

War's Ontogeny: Militias and Ethnic Boundaries in Laos and Exile

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Abstract

This article concerns the dynamics of people-making during war and exile. While the Second Indochina War (1954–75) in Laos was international, the fashioning of ethnic identities in relation to militias also reflected local dynamics and divisions, and rivalries over prominence. I focus on the identification of Iu Mien peoples in relation to Chao La, a militia leader whose prominence reflected his authoritarianism and command over resources, as well as the social repercussions of large-scale resettlement and the dynamics of refugee camps. My argument centers on the potential of warfare and violence to define ethnic identities, and on social reproduction concerning cultural factors in ethnicized and militarized social life.

Keywords: ethnicity, warfare, militias, witchcraft, Iu Mien, Laos

Introduction

The war in Laos which ended formally in 1975 is still generative of identifications and agendas. A small guerilla unit is still hiding in the jungles, now more than three decades after the war, and it receives occasional support from General Vang Pao, the wartime leader of Hmong refugee-immigrants now in the USA [Fuller 2007]. During summer of 2007, Vang Pao was arrested in California after a sting operation that exposed his attempt to buy missiles, guns, and bombs for the purpose of re-taking Laos from its communist government.¹ “Many [Hmong] felt betrayed by the United States when the war ended,” and Hmong veterans in the US were “bewildered” over the arrest of General Vang Pao. “[The Hmong in the US] are frightened, [they] see this as an attack on them” [Weiner 2008].

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1) During the war, the movement was known as Pathet Lao (Lao Country). With victory, the country became the Lao People's Democratic Republic. I use “Pathet Lao” throughout, following usage among the Iu Mien people who became refugees. I use Lao spelling conventions when appropriate, e.g. Houai Xay (that is Huai Sai in Thai and Mien) and Nam Nyu. Nam Nyu and Nam Dui sometimes appear as Nam Yu and Nam Thoui [e.g. McCoy 1991; Warner 1996]. My dates for the war, 1954–75, can be challenged — 1960 is a more common reference to its beginnings, and the fighting continued long past 1975.

Accounts that conflate Hmong ethnicity with Vang Pao's agendas, the remnants of post-1975 militias, and Hmong refugee immigrants in the USA [Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Quincy 1995; 2000] make it hard to imagine diversity among the Hmong, or their adjustment to the post-1975 regime in Laos. Instead, Hmong people appear locked, ethnically, in this struggle against the contemporary Lao authorities, in a way that is anchored to Vang Pao's prominence.²⁾ Expectations of ethnic divisions and animosities are so common as to appear obvious. My aim here is to offer another perspective on this dynamic, by charting the impact of the Second Indochina War on the ethnic consciousness of another group, the Iu Mien.³⁾

Similar to the Hmong, the Iu Mien people in Laos were caught up in the war, after which they and many others entered refugee camps in Thailand and later settled in "third countries" such as the USA. I draw on conversations with a range of Iu Mien people in the US, most of them born before 1963. I do not identify the sources for individual statements, largely because they concern contested notions of history and identity. Statements about militias, in particular their leaders, are sometimes sensitive topics, and I have an interest in both continuing relations with people and in not exposing them to any risk of retribution for views with which they have trusted me. Since late 2005, I have been doing intermittent research with Iu Mien refugee-immigrants in the US. I have conducted interviews and been engaged in participant observation of various kinds in Portland, Oregon, in Redding and Oakland, California, and in a seasonal camp of mushroom pickers from a range of West Coast settlements. Earlier, at several times between 1990 and 2005, I had done research with Iu Mien people in Thailand, so the language and certain matters of social life and culture were familiar.

In my initial encounters with US-based Iu Mien, people repeatedly told me that they had all been under Chao La's command and that they had left Laos in 1975 for refugee camps. Over time, it became apparent that this did not describe the situation of migration or how Iu Mien people related to the militia leader. But this simplified self-presentation is officially true in that the two elements were central to

2) One dimension of how far Vang Pao's supporters identify the ethnic group with him is the dismissal that I heard of Hmong academic Yang Dao, who has not come out in full or uncritical support of this leader: "He (Yang Dao) is not really Hmong, he was adopted from across the Lao border in Vietnam." This is a fanciful assertion, but it makes the point that to his ardent supporters (my source was from the Vang clan), Vang Pao is indexical for the ethnic group, a principle of their ethnicity. Warner [1996], perhaps the most neutral source on Hmong in the war, relates various internal divisions and factionalisms such as between White and Green Hmong [*ibid.*: 119–120] and between different kin-groups [*ibid.*: 360]. He also mentions that Yang Dao was willing to publicly challenge some of Vang Pao's decisions, and that at different times many ordinary Hmong people openly criticized Vang Pao for the suffering that the war brought on them [*ibid.*: 298, 358, 366].

3) Iu Mien are also known as Mien and Yao; Yao is a Chinese term that is more inclusive [see Purnell 1991; Yoshino 1995; Jonsson 2005; Alberts 2006]. In this article I use Iu Mien, which is the preference of the people I am concerned with, who are refugee immigrants in the USA. I use "Lao Mien" and "Lao Iu Mien" to distinguish them from Iu Mien people in Thailand.

people's credibility as refugees who were eligible for resettlement in the US or another country. Once it was clear that I was not an agent of the American authorities, and people had a way of situating me in terms of the Iu Mien settlement where I had been based in Thailand, other accounts became possible. But even if it is not true in any simple way that all Iu Mien in Laos had been under Chao La, the notion points to the important role of warfare and other violence in shaping the social landscape of Southeast Asia.

My case examines how violent histories shape and even create ethnic divisions and ethnic consciousness. Not all violence in Southeast Asia has fallen along ethnic lines, but there is considerable continuity with other violence in how it normalizes authoritarian command by leaders who become indexical of society. Chao La is indexical of the Iu Mien people (and Vang Pao of the Hmong) because he used violence to suppress what he took as signs of insubordination. In times of peace, people could give priority to more domestic concerns of livelihood and family and perhaps dismiss the demands of would-be leaders. When people fled Laos for refugee camps on the Thai side, militia leaders such as Vang Pao and Chao La had considerable say over where people were placed and whether they would get support, which added to the conflation of leaders and ethnic groups. The identification was continued in exile as the militia leaders re-established army units to fight in Laos after 1975, and refugees came under considerable pressure to contribute to their cause. For the most part, Iu Mien gave up on such donations by 1990 or earlier, which has made it easier for them to discuss this history with me.

The case also concerns social continuities and transformations. While the Hmong and Iu Mien militias were established by American agents of the CIA, the result was not an American creation. There were already high-level leaders among the Iu Mien, who had made relations with lowland rulers and participated in taxation, trade monopolies, and warfare. One Iu Mien leader rose to prominence under the French colonial authorities in Laos, in part through military suppression campaigns for the colonial authorities. His sons became leaders in the CIA-sponsored militia. The case suggests historical continuities in leadership, and it also represents a shift in that no other leader-candidates were able to gain comparable positions. The memory of other high-level leaders faded, and previous chiefly competition over household size became a thing of the past as livelihood and social relations were restructured in times of war.

Indirectly, my concern is with an effort to characterize the region in terms of the "peoples" of Southeast Asia. While there is general agreement among anthropologists that the earlier focus on ethnic groups in terms of cultural features and patterns of social structure is no longer productive, there is no agreement on what perspective would best replace it. Ethnicity is still relevant, even if no people match a schematic list of traits. Rather than join the move to abandon the study of ethnic groups, I

suggest that a historical focus on people-making — how people are aligned with particular categories, through what dynamics, in what context, and whose perspective it manifests — may bring some aspects of the region into new focus.

Ian Hacking [2002] draws on Foucault to suggest that “historical ontology is about the ways in which the possibilities for choice, and for being, arise in history [as] the space of possibilities for character formation that surround a person, and create the potential for ‘individual experience’” [*ibid.*: 23]. Hacking maintains that there is no general process of people-making; “each category has its own history” [*ibid.*: 111]. I view historical ontology as equivalent to ontogeny, which is commonly used in reference to the biological evolution of individuals, in relation to phylogeny; the development of a species or type [Gould 1977]. My appropriation of the term is meant to strike against biologism and the notion that an ethnic group is somehow a self-explanatory entity that can be accounted for in terms of ethno-linguistic categorization, a leader, a list of traits, or a political agenda, independent of history. Particular times and contexts offer certain options for identity work and social relations, leading to family resemblances among social units that shape themselves in relation to common projects.

I cannot claim any fieldwork familiarity with life in Laos during the war or the subsequent time in refugee camps. But fieldwork and ethnohistorical investigations in Thailand give me some perspective on relations and tensions between chiefs and householders and the uneven ability to speak for an ethnic group. War can engender a nation-like structuring of ethnic groups, involving not only a leader with an administration and a military but also provisions and structures for health care, education, media, recreation, and social control. Like nations, such ethnic entities may draw on international support to sustain themselves and their projects [for Burma’s minority areas, see Falla 1991; Smith 1991; South 2003; Gravers 2007].

War affects people’s sense of identity through particular configurations of time, space, and agency [Greenhouse 2002]. In her study of identity formation among Hutu refugees in Tanzania, Malkki [1995] shows that oppositional identification between Hutu and Tutsi was not a phenomenon of much historical depth but emerged in the wake of massive violence related to governmental intrigues and hardened in refugee camp as people came to view their experiences as ethnic [*ibid.*: 145]. She mentions that at least some of the Hutu rhetoric of ethnic purity and authenticity derived from militia leaders [*ibid.*: 223–224], but her analysis is largely focused on the contrasting strategies of identification in refugee camp and in a multiethnic city, of people either playing up or down their Hutu-ness. There was a striking contrast between how people in the refugee camp produced a sense of a pure Hutu national identity, and how those in the city dissolved such national categories [*ibid.*: 2–3]. In the former setting, Hutu identity was central to nation-like self-fashioning that denied the possibility of accommodation to Tutsi or

Tanzanians. In the latter, people erased any traces of their Hutu-ness as it might have marked them as immigrants. Hutu identity brought security in the camp while it had the opposite effect in the city, where people instead engaged with multi-ethnic cosmopolitanism [*ibid.*: 39–51, 163, 234–236].

From the case of Iu Mien in Laos and exile, I argue that the rhetoric of ethnic purity is ontogenic; that it makes people, much in line with Malkki's analysis. However, my case highlights the role of militia leaders in sustaining the notions of purity and danger, in part through violence and purges of (mostly internal) Others. One segment of my case concerns Iu Mien fears of witchcraft that took shape in a resettlement that was in many ways an ethnicized space, between 1965 and 1975. The anxieties about witchcraft do not have parallels among Iu Mien in Thailand, in the refugee camps, or in Laos at other times. War and exile created ethnic effects, largely because they provided a context for militia leaders to appropriate an ethnic voice and to ruthlessly suppress any internal diversity or critique.

The war in Laos was not an ethnic war, but some anti-communist militias were established in ethnic terms. The militias were initiated and funded by the American CIA [Warner 1996]. After the war ended in 1975, the militias were reestablished with some support from neighboring Thailand, and by 1980s they were actively supported by communist China that was invested in countering the influence of the Soviet Union and Vietnam. China actively supported the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and attacked Vietnam in 1979 after Vietnam had invaded Cambodia and removed the Khmer Rouge from power. China revoked its support of Communist Party Thailand guerillas and struck deals with the right-wing military government of Thailand in order to ship arms and other support to the Khmer Rouge, from where some were supplied to anti-communist guerillas inside Laos [McBeth 1980; US Department of Defense 1981; Gunn 1983; Evans and Rowley 1990].

While this complex global ecology of support is an important part of the picture, it does not offer much insight into how people came to or sustained particular ethnic identifications. Lubkemann [2008] argues for a reorientation of the ethnography of "warscapes as sites of generative social reproduction rather than merely social interruption," and for a focus on "tracing the dynamic development of social relations throughout conflict" [*ibid.*: 24]. Prior to the war, there were several high-level chiefs among the Iu Mien in northern Laos, southern China, and northern Thailand, all of whom had titles (*phya*, *phaya*) from lowland kingdoms. They tried to outshine one another, but it was only among the next generation and through war that one chief's sons came to a leadership position that assumed the ethnic group within a national territory. This command never took to all Iu Mien in Laos, but internal resettlement and later refugee camps and continued fighting after the war contributed greatly to an ethnic consciousness through the militia leader's agendas. Such ethnic consciousness has served to make internal diversity unthinkable and to anchor ethnicity to individual militia leaders.

Entering the Second Indochina War

The increasingly ethnicized dynamics in Southeast Asia during the colonial era informed the divide of minorities and a national majority that became routine in the twentieth century [Anderson 1998; Salemink 2003; Jonsson 2005; Pholsena 2006], including in Thailand that was never formally colonized. This shift was not simply imposed from above, it drew in many ways on particular intersections of local agendas and ambitions with the opportunities availed by colonial and later national structures of trade and administration. Tsing's [2005] notion of "friction" suggests one perspective on this landscape. Rather than assuming that war or globalization comes from outside and affects a place-bound people, we should pay closer attention to how violence, investment and exploitation, trade, and other factors shape social relations, political options, identity work, and (in Tsing's case) environmental destruction. From that perspective, the focus shifts toward examining how war and exile provided particular intersections where the Iu Mien have emerged as a particular people.

American intervention on one side of a postcolonial nationalist conflict in Laos led to the creation of ethnic militias among several groups of highland minorities [Adams and McCoy 1970; Stuart-Fox 1982; 1996; Baird 2008]. The CIA initiated and supported Hmong, Iu Mien, and Khmu militias to fight the communist Pathet Lao forces, and trained various other peoples for surveillance, often in ethnically mixed teams. Within any of these ethnic labels, there were many who were variously neutral or were on the communist side [Proschan 1989: 211–232; Smalley *et al.* 1990: 27–39]. As in Burma [Dudley 2007; Gravers 2007], the dynamics of minority ethnicization related to Laos have drawn on warfare as much as on conditions of exile, in refugee camps and in various "third countries" of resettlement such as the US.

In 1958, agents of the CIA asked around who were the leaders of the Iu Mien people, and were told of Chao Mai and Chao La. At the time, Chao Mai had the position of *taseng*, a sub-district headman. The CIA's need for ethnic leaders increased the two brothers' prominence. The CIA also established a Khmu leader (Khamsene), for instance, along with establishing Vang Pao as the Hmong leader. Some Iu Mien men went for soldier training, and some served as spies across the border in China [McCoy 1991: 335–343]. Attacks by Pathet Lao forces on Iu Mien settlements made a real difference, in that people either had to cooperate with them or fight on the other side. Recollections of this time suggest the violence of forging the two sides of this national and international war, and the wartime normalcy of killing those on the other side:

In about 1963, communist soldiers came to the village. I was with my grandfather visiting at the other end of the village, about 10 minutes walk from our house. The soldiers shot and killed a cow (to eat). My older brother had got a gun from Chao Mai in Nam Dui just a few weeks before that. After they killed the cow, the leader of

the communist army was in the (household's) vegetable garden. Bullets would not enter him, he had *faat* (magical protection). But the Iu Mien caught the leader and then his soldiers fled. They (local Iu Mien) knew bullets could not kill him (the Pathet Lao unit-leader), so they did him in with rocks and then a shovel. Later we (the villagers) went to Nam Keung.

In response to Pathet Lao capture of the provincial capitals of Nam Tha and Muang Sing, adjacent to China, the two Iu Mien leaders brought their followers from these provinces to the area around Houai Xay, by the Mekong River and at the border with Thailand, about a week's walk from their previous home villages. The resettlement in Nam Keung and Nam Dui took shape between 1962 and 1964. There was some tension between the two brothers. Chao Mai, the older, was the military leader, and he set up camp in Nam Dui. Chao La, always more of a businessman, led his followers to Nam Keung. Some people have mentioned this fraternal rivalry, but none extensively. Chao Mai passed away from a sudden stroke in 1967, leaving Chao La as the de-facto leader.⁴⁾

The brothers, Chao Mai and Chao La (these are princely titles, their names were Tzeo I-Fu and I-Kyen) were the sons of a man with the title *Phya Long* ("great chief," his name was Tzeo Wuen Tsoi Lin), who was one of several titled chiefs in this border area of Laos and China.⁵⁾ Upland leaders received titles, collected tribute or tax, and served as reserve military forces [Jonsson 2005: 73–88]. Prior to World War II, there was competition among these chiefs, ranging from Thailand through Laos to Muang La in Yunnan, China, over household size. The goal was a household of one hundred people. While no one is said to have achieved this goal, it indicates how chiefs were engaged in social formations that were radically different from those of commoners — ordinary farming households had on average between four and twelve people.

My conversations with Iu Mien in the USA, who earlier lived in the Muang Sing and Nam Tha area of northern Laos, indicate that there were many titled (*phya long*) Iu Mien chiefs in the early decades of the twentieth century. The father of Chao Mai and Chao La was not the uniquely prominent leader that some accounts suggest [Kandre 1967: 615–616]. He was known as *Phya Long Hai*, "cruel great

4) McCoy [1991: 338; 300–301, photo caption] portrays Chao La as a druglord and a "heroin manufacturer." To the best knowledge of the people I have consulted during 2005–09, two Chinese men ran refineries in the Huai Xay area, and they paid Chao La protection money as his militia guarded their outfits. Chao La himself had a saw mill and perhaps a rice mill. Warner mentions a power struggle between the two brothers, and states that they "were more interested in war profits than in military gains" [1996: 259]. He states that Chao La ran opium refineries [*ibid.*: 259–262] but I have no affirmation of that from my interviews with Iu Mien people, some of whom have no interest in protecting Chao La's reputation. Chao Mai and Chao La profited from the opium trade, and sold some CIA-donated arms and other equipment on the black market, primarily to armies on the Burma-side [*ibid.*: 255, 259].

5) *Phya Long* is a Tai Lue pronunciation of what is Phaya Luang in Lao and Thai.

chief,” which suggests something other than an unqualified admiration. He rose to prominence not because he was the only leader but because of rivals whom he overshadowed through tax collection and military suppression campaigns for the benefit of French colonial rule. That his two sons later rose to prominence in the context of war and American support is a manifestation of continuity of leadership claims in a new context, and served to preclude the perpetuation of leadership among others with *phya* titles. The entry of an Iu Mien militia into the Second Indochina War was as much a break with the past as it manifests the search for ways of perpetuating and enhancing leadership positions against rival claimants.

The forging of an Iu Mien identity in terms of Chao La and his militia shares many features with militarized national identities and while it lasted it thrived on continued fighting. Identity and violence became co-constitutive [Kapferer 1998; Malkki 1995]. This is war’s ontogeny, the generative potential of violence for shaping people’s sense of time, place, and purpose in a way that plays to the interests of military leaders and state-like structures. In delimiting what can be thought and experienced, and in classifying people and places in terms of an inside and an outside, war creates the contours of ontogeny that naturalizes violence in terms of ethnic and national identities. The oppositional identification of warring sides normalizes the use of deadly violence and tends to silence any critique. Among the perspectives that get suppressed or silenced are those that privilege people’s membership in a household or a settlement, or have casual regard for ethnic or national boundaries.⁶⁾

Lintner [2003] suggests that British colonially-enforced peace in Burma held in check an “intricate jigsaw puzzle of nationalities, tribes, immigrant communities, linguistic and religious groups [but that] the Second World War pitted many of the nationalities against one another, and old animosities flared anew” [*ibid.*: 181]. There is every indication that this statement projects onto the past what are in fact very contemporary dynamics. Ethnic lines became hardened and militarized following Burma’s independence in 1948, and settled into an ethnicized civil war that has lingered with varying intensity since 1962 [Callahan 2003; South 2003].

The war in Laos created antagonistic identifications that hardened at war’s end and in exile. “Violence is itself a discourse of nationalism, a dynamic of social formation, and not merely a con-

6) China’s Great Leap Forward campaign during 1958–60 led many Iu Mien families in Muang La, Yunnan, to flee across the border to Laos, and made relations across that border more difficult. Many Lao Iu Mien now in the USA have relatives on the China side and speak of previously easy relations back and forth. First-hand accounts of the Chinese campaigns for collectivization and against what the communist cadres considered lazy and parasitical rich farmers may have contributed to the Lao Iu Mien willingness to side with Chao Mai and Chao La against the Pathet Lao. Mueggler [2001: 159–198] provides a compelling account of what the Great Leap Forward meant for some of the hinterland peoples who have stayed in Yunnan.

sequence or a product of social forces or, as in many functionalist arguments, constituted in the absence or disintegration of society and morality” [Kapferer 1998: xii]. Prior to being drawn into warfare in 1958, people in Iu Mien villages in northern Laos had various relations among themselves, with non-Mien neighbors and traders, and with state-structures, both Lao and French colonial. It was only through war and exile that Iu Mien people were suspended from such particulars and came to a collective identity that drew on the intersections of militia leaders, exile, and refugee resettlement in other countries.

War centers agency on high-level leaders. The process is similar to what occurred with an Iu Mien migration group from southern China to northern Thailand in the late nineteenth century [Jonsson 1999; 2001]. The migration leader subsequently reproduced his prominence in settled conditions through ritual as much as links of tribute and trade to a lowland kingdom, and he and his son are said to have maintained law and order within their highland area. They would arrest thieves and mediate disputes, but outside the context of migration and warfare their command over social life was limited by people's domestic orientations in farming, ritual, trade, and kinship.

This is where war makes a fundamental difference in justifying a leader's permanent command over social life; his ability to offer protection and provisions, and the largely-unquestioned ability to recruit soldiers and other staff for his projects against the interests of farming households. “Leaders prefer war because war prefers leaders” [Ferguson 2008: 44]. The ontogeny of Iu Mien during the war in Laos was later entrenched in refugee camps as people were accepted and placed in terms of ethnic leaders, and where ethnic and other militia leaders organized new armies to continue fighting after the war formally ended.

It deserves mention that Vang Pao ran a multilingual radio station in Long Cheng. An Iu Mien woman who now lives in the USA was one of the Iu Mien speakers, when she was 15 years old. Her service for one year allowed her brother to stay home and farm for his parents. The then-teenager would read news and sing traditional songs, and at Vang Pao's New Year festival in 1969 she danced *lamwong* (the standard form of social dance) with the King of Laos. Chao La similarly invited various dignitaries to his festivals in Nam Keung. The militia leaders engaged in national and multi-ethnic politics along with their ethnic agendas. The “Union of Lao Races” radio station, established in 1965, was initiated by an American CIA-agent, Vinton Lawrence [Warner 1996: 178]. Both dynamics, those of ethnicization and of multi-ethnic nation building, point to US involvement. But the historical setting also motivated the realignment of society in national terms, and the efforts of Vang Pao and Chao La need to be seen in the context of pervasive Lao prejudice against Hmong, Iu Mien, and other highlanders at the time [*ibid.*: 112–113, 149]. As the militia leaders entrenched their ethnic prominence and took

an active part in the ethnicization of social life, they made various efforts to shape national society toward multi-ethnic accommodation.⁷⁾

Chao La's Command and the Ethnic Boundary

Chao La is very central to this case, and any choice of terms to describe him may place me on one side of internal or other politics. I have heard a range of views on him from among Iu Mien people in the US. The diversity of views is rather similar to what I had earlier learned about certain past leaders of the Iu Mien in Thailand [see Jonsson 2005: 82]. To some, these were exemplary leaders whose unique qualities were the key to a good life in the highlands; others were somewhat indifferent and did not suggest that the leaders had much power in daily life; yet others suggested that they were cruel and held on to their power through ruthless means. The range of local views expresses varied social proximity to these leaders and uneven access to the benefits they could distribute. From knowledge based on extensive fieldwork, I find these diverse views to all be accurate in their different ways. There is no single way to describe Iu Mien leaders without taking sides in local politics. My perspective aspires to “objectivity-in-progress” that combines inter-subjectivity and critical distance [see Borneman and Hammoudi 2009: 19–20]. My aim is not the critique or glorification of militia leaders, but an understanding of the historical process that aligned their identity with that of ethnic groups.

In 2005, when I started meeting US-based Iu Mien people and learning about their lives, I was repeatedly told that they had all been under war-time leader Chao La and that they had left Laos in 1975. As I got to know more people and they told me more about the past, these facts emerged as radical simplifications that had more to do with people's post-war resettlement. The American people interviewing refugees in Thailand had particular notions through which they could sort genuine refugees from others [see Long 1993: 155–165]. To them, any Iu Mien person qualified insofar as they had been under Chao La, whose militia had been financed by the CIA, and left Laos once the communist Pathet Lao took over in 1975. Many people had left in 1973 and at other times that did not match the officially declared year of genuine-refugee departure, but anyone declaring that in an interview would be turned down for further consideration, as “nothing was happening in Laos at that time.”

The military headquarters were at Nam Nyou and the civilian headquarters at Nam Keung, where

7) During the 1950s and 60s, the Pathet Lao were also devising schemes of multi-ethnic nation-building. Their framework of nationals-by-altitude (Lao Sung, Lao Thoeng, Lao Lum, “highland-, midslope-, and lowland Lao”) became official by 1975 and is a significant part of national iconography [Trankell 1998; Ovesen 2004: 221–222].

people farmed lowland areas and some hill fields. This big resettlement was multi-ethnic but in many ways it was the domain of Chao La, who became the sole Iu Mien leader after his older brother died. Each Iu Mien household had to supply one man to serve as a soldier. Starting in 1970, Chao La annually sent one hundred soldiers to help Hmong militia-leader Vang Pao fight in the northeast, at Long Cheng and the Plain of Jars, and Vang Pao paid him for this service.⁸⁾ Some Iu Mien people rumored at the time that Chao La had sold off the soldiers (“many later were able to return,” one Chao La supporter added). In general, households with only one male of working age were exempted from recruitment. But even those came under pressure:

The only son of one household was recruited to fight for Chao La in 1971. He went for a year and then came back, and the family did not want to see him go again. They asked that the son stay home because they still had to harvest rice, and Chao La's men came and beat up the mother, so the son had to serve another term.

I learned of this during a conversation about songs, and asked if people had made up songs about this predicament: “No one dared make up songs about this, if they did hear it then they could order the soldiers to strike them immediately, or they could be put in jail. People could not say anything bad about our own friendly soldiers.” Military command played up authoritarianism and the use of violence, which were naturalized through the equation of the ethnic group and its leader that made alternative priorities of identity, such as families or households, appear subversive or unthinkable.⁹⁾

There were two kinds of military units under Chao La; Special Guerilla Units (SGU) and Village Militias — the former received training in Thailand while the latter were trained in Nam Nyou. The soldiers' salaries came from the CIA. But the dynamic of ethnicization was not exclusively related to warfare and the CIA. There were also Iu Mien who were trained as medics and operated clinics, and some who were trained as school teachers (and taught in Lao), who served only Iu Mien people. Some Khmu in the area were similarly trained and only served Khmu people. The medics and teachers were paid by the US Agency for International Development [USAID, which operated almost like a second government, see Branfman 1970: 256–264] and were trained at their initiative. They were not directly under Chao La's command but their services primarily benefited his people: “He would stall or end the career of anyone he did not like.”

Chao La's ethnic leadership and the year of departure from Laos are not neutral facts but an

8) I learned of this from various Iu Mien people, but my source for the date is Warner who suggests that this was not particularly successful. There was, for instance, at least one armed fight between the Iu Mien and the Hmong in the first year [Warner 1996: 299].

9) During the war, Vang Pao had many Hmong dissenters (and those who had accommodated the Pathet Lao) variously arrested, tortured, or executed [Warner 1996: 278–279].

interested claim to a particular identity. The two items of Iu Mien exile identification make sense as “mythico-history,” concerning a people’s claim to “be (or become) a collective actor, a historical subject, in the domain of interrelationships among nations . . . the attainment of a legitimate place in [the order of nations], a seat at that table” [Malkki 1995: 253]. It is rare, if ever really true, that an ethnic group has been unambiguously on one “side” of such conflicts in Southeast Asia [see for instance South 2003: 240]. Statements of that sort are politically charged projections of unity and purpose and should be met with ethnographic skepticism. I do not wish to undermine the claim of my Iu Mien acquaintances that they were all under Chao La and left Laos in 1975 as somehow wrong or false. This statement is primarily about the position of refugees in conditions of exile — it is not wrong but its truth is more positional and retrospective than it is historical.

A number of Iu Mien fled Laos in 1973, in response to the capture of the Nam Nyou base by Pathet Lao soldiers (with considerable Vietnamese backing). This occurred at New Year when most of the Iu Mien soldiers were away, celebrating with their families.¹⁰⁾ Many of the people affiliated with Nam Keung and the Iu Mien militia unit left for Thailand at the time. Of those, many returned to Laos after a month, with Chao La, when it was clear that Nam Keung would not also be attacked. In 1973, a coalition government was formed in Laos, after international peace talks. When it lost power in 1975, many Iu Mien soldiers feared being sent to labor or re-education camps, and people started fleeing across the Mekong River. When the first groups left, many were brought over by boats arranged by a man on the Thai side who had established relations with Iu Mien in Nam Keung as an arms trader to insurgents in Burma.

The thousands of Lao Iu Mien people who crossed the Mekong River to Thailand in 1975 were not as easily absorbed as the perhaps hundreds who left in 1973. Refugee camps were gradually set up in Chiangrai (Chiangkhong, Chiangkham) and Nan Provinces (Mae Jalim, Nam Yao), and elsewhere.¹¹⁾ Military leaders had considerable say in where their followers were placed. When one temporary camp was dissolved, Iu Mien from Nam Keung were sent with their leader Vern Chien to Suan Ban Tong (Chiangkhong in Chiangrai) while Iu Mien who had had no previous relations with Chao La were sent with Long Tong, another leader from Chao La’s militia, to Nam Yao (in Nan). While others were later placed in the Ban Vinai camp, which was heavily Hmong and a Vang Pao stronghold [see Long 1993], the structures of refugee relief tended to reinforce an ethnic imaginary that played to the interests of militia leaders.¹²⁾

10) In response to the Pathet Lao capture of Nam Nyou, the base was destroyed in an American bombing raid [Warner 1996: 341–342].

11) The first camp was established in Chiangsaen, but it was replaced by camps in Chiangkhong and Chiangkham. See Van-es-Beeck [1982], who gives an estimate of 300,000 refugees from Laos to Thailand by 1980. W. Robinson provides a more up-to-date account of the camps serving refugees from Laos [1998: 103–126].

Some hundreds of the Lao Iu Mien people who settled inside Thailand during the 1970s were rounded up in the early 1980s, by the UNHCR after the Thai government made a complaint about “strays” from Laos who needed to be in refugee camp. This roundup brought to camp some Lao Iu Mien who had settled in Thailand in the 1960s, as well as Iu Mien who had lived in Burma most of their lives and had been on the Thai side for a few years, and some who had spent their whole lives in Thailand. This denial of residence in Thailand served to revamp the Lao Iu Mien sense of themselves as individuals and a people in relation to Chao La and Laos, at the same time as it entrenched certain Thai nationalist understandings of Thailand’s highland ethnic minorities as aliens. One man who had lived in Nam Keung told me that the Iu Mien refugees who settled in farming villages on the Thai side had “disappeared like drops of water into a river.” This is from a perspective that is tied to the official story of exile as of 1975, and assumes that Iu Mien people had lived in Laos and were now in the US (and elsewhere), rather than making a new home in Thailand.¹³⁾

The internal resettlement in and around Nam Keung created an ethnic space that was unlike the common multi-ethnicity of the social landscape in these areas (in Laos and adjacent regions of China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma). Nam Keung had various non-Mien peoples such as Lahu, Akha, Hmong, Tai Neua and Tai Lue, but the wartime configuration made it an Iu Mien space. Nam Keung provided the conditions for fashioning an ethnic consciousness in relation to a military leader, that was later reinforced as people fled the country and were placed in refugee camps on the Thai side as of 1975. Iu Mien in Laos who were beyond the resettlement near Houai Xay lived in villages that were interspersed with those of various ethnic others. Theirs was not an ethnicized space, and I have never heard Lao Iu Mien who were not affiliated with Chao La claim their experiences as being those of the whole ethnic group. When I have consulted with the Iu Mien from Nam Keung about what I learned from those who never identified with Chao La’s command, their most common reply is a dismissal; “they are ignorant, all Iu Mien were under Chao La.”

The wartime Iu Mien terms for those on the communist side were *jan-lom* and *jan-sala*. The term *jan* marks them as non-Mien, suggesting how at least the people in Nam Keung identified Iu Mien ethnicity with their side in the conflict. *Jan-lom* translates as “bush-aliens,” while *sala* is from the Lao language; “to forsake, renounce, abdicate,” implying the communists’ plan to overthrow the Lao

12) At the time, Thai authorities and military personnel cultivated relations with anti-government militias in Laos, Cambodia, and Burma. This changed in 1988 when the Thai authorities made official deals for economic relations (resource exploitation, primarily logging) with their neighbors [Hirsch 1995: 236].

13) The statement has some parallel in the disparaging remarks that Burundian Hutu refugees in camp made about the others who settled in the Tanzanian city of Kigoma and slipped into a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan social life by shedding any markers that would identify them as refugees or Hutu [Malkki 1995: 158].

monarchy [Herbert Purnell, personal communication, December 2008]. Some of my contacts stated that *jan-lom* were the Pathet Lao soldiers and spies whereas *jan-sala* were the North Vietnamese communists who backed the Pathet Lao and were also involved in the fighting. But there is no consistency in the references of these terms, now over thirty years later, beyond the implication that these were not Iu Mien people. Many of my sources say that the terms were nonsense words that were invented for the sake of secrecy in case there were spies around, which indicates a lingering anxiety about people transgressing social boundaries without others' knowledge. Such fears were central to the notions of witchcraft in the Nam Keung resettlement.

Witchcraft

Sitting in a noodle-shop in Portland, Oregon, in 2008, an Iu Mien refugee-immigrant man was telling me about the past — warfare and resettlement in Laos that was followed by refugee camps in Thailand and immigration to the United States. Among the things he mentioned was a dangerous witchcraft spirit, *lau-hu-gwe*; “old-tiger spirit.” Prior to the war, the Iu Mien had lived in the mountains as shifting cultivators. A number of children had died from illness in the process of a resettlement to Nam Keung, a lowland area near the Mekong River and about a week's journey by foot from their previous home areas. At least some of the deaths were attributed to the old-tiger spirit. “No Iu Mien will become [a host-body for the] *lau-hu-gwe*, it is the Akha, Lahu, and Lue” — other ethnic groups in northern Laos and neighboring areas of China, Burma, and Thailand. Children in particular might become victims of this spirit but Iu Mien people were by (ethnic) definition never its host.

The *lau-hu-gwe* was not an issue of any apparent concern in the Iu Mien settlements where I based my previous research in Thailand. Only once did I see a spirit medium (Le Tsan Kwe, in Phale Village) drive such a spirit from an afflicted child, wielding a tiger claw. At that time, there was no search for a resident witch to hold responsible for the illness, and the treatment was analogous to how people would drive off a “wild spirit” from a household.

One Iu Mien woman in Nam Keung was accused of hosting an old-tiger spirit that had made a child sick and caused its death. Some Tai Lue people suggested that the woman be let go on condition that she lived far enough away. The woman had been acting strangely one day, and some people grabbed her and asked her to identify herself. After she gave her name and was recognized, people released her: “But when they got to her house she was there before them. For an adult to be in two places at the same time is a sign of being *lau-hu-gwe*.”

At a village meeting, people decided to give her an ultimatum; that she had to leave the settlement.

Her husband was at the meeting, and he was made to convey to her the notice of eviction. If she would not leave then militia-leader Chao La would send his henchman, Fu Tsing, to arrest her. The woman had children and did not accept either alternative; to leave or be arrested.¹⁴ She used poison (“the kind we used for fishing”) to take her own life that night, and the husband later remarried. Another Iu Mien woman was accused of hosting this spirit; she promptly took off and was never heard from again. The latter woman did not have any children. Both were said to have been adopted as children, probably from Akha or Lahu families.¹⁵

Ideas of *lau-hu-gwe* did not emerge during the war. Nor is the notion specific to the Iu Mien peoples. It resonates for instance with Chinese ideas of evil spirits, *gui* [see Diamond 1988: 13, this may be the same term]. Some of the remedies that Iu Mien people employed they had learned from Tai Lue neighbors, and in some (Iu Mien and English language) conversations with me people have used the Tai Lue term for witches, *phi-pop*, when clarifying my questions about *lau-hu-gwe*.¹⁶ But as much as there was a regional, interethnic continuity in ideas about witchcraft spirits, the form they took reflected an anxiety about ethnic boundaries that had emerged in the context of war and was reproduced in relation to an ethnic militia leader's command over “his” people.

Only non-Iu-Mien people were the hosts of *lau-hu-gwe*. Some Tai Lue people were suspected of harboring the witchcraft spirit but it appears that Iu Mien people took action only against members of their own ethnic group, particularly women who had been adopted as children. Adoptions have some history, but in previous research I never heard of any witchcraft anxieties about people of such background. In conversations about life in refugee camps, subsequent to the resettlement in Nam Keung, people have not mentioned any allegations of witchcraft. Instead, many have related conversions to Christianity in response to the deaths of children.

The old-tiger spirit shows how notions of purity and danger are mapped onto a social category, in this case an ethnic group [Douglas 1966; Diamond 1988]. Any threatening or dangerous entity could

14) The husband and children were not thought to be afflicted, as victims or hosts. This is different from lowland Shan and highland Lisu notions (*phi phue, phyiphoe*), where contagion results from living together or eating repeated meals with someone who has a witchcraft spirit [Durrenberger 1993; Tannenbaum 1993].

15) Such purchase-adoptions have some history, though there is no support for Lemoine's [1983] notion that this was an ethnically shared practice [see Jonsson 2001 for an alternative formulation]. Adoptions were among the strategies employed by better off people to increase their pool of laborers. When the children grew up they had the same rights and duties as other children of a household. Some of my contacts recall the hardship of French colonial taxation, when many Iu Mien were forced to sell off children in order to pay. This critical awareness is generally absent from discussions of purchase-adoptions by Iu Mien people from other groups.

16) Tai Lue are known as Jan Pa-e. Jan refers to any alien or non-Mien, while Pa-e draws on the Chinese term Pai-I and related references to Thai speaking groups in the south. Among Iu Mien, Jan Pa-e refers to Tai Lue, Tai Neua, and Shan, for instance, but not Lao or Northern Thai — the term is simultaneously precise, deeply ambiguous, and specific to place and time.

not have emerged from within the group but was rather derived from outsiders. These ideas have much in common with certain nationalist and ethnic ideologies that are accentuated in times of war and exile [Kapferer 1998; Malkki 1995], but are also a general feature of oppositional identity work [Herzfeld 1987; 1997]. The old-tiger spirit offers an angle on the ethnic group as a “bounded entity under threat” [for 1970s Thailand in these terms, see Irvine 1982] in its historical context.

In Nam Keung in about 1967, a boy of about seven died after only a few days of illness. He had not been in bad health as a child, and some people suspected witchcraft. As people explored a likely source, they settled for a Tai Lue noodle-vendor, speculating that the boy had at some point gotten a bowl of noodles from her after school with a promise of a later payment. Someone supposedly overheard the woman wonder why the boy had not paid her. But there was no action against this woman. The policing against witchcraft was limited to the Iu Mien people, and came out for instance in occasionally ruthless acts of imprisonment, beatings, and expulsion by Chao La’s henchmen.

Iu Mien people acquired many of the defenses against witchcraft from non-Mien sources within the multi-ethnic resettlement of Nam Keung, especially from neighboring (lowland and Buddhist) Tai Lue peoples. If witchcraft spirits marked an ethnic boundary for the Iu Mien and expressed their anxieties over social boundary-transgressions then it is particularly telling of their situation that the defenses drew on crossing such boundaries. There was no way of maintaining an ethnically sealed-off space. The Tai Lue suggested such remedies as chili peppers, Buddha amulets, and relocation. For the first; “the person would sneeze and the spirit would leave.” The Buddha image would scare off the spirit, because of the amulet’s greater power. On the third remedy, Tai Lue people stated that if a person hosting this spirit lived a two-hour distance away from other people then there was no danger when the spirit took off at night in search of a victim; it could not travel that far.

Unlike lowland neighbors such as Tai Lue and Lao, the Iu Mien were not Buddhist. But during the war that raged across Laos with varying intensity between 1954 and 1975, many Iu Mien soldiers and others took to wearing Buddha amulets for protection, and the ease of wielding a Buddha amulet to fight the witchcraft spirit may have come from their ubiquity at the time.¹⁷⁾ An Iu Mien soldier suggested that rifle bullets might work, since they had bronze-like the Buddha images — this may be a distinctly non-Buddhist understanding of the quality of amulets. Amulets, even from a different cultural scheme, made local sense as *pou*, objects that create a protective barrier around a person, in contrast to the protection of *faat* that draws on verbal formulas.

17) Tannenbaum’s [1987] study of amulets and invulnerability, while centered on Thailand’s Shan, is useful in this context. Vang Pao had detailed notions of amulets that worked against bullets, which he potentially derived from a Lao (and Buddhist) Colonel in his army [Warner 1996: 170].

The recollections about *lau-hu-kwe* bring out Chao La's role in guarding the ethnic boundary, with his henchman who would imprison people and sometimes beat them up or might even kill some. From the admittedly-limited comparisons to the treatment of *lau-hu-gwe* in Thailand where there was no follow-up quest to identify a witch, I argue that the war significantly increased particular concerns and anxieties regarding ethnic boundaries, manifest for instance in occasional witchcraft accusations, that entrenched the prominence of militia leaders within the ethnic group. The context of war created and enabled Chao La's command over ethnicized social life.

Iu Mien anxieties about witchcraft spirits and actions against alleged witches occurred during war, in a resettlement that was multi-ethnic but under the command of the leader of an ethnic militia. They express fears about the transgression of social boundaries. As such, they have many parallels in Diamond's [1988] case about Han Chinese fears about ethnic minority Miao poison, and in Thai anxieties about Vietnamese poison that caused a "shrinking penis syndrome" among Thai men in the 1970s [Irvine 1982]. Both "outbreaks" occurred at times of social conflict, where various internal divisions and unrest were defined as alien threats to the social boundary.

The national and international context of the war in Laos created new options for social alignments that made possible the ethnicization that occurred within the on-going war among royalists, communists, and neutralists. The American-related wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia brought out diverse social configurations, as did the civil war in Thailand that occurred at the same time, and an ethnicized civil war that has raged with varying intensity for longer in Burma. These wars were interconnected, but each produced particular configurations of identity and violence in relation to national diversity. Interconnections do not produce uniformity, nor do they necessarily enhance unity. The refugee camps in Thailand that have sheltered people fleeing the wars in Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam have produced various configurations of humanitarian relief, people-making, political manipulation, insurgency, and social reproduction since the 1970s [Long 1993; French 1994; 2002; Robinson W. 1998; South 2003; Gravers 2007]. Warner characterizes the refugee camps along the Thai border as "the strangest place of all: part prisons, part feeding and vacation centers for resistance fighters, part travel bureaus [for emigration]" [1996: 374]. The following section concerns connections among the camps, Laos, and refugees resettled in the USA, that brought yet another dimension to Iu Mien identity work.

Post-war Resistance and Its Demise

Chao La wanted to keep fighting after 1975, as did Vang Pao, and both organized militias in 1976 from

among their former soldiers. Both received encouragement and support from former leaders of the Royal Lao Army. Chao La was visited many times by some of those leaders in refugee camp in Chiangkhong, and Thai military leaders arranged for refugee soldier training and orientation in military camps in Chiangrai Province, Thailand. The Iu Mien militia unit was promised supplies but many people have told me that the men took off with only one rifle. In their first year, they managed to gradually arm themselves by killing Lao government soldiers and taking their weapons. The promised support never materialized. This guerilla unit was defeated in 1984 when the leader, Seng Fu (Pien, or Sae Phan), was captured in Burma and handed over to the Lao authorities.

Before it was defeated, the guerilla group had alienated many potential supporters and allies among Iu Mien people within Laos, in the refugee camps, and those in the US. The soldiers relied on supplies from local Iu Mien villagers, who were in a bind. They would be punished by the Lao authorities if it became known that they were supporting the militia. Sometimes the insurgents would steal food from people, or rob them at gunpoint. “When he took off in 1976, Seng Fu went about like a *jan-tza* (“robber, bandit,” but my informant glossed it as “freedom fighter”), he knew which households had wealth and that’s where he would go.”

What seems to have ended the general Iu Mien exiles’ support for the group was that the militia killed all the members of an Iu Mien household in revenge for being denied supplies. This was one of their several violent attacks on Iu Mien people in Laos. Word of the killing spread to the victims’ relatives in the refugee camp of Chiangkham, where one in-law of the victims made up a song about it. The man, whose name is Fu Pu, made a cassette with his song and sent to relatives who were by then living in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. Chao La’s relatives were also living in the Bay Area, and learned of the song. They wrote out the words and sent it back to Chao La in refugee camp. He fined the man Baht 6,000 for the offense. The song blamed and criticized (*hemx*) Chao La and Seng Fu, said one interlocutor. According to another man:

It was purely cursing. The song did not mention Chao La’s name, but in the words, every bullet was shooting at Chao La’s name. (Were there any other songs like this?) No, this was the only one, and because we were in refugee camp we were safe but still not safe. If this man had been in Laos, you know what would have happened (imitates a gunshot). This was not only a criticism, it was a cursing of Chao La.

People in refugee camps lived under surveillance and authoritarian control to a considerable degree. The camps resembled total institutions that were monitored by ethnic militia leaders and their agents, as well as by the Thai guards [Long 1993: 8–9; cf. Malkki 1995: 138–141]. Songwriter Fu Pu would probably have been beaten up or killed if he had performed his song where he was, in the refugee camp,

because of Chao La's authoritarian command over his subjects that was enabled by the war and the conditions of exile. Instead, by making the cassette and mailing it to Iu Mien relatives in the US, Fu Pu transcended the total institution of the camp by reaching a transnational audience of people who were in a position to hear and respond to the criticism. Iu Mien who had resettled in the USA abandoned their support of this militia group. Chao La is still an indexical leader [he died in 2005, in France, where he had settled in 1992], but he now stands for the Iu Mien past in Laos in a way that suggests their route to the US and France more than anything else.

I know of only one person who challenged Chao La in reaction to his militia's violence against fellow-Iu Mien people after 1975. Already resettled in the US, this man learned that the militia intended to kill his uncle for not giving them the support they demanded. He wrote to Chao La in the refugee camp that if anything were to happen to the uncle, he would hold Chao La responsible; "I know what to do to take care of you." This threat came from a man who was descended from one of the several *Phya* in the region — people who in at least some cases did not take for granted Chao Mai and Chao La's (or their father's) general command over the Lao Iu Mien population. Even if it did not take place, the proposed vendetta hints at the generative quality of militarized violence; killings become a mode of communication and reciprocal interaction.

The loss of support for the militia from among the Iu Mien in Laos and diaspora was in response to Seng Fu's transgressions of the ethnic boundary that was central to the ethnicization of Chao La's and his militia's agendas. By attacking Iu Mien people, the militia undermined any justification that it was as Iu Mien that people supported their cause. Anyone who identified with the victims of these attacks could see this as an assault on themselves, personally or ethnically — the kind of threat that had crystallized in ideas about witchcraft spirits.

When Seng Fu had been in prison for four or five years, he was eligible for release if some (Iu Mien) people would vouch for his return into Lao society. "But no Iu Mien person would sign for him, so he could not be released and he later died in jail." The notion that no one would take responsibility for Seng Fu's release emphasizes a uniform discrediting of the guerilla leader among the Iu Mien people in Laos and more widely. It is retrospective, and may do more to situate Iu Mien identity against internal diversity than to describe what really took place. It directs attention away from Chao La's role in creating the militia and defining its mission, and disconnects Iu Mien identity from the deadly violence that accompanied the agendas of the ethnically-defined militia after 1975.

Seng Fu's wife left the refugee camp and moved to live near the prison so she could assist him. This is one indication that there certainly were people around who would have been willing to sign for his release. The prison was a rather open place, on an island in the Nam Tha River in the town of Louang

Nam Tha, where Seng Fu received some visitors. Several people suggest that he was badly treated and even poisoned by Pathet Lao guards; “his hair fell out, he looked scrawny.” One man added; “you know how the communists treat people,” turning wartime ontology into a historical explanation in a way which also implicated my awareness of things. Seng Fu died in 1990 or '91, and soon thereafter Chao La left refugee camp for France.

Social realignments related to the war, both in the internal resettlement in Nam Keung and later in refugee camps, contributed greatly to the ethnicization of Iu Mien orientations. But in the camps there were no accusations about *lau-hu-gwe*, while there were many cases of illness taking the lives of children and others. Some people responded by converting to Christianity, on the grounds that ancestor spirits were not taking sufficient care of them. The conversions were family-based, and while they can be presented as a fundamental cultural change they can equally be taken as manifestations of continuity; the on-going and more general tension between the interests of households and those of chiefs [Jonsson 2001].

During the war, Chao La could always override household-priorities in the name of the interests of the ethnic group. He largely lost this power when the war ended, and this offers some perspective on many former leaders' decision to reestablish militias after 1975. War structures social relations in ways that naturalize militia leaders' power. This case can be expanded toward a perspective on patterns in political violence and states of emergency in the region more generally, as entrenching particular leaders and structures of power. The recent “war on drugs” in Thailand was deeply tied to the use of authoritarian violence in sustaining the prominence of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra [Phongpaichit and Baker 2004: 165]. The deadly anti-communist violence that was foundational to Suharto's regime in Indonesia [Robinson G. 1995] is potentially analogous to the mass killings associated with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia [Vickery 1984] regarding how a social order and a particular leadership structure were brought into being through violence. My aim is not to single out violence and warfare as somehow the real roots of identity and authority. Identities become real in particular circumstances, in ways that may distribute power very unevenly within a group. Sports contests, cultural preservation, and village festivals can have the same agentive power to shape “a people” [Jonsson 2003; 2004; 2005; 2010]. My critique is of ethnic labels as self-explanatory, and my argument is for a focus on identity as an on-going and active process that must be situated socially and historically.

While the post-war Iu Mien militia lasted, there was an effort to collect money for their support among the Iu Mien in the US, and the money was passed on to Vang Pao for delivery. Some US Iu Mien were also collecting for Vang Pao's more general support of an anti-government guerilla unit in Laos. Vang Pao's annual collection of money may still be active. I am told that he asked \$100 per household

a year, and in exchange people received a card that guaranteed their admission to his Laos once he had taken the country.

Vang Pao was arrested in California in 2007, for allegedly arranging to buy weapons for the purpose of re-taking Laos. But the collection of money has not stopped. Among the deals that people can get is the position of a town or city mayor, for a payment of \$6,000. Such posts are available on installments, and an acquaintance with connections among US Hmong suggested that the Iu Mien may be charged extra; the amounts that Hmong people mentioned were lower. I have learned of older Iu Mien women of meager means who were still paying, in late 2008, \$50 per month over a ten year period for their sons' future prominence in the old homeland as the mayor of some unspecified town under the phantasmatic Vang Pao regime.¹⁸⁾ Such efforts and taxation sustain wartime identifications long after their original context has expired, to the point of an ethnic identity and a particular wartime orientation being mutually constitutive of individual and collective subjects in exile in ways that continue to reinforce militarized, masculine leadership.

Conclusions

I have argued for a perspective on war and exile as generative of particular alignments of identity, society, and politics. Resettlement, refugee camps, and exile have greatly influenced ethnic rhetoric in contemporary Mainland Southeast Asia. My case points to the critical role of nation building and militia leaders in sustaining identifications that reproduce an orientation toward violence and warfare. War makes people; it plays up certain subjectivities that become dominant, sometimes violently so, and silences others. Iu Mien identification in terms of Chao La suggests a persistent use of authoritarianism and the suppression of diversity. Among Chao La's followers, his monopoly on the ethnic agenda is reflected in their dismissal of the possibility that any Iu Mien people had not been under his command. The refugee immigrants who are now in the USA view their trajectory as the normal path of the ethnic group. At least some of them view those who made a new life for themselves in Thailand as representing a loss to the ethnic group. People experienced the war from a range of perspectives. Focusing on the militia leader and collective, ethnic experience denies such diversity.

While the American support for a militia provided novel opportunities, the choice of leaders drew

18) From what I have learned, these young men have no interest in returning to Laos. Warner mentions considerable corruption regarding the selling of such future-government posts: some desirable positions have been sold to more than one person, and a good portion of the money has been skimmed off by US-based members of the resistance unit and then by Thai agents (customs, police, etc.) [1996: 383].

on their position within the Lao administration and their father's earlier position as a titled chief. Their father's prominence over many rivals came through military suppression campaigns for the French colonial administration. Rivalries among chiefs and tensions between the goals of chiefs and commoners have been a recurring feature of Iu Mien social dynamics. The war undid such rivalries and tensions in favor of the Iu Mien militia leaders. Internal resettlement in Laos further accentuated the alignment of ethnic identity and Chao La in Nam Keung. At war's end, Chao La reestablished a militia from refugee camps on the Thai side that continued his ethnic agenda. The group lost support among the Iu Mien after violent transgressions against their own people. Chao La's continued leadership in the refugee camp suppressed any criticism, and any internal critique was only possible through networks of communication to resettled refugees in the United States. Witchcraft anxieties point to fundamental concerns with social transgressions in times of war, to the impossibility of fashioning an ethnically sealed-off space, and to the militia's use of violence in policing the ethnic boundary.

Ethnic labels are simultaneously precise, deeply ambiguous, and strongly connected to particularities of time and place. While most Lao Iu Mien abandoned wartime identifications by the 1980s as they lost faith in the post-war militia, the on-going collection of money among US-based refugee immigrants continues the conflation of ethnicity and militia leaders. These agendas are diametrically opposed to the concerns of Iu Mien, Hmong, and others who live in Laos and have come to terms with the regime that has been in power since 1975. The focus on the processes of people-making provides an ethnographic lens on the dynamics of warfare, refugee camps, and resettlement. These are often sites of social reproduction and not just disruption. Examining and questioning how militia leaders appropriated the ethnic voice can produce new insights regarding the continual shaping of the region, and on what otherwise might seem to be settled histories and obvious identities.

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