.

The answers in this study show that the Karen and Akha's consider the tourists to be the responsibility of the guides. Therefore, the blame for disrespect of cultural and social norms is placed more on the guides than on the tourists. This is also the reason that the role of guide is often seen more critically than that of the tourist.

"The guides tell the tourists the rules: about the toilets, walks through villages, about taking photos and so on. So tourists with guides should know what is good and what is not good. If there is a problem with tourists we blame the guide. Tourists are under his responsibility." (Interview with villager, Muang Pham)

For the tourists in Jorpakha and Muang Pham, the guide is the primary source of information about the Akha and the Karen's lifestyle and culture. Each arriving tourist group goes on a tour of the village accompanied by a guide who provides some general information about the villages and their inhabitants. The "jungle guides" in Muang Pham generally have a more personal relationship with the villagers and a deeper knowledge of hilltribes than the "town guides" in Jorpakha.

"Our culture is complex and our ceremonies are not explained in a few sentences. The guides have a superficial knowledge about us. So they produce many misunderstandings." (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

Since most tourists speak neither Thai nor Akha nor Karen, one of the most important responsibilities of a guide is to facilitate communication between the hilltribe members and the tourists, especially the translation of information related to the traditions. Sometimes interested tourists ask many questions about the culture and lifestyle of the Akha or about myths and old stories.

"If I explain a ceremony in a few minutes and the guide translates it in a few sentences I know without understanding his language that the translation is incomplete or wrong." (Interview with villager, Jorpakha)

The guide is not only an important mouthpiece and translator, but also forms the tourists' basic understanding and impressions of the Akha and Karen through his or her explanations and interpretations. TOYOTA (1993, p. 52) states in her studies that the guide is the person "who directly constructs and exposes the image of the hill tribe people to the wider outside world. Thus it is essential to realise the importance of the role of the guides in order to demonstrate the mechanism of the image production system in the tourism setting."

8. Closing Comments

Study findings show that the phenomenon of ethnic tourism plays a less important role than expected in the minds of the Akha and Karen. Although tourism is an almost daily

occurrence in both villages, other processes and events such as agricultural problems, citizenship, migration, and missionising are much more strongly perceived.

The Akha and the Karen implement their objective and incorporated cultural capital within the tourism context to transform it into economic profit. In the Akha village, tourism is the sole source of financial income for approximately one hundred people. In the Karen village, tourism serves as a supplementary source of income. Due to its poor economic starting position arising primarily from the lack of land use rights, Jorpakha is heavily dependent upon tourist spending for its income. Thus, stronger negative perceptions about tourism and tourists can be determined in the Akha village.

Overall, tourists have a very positive if rather limited image in both villages. The material possessions apparent among tourists are perceived by the hilltribes as evidence of the belief that the visitors have large amounts of money available. The primary intent of actions in the touristic context is quite clearly economic in nature, although the younger generation shows an interest in the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of language skills. The perception and attitudinal schemas of the visited Akha and Karen differ, especially between older villagers and a younger generation increasingly influenced by mainstream society. Moreover differences between western and domestic tourists were identified. The way domestic Thai tourists and ethnic minority members are gazing upon each other is embedded in historical and political developments and the thereby negatively constructed stereotypes

The tourist guide plays the most important role during intercultural contact and is principally responsible for exported images of the hilltribes. The guide's tips and advice influence the tourists' behaviour in the village (including their purchasing tendencies), leading to the guides being more critically perceived and judged than the tourists.

The paper has shown that visited local residents are not passive objects but are active agents who develop their own perspectives and construct their own gazes upon various aspects of the ethnic tourism phenomenon including different types of tourists, tour guides or the questions of modernisation versus cultural exoticism.

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