

Negotiating Ethnic Representation between Self and Other: The Case of Karen and Eco-tourism in Thailand_

Abstract

Since the late ____s, the hill dwelling minority in Thailand have gained visibility amid social movements concerning environmental conservation, community forest rights, and the appeal for citizenship. In this process they have gained a stage and a voice to represent themselves to a considerable degree. The discourse and representation pertaining to the hill-dwellers are becoming an arena of negotiation, where the hill-dwellers themselves are active participants. In this paper, I examine the layers of discourse regarding the Karen which has evolved within the changing socio-political context. Participants in the discourse adopt varied elements of the existing layers of discourse by travelers, missionaries, academics, administrators and NGOs which have all contributed to the stereotype of the Karen as the meek and submissive hill-dwellers. In the latter half of the paper, I take up a case of a recent eco-tourism venture in Chiang Mai Province, and analyze how villagers whose existence has been precarious for decades due to its position on the edge of a National Park have chosen to represent themselves in the venture. Eco-tourism especially provides a pertinent arena for the negotiation of such self/other representation.

Keywords: Eco-tourism, Northern Thailand, Karen, identity negotiation, ethnic representation