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Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand

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Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand

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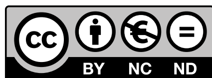

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A Note on Transliteration and Thai Naming Conventions

Where possible, I have used the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) to transliterate from Thai to English and have also included the original Thai to avoid confusion. Occasionally, some choices do not correspond to the RTGS. This could be for one of several reasons. For one, in the case of words originating in the Kui language, which has only recently had a written form developed, and still does not have a standardised transcription into Thai or English, I have used the preference of spelling provided to me by members of the Kui community, or which I have seen written a certain way (e.g., on signs) during my research period. Where a different transliteration is more common in literature, I have also chosen to use the more popular option. Occasionally, I have opted against the RTGS transliteration in favour of personal preference (as is the case with my use of "mor" for หมอ, rather than "mo" as the RTGS would have it). In instances where an English spelling of a name has been provided to me by one of my interlocutors, I use this spelling even if it does not match with that of the RTGS. Other times, where interviewees have not provided a written version of their name (in English or Thai), I have had to guess the spelling (and, therefore, the transliteration). As a final note, I have also chosen not to italicise non-English words, and use the Thai convention of referring to Thai authors by first name, with these authors also listed by first name in alphabetical order in the bibliography.

List of Abbreviations

AED	authorised environmental discourse
AHD	authorised heritage discourse
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
DNP	Department of National Parks
ICH	intangible cultural heritage
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
NPA	National Park Act (1961)
RFD	Royal Forest Department
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WARPA	Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act (1992)

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Preface

Like many interdisciplinary fields, critical heritage studies requires the acceptance of intersecting but often divergent methods as well as sensitivity to unexpected erasures and silences. In Thailand, a socially dominant code of etiquette (marayat) all too frequently trumps forceful acknowledgment of long-standing inequalities. The historical and ethnographic traces of these inequalities are nevertheless painfully obvious, and both historians and anthropologists have been increasingly willing to point them out. Following clearly colonial models of nation-state construction, the Thai elite has frequently denied recognition to groups not considered to be "sufficiently Thai", an attitude that even in the capital of Bangkok has poisoned the life chances of those not considered, if one may invoke a Weberian note here, to be among the elect of the Buddha—those whose poverty and racialised distinctiveness provide a counterpart to the self-congratulation of the chosen.[1] In the present volume, a case study in the politics of ethnic assimilation and differentiation, Alisa Santikarn, although a product of cosmopolitan Thai and Australian backgrounds, breaks the mould of Western-inspired elitism to chart the implications of these dynamics for one particular group, the Kui of Surin province. In so doing, she offers a searing indictment of national ethnic politics, a timely warning to wrest the definition of "heritage" from those who have used their power to exclude its subaltern manifestations, and a perceptive unravelling of the ways in which environmental issues have become entangled with minority attempts at gaining collective recognition.

A fundamental problem for such an analysis lies in the nature of the nation-state itself. Today, we are apt to see this entity as a logical culmination of humanity's efforts to achieve social and cultural security. Yet the coupling of nation and state in a single entity is, as I have recently argued (Herzfeld, 2024), deeply problematic in itself. For the Siamese Kingdom of the 19th century, it may have been the only way for what had been a very type of political organisation to survive outside the immediate control of the Western colonial powers, although that survival was predicated on a long list of humiliating concessions.[2] In the long run, the cultural influences may have been more crushing than the political ones, with the adoption—however partial, and with whatever stings in the tail they reserved for unwary

1 See especially Bolotta, 2021, for an account of how these attitudes pervade both Buddhist and Catholic educational institutions.

2 See especially Strate, 2015 on the Western humiliation of the Siamese state.

Westerners—of Western cultural accoutrements in dress, language, and manners.[3] Those who successfully followed this path became the new elite. Those who did not follow the path became the necessary internal other. Even within the royal family, the retention of non-Central cultural features was only possible through carefully sanctioned processes of expropriation.[4] Increasing control by Bangkok over the rest of the country led inexorably to the emergence of a hierarchy that was—and is—at once cultural, racial, and economic. The Kui, as Santikarn argues, find themselves today on the lowest level of that hierarchy; they have become expendable.

Directly allied to the hierarchisation of ethnicity was a redesigning of the concept of nature. Santikarn delicately dissects the elite distinction between the savage forest (pa) and the ideal-state vision of nature (thammachat). This subtle but crucial contrast, with its elevation of an idealised condition over the realities of everyday life, allowed the elite to dismantle the forest and disconnect it from the marginalised people who lived in it—and whose lives were dependent on its material, economic, and spiritual resources. Taking her lead from the seminal work of James C. Scott (1998; 2009) on "legibility", she shows how the suppression of cultural practices in the name of a carefully constructed protectorate identified as "nature" reinforced official views of the Kui and other forest-dwelling minorities as maleficent exploiters of a passive environment. Readers will discover in Santikarn's carefully reasoned critique how that attitude has contributed to the removal of the Kui from the chronicle of Thai national history—a textual tradition largely distinguished by what I have called the "airbrushing" of inconvenient presences (Herzfeld, 2021, pp. 12–14, p. 20)—and thus to the erasure of any rights they might claim to a heritage of their own, or to participation in the heritage of the nation.

The Kui are known to other Thai citizens, if at all, as elephant catchers. In this, the elite view contains a kernel of truth, albeit a truth distorted to serve the entextualised hierarchy of ethnic others and the cultural, linguistic, and social domination of the Central Thai. The deep attachment of the Kui to their elephants both merges them with a kingdom whose dominant symbol is the white elephant, and, at the same time, pits them against an elite jealously committed to guarding a self-interested view of the elephant's symbolic importance. Here, Santikarn illustrates the familiar

3 Jory, 2021 offers a magisterial account of the development of Thai notions of etiquette in the modern era.

4 On the dynamics of Thai official absorption of cultural traits, especially through the control and representation of women's bodies, see especially Porranee, 2017; Woodhouse, 2012.

anthropological observation that all symbols are labile; their meanings may change, imperceptibly or otherwise, at different speeds, and across cultural boundaries. Laos, for example, a country that Thais often regard as their "younger sibling", embraced socialism and discarded its monarchy, but the elephant retained its import as a *national* (rather than institutional) symbol. The powerful Bangkok elite always understood the importance of harnessing the elephant's symbolic power for their own exclusive purposes—purposes that included the homogenisation of the national population and its cultural heritage.

The elite saw homogenisation as an effective response to the Western colonial threat of invasion. A single national culture not only suggested a unified nation, willing and able to defend itself against foreign incursions; it also represented the ultimate achievement of being siwilai (civilised) albeit in terms superficially dictated by those same colonial powers (as the English-derived term suggests). In such a frame, minority groups that resisted assimilation all saw their ability to claim cultural heritage severely circumscribed.

Santikarn provides a fascinating account of the Thai state's changing understanding of khwam pen thai (Thainess), a concept that has long held echoes of European hyper-nationalism. Throughout its vicissitudes, it remained firmly anchored in the elite's self-perception. This produced a besetting irony: at various times, Thais found themselves commanded to look and behave like Westerners in order to qualify for the regnant definition of Thainess. Despite increasing international recognition of Indigenous rights (a category to which the Thai authorities have been notoriously resistant), and despite (or because of?) their special association with a royal symbol, the Kui have remained politically and economically marginal. Santikarn's story poignantly exposes the dilemma: if the Kui assimilate, everything they claim as heritage will disappear; if they resist assimilation, it will be absorbed into a national heritage they would have difficulty recognizing as their own.

The Kui's sense of imminent dissolution resembles the condition of many small Indigenous populations around the world today. Alisa Santikarn has given us a subtle and multifaceted account that shows how Kui identity and heritage, and the attendant ability to sustain a sense of distinctive cultural traditions, are all compromised by the ethnic politics of the nation-state in which they live. Thailand is an *ethnonational* state; its cultural policies are attempts to achieve ethnic homogeneity while acknowledging a carefully controlled range of minority traditions as part of the larger Thai heritage. Local variation becomes evidence of a transcendent oneness, in a manner

that recalls, for example, the Italian attitude to local cultural variation during the years of Mussolini's rule.[5]

It is through such studies as this, which focus on minority heritages in unequal dialogue with nationalist historiographies, that we can begin to appreciate how effectively the idea of the ethnonational state has gripped the global imagination. Insight from the Kui margins should prompt a serious rethinking of terms like "ethnic", "national", and "Indigenous". It should also help to clarify the difference between citizenship as a bureaucratic arrangement and ethnicity as a claim on distinctive identity within the nation-state. Alisa Santikarn's profoundly respectful treatment of an often despised and usually disadvantaged minority offers an alternative vision of human versatility and resilience. She effectively points up the historical and ethnological irony of a minority's dilemma, a dilemma that also reflects the paradox of a particular variant of postcolonial nationalism. There is a will to sustain some version of a heritage grounded in engagement with the land and its animals, but that engagement is being fatally undermined by an intransigent nationalism that has itself been deeply transformed by the colonial models it claims to have rejected.

Michael Herzfeld
Athens, Greece, 30 June 2024

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5 We should not forget that the concept of khwam pen thai was largely inspired by, and grounded in, the Italian models of that time. See Barmé, 1993; Saichon, 2002.

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1 Introduction

Abstract

This introductory chapter presents the author's first encounter with the Kui people of Thailand, from online to in person. It provides the context for the ensuing research and monograph, whilst also considering the author's own insider/outsider positionality as an ethnographer. This chapter also includes a brief overview of existing literature on the Kui, while situating the contents of this monograph within the pre-existing body of work on the community. It concludes by introducing a central focus of the monograph—the misrecognition and tension between visibility and invisibility that marks the Kui Ajiang's heritage and identity.

Keywords

Kui Ajiang, heritage, Thailand, elephants, ethnography

My first glimpse into the Kui came about entirely by chance. I was researching what I thought my PhD *would* be—about Thailand's elephants and the cultural values surrounding this species. In doing my background research, however, I came across a brief reference to a community of people, the Kui, in *Gone Astray*: *The Care and Management of the Asian Elephant in Domesticity,* a 1997 book by Richard Lair. It was only a short section, around nine paragraphs, discussing the cultural dimensions of elephant keeping and what Lair (1997) referred to as "tribal keepers". In his first line about the Kui, Lair (1997, n.p.) wrote that "[t]he most famous elephant people in Thailand, at least to the average Thai, are certainly the Kui".[6] This statement made me pause. Who are the Kui? How could it be that in the months that I had already spent planning my research proposal and conducting preliminary reading on elephants in Thailand, this was the first mention of them that

6 Although Lair describes the community simply as the Kui, there are many different Kui communities, not all of whom have elephant-related traditions. As I clarify later, the Kui people with elephant heritage are known as the Kui Ajiang. It is this particular group that is the focus of this book.

Santikarn, Alisa. *Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025
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I had come across? Why, as a Thai person myself, had I not heard of them before? As it turns out, this was not something that could be blamed on ignorance on my part alone. I asked my Thai family, my father's friends, my own friends, and not one knew who the Kui were. I thought, perhaps this was a consequence of living in the capital, Bangkok, but when I went to Surin for the first time later in my research—a province *founded* by a Kui man—I asked a member of staff where I had dinner on my first night if *she* had heard of the Kui, and she also said no.

So, naturally, as one often does when first looking for more information, I turned to Google. This led me to a blog post, "Thailand People Hill Tribe Kuy People the Elephant Hunters of Southeast Asia," that would ultimately shift the direction of my research, resulting in this very book. Rather than the blog itself, though, it was the comments section that was most impactful. Someone had left a comment calling out the inaccuracies of the blog, ending with: "If you are interested in the details about 'Kui/Kuy' of Southeast Asia, please feel free to contact me in person via my Email________". And so I did.

This is how I came to meet Dr Sanong Suksaweang, who was, at the time, a vice president of the Kui Association of Thailand, and my first contact with the Kui community in Surin. I sent Dr Sanong an email in November 2018, asking if he could meet with me to discuss my plans to research elephants in Thailand, focused on the Kui. In his reply to my initial email, he stated, "I have been waiting for this opportunity for a while if anyone in [the] academic field abroad would see what I said. Thank you for contacting me. Your dissertation will bring the world down. I have a lot of information for you to explore". Now, I am not sure if this book will "bring the world down", but the enthusiasm of his response speaks to two important points. The first is that it reaffirms the invisibility of the Kui both within Thailand and abroad. The second relates to the ethical implications of my research, as I wanted to avoid (as much as possible) entering into a one-way extractive relationship with the Kui, where I was the sole beneficiary of the knowledge and time I had taken from them.

I thought quite a lot about my positionality as a researcher—as Thai but not Kui—and whether I was the right person to do this research. This is an essential consideration when conducting community-based research, and even more so when working with an Indigenous community as an outsider. Ethnography has traditionally been associated with ideas of otherness, exploring communities and ideas that are different from those with which the ethnographer is familiar. Ingold (2007, p. 69) notes that ethnographic research aims "to describe the lives of people other than ourselves". This style of exploration views researchers as neutral observers who are better

positioned to study a society because of their cultural and geographic distance from it.

The postcolonial[7] age resulted in a global rethinking of previous ethnographic practices, which privileged Western researchers as the ultimate authority on other cultures. Issues of intersectionality with aspects of researcher positionality including gender, sexuality, race, and class also contributed to the rethinking of the anthropologist's relationship with the community being studied (e.g., Davis, 1981; Abu-Lughod, 1990; Visweswaran, 1994; Behar and Gordon, 1995; Moraga, 1997; and Johnson-Bailey, 1999). Additionally, many ethnographic studies conducted during the colonial period painted portraits of the communities studied as backwards, thereby reducing their autonomy and power in favour of Western authority and supporting the colonial agenda. The othering that can occur during ethnographic study can establish one party's culture—the Western researcher's—as the norm. In contrast, the ethnographic subject's culture is portrayed as "defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination" (Staszak, 2009, p. 43). This process can only happen in instances of asymmetrical relations of power (Staszak, 2009, p. 43). The other key critique of Western anthropology as a product of colonialism is not in what is devalued but rather in what *is* valued—the exoticism and orientalism of cultures. Within this, a culture is deconstructed and re-presented to emphasise what is perceived as different and strange to the Western gaze.

Although it has previously been thought that a researcher could only be either an insider or outsider to a community, it is gradually becoming accepted that the apparent inside/outside dichotomy is not so neatly delineated. Culture is not monolithic. Consequently, ethnographic researchers can be both inside and outside of a given community at different times (Merriam et al., 2001). According to Clifford (1983, p. 127), the very nature of participant observation centres around the ethnographer's ability to view an event from both the *inside* and *outside*, analysing events, ceremonies,

7 I use the term postcolonial with caution, as I do not mean it to imply that colonialism is over. Colonialism and its legacies are still present and an active concern for many around the world today, but it also is no longer the same. As Simon Gikandi (1996, p. 14) puts it, postcolonialism is "code for the state of undecidability in which the culture of colonialism continues to resonate in what was supposed to be its negation". Postcolonial is a temporal marker for changes in state policies and international politics, and also describes a group of scholarship. Works by postcolonial thinkers like Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Talal Asad, and Frantz Fanon were incredibly influential in prompting this disciplinary shift within anthropology. For more on postcolonialism and further critique on the term, see Shohat, 1992; Dirlik, 1992; Hall, 1996; Fanon, 2001; Mishra and Hodge, 2005.

and interactions within this framework of meaning-making through both empathetic response (inside), as well as "situat[ing] these meanings in a wider context" (outside). As someone straddling this space between insider and outsider, I am well-positioned as an ethnographer. While my Thai identity allows me a better understanding of the socio-cultural structures affecting the actions and decisions of the Kui, I am still positioned outside those events as a non-Kui researcher.

Yet, my insider identity as a Thai national is also not without its complications. Later in this book, I consider the boundary drawn between those living within the capital of Bangkok versus those living outside. Othering and the devaluation of the other do not only occur between West and East but can also occur within these different cultures themselves, as is the case of the asymmetrical power relations between the Thai state (including the urban middle class of Bangkok) and the Kui in the Northeast. Alongside being someone from the capital, I have also spent much of my life outside of Thailand, undertaking much of my education in Australia and the UK. At times, I chose to emphasise this distance and present myself as non-Thai altogether—speaking in English and using an interpreter—to remove my association with the power imbalance that exists between Thai and Kui, as this is more immediate and personal than the relationship between the Thai/Kui and the West. Finally, it is also necessary to acknowledge other types of power like age and gender. A researcher's positionality is always changing depending on the context and who else is in the room. From this first email from Dr Sanong, and my subsequent meeting with him, however, it was clear that what I *could* offer the Kui was visibility and recognition on an international stage. Through this book, and through you reading it, I hope you come away with at least one clear message—this community exists, they are called the Kui, and they are Indigenous.

In December 2018, Dr Sanong had come down to Bangkok with his wife to meet me, making a six-hour car journey from where they live in the northeast of Thailand. When we met, both were dressed in traditional Kui clothing. They wore long-sleeved black tops and his wife wore a silk skirt while Dr Sanong wore chong kraben-style silk trousers. They both also wore silk scarves, woven in a classic Kui pattern. "We wear these clothes whenever we go anywhere", Dr Sanong explained, because these clothes are a visible signal of the Kui and their presence—"we're here, see us". We met at a local food court, with my parents in tow, to discuss the feasibility of my research plan and for me to get some more information on the Kui—filling in some of the gaps in my understanding that my preliminary literature review did not address or, in the words of Dr Sanong's blog comment, to get the "true

history" of the Kui. The rest of the research that has come to form this book emerged through multiple visits I made between 2018 and 2021 to work with the Kui community in Surin, observing their festivals and cultural events, and conducting interviews. Throughout this text, where individuals are cited, by name or otherwise, these comments are taken from interviews I conducted during this time in Surin and, in the case of interviews with members of the Ministry of Culture, in Bangkok in 2020.

As a result of Thai attitudes towards minorities and the manipulation of the national historical narrative, not much has been written about Kui history or the role of the Kui in Thai history, at least, not in English. Part of my time in the Northeast involved trips to local universities in Surin and neighbouring provinces like Maha Sarakham. In these libraries, I found a wealth of material on the Kui written by students for dissertation projects and research conducted by local academics. In fact, during one conversation I had with a Kui man in Surin, he informed me that I should speak to the abbot of the local temple, as he would check over the work of everyone who had previously come to research their community. Publications by the Surin Visual Archives (Surin Samosorn/สุรินทร์สโมสร) also document the culture of the province, regularly featuring articles on the Kui. Thai writing on the Kui has, however, mostly been localised—stored within university libraries in the region. This has meant that until recently—owing to a Muay Thai controversy I discuss later—the Kui have been relatively unknown to those outside Thailand's northeast.

The lack of a Kui script (up until very recently) has also left a dearth of written material produced from within the community itself and in their own language, particularly as there does not appear to be any current storytelling tradition to fill this gap. One byproduct of the Kui's exclusion from more formal histories has been a recent push within the community to document and share their historical information or theories. Because of a lack of financial support and formal recognition from the government, many minoritised communities in Thailand, like the Kui, have needed to take responsibility for conserving and documenting their own heritage. This movement has largely been facilitated by public Facebook groups, including อนุรักษ์ศิลปวัฒนธรรมไทเชื้อสายกวย กูย (Conservation of the arts and culture of the Tai Kuay Kui lineage) and ชุมชนคนสุรินทร์ (People of Surin community), alongside personal websites, online forums, and both short- and long-form video platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Therefore, as a result of the Kui community's relative societal anonymity, the research I undertook—particularly that looking for community-based histories and narratives—has needfully ventured into alternative, less official or

academic sources of data, such as blogs, forums, and social media posts, supplemented by interviews.

From early on in school, even before starting university, I remember being taught the importance of a reliable source. Within academia, there is an apparent hierarchy of resources, with blogs, personal websites, and social media forums sitting somewhere towards the bottom of the credibility pile (although this is slowly but surely changing with a shift towards digital methods). As I will describe shortly, my research navigates a key heritage concept—the authorised heritage discourse (AHD)—a top-down imposition of knowledge and authority on heritage. To ignore the bottom-up writings on the histories and cultures of the communities—particularly those produced by members of the community in question—would only feed into maintaining this hierarchy imposed by the AHD. Certainly, many of the "reliable" academic publications available in English on the Kui are problematic because they are tinged by the historical contexts in which they were written. Consider, for example, the texts by Frances Giles (1929–32) and Eric Seidenfaden (1943–52), two key authors of historical works about the Kui. Positioned among the elite of Thai society, both men were members of the national Siam Society Under Royal Patronage and published works in the society's journal at a time informed by lingering Western colonial ideology. This ideology is apparent, for instance, in Seidenfaden's (1952) loaded descriptions of the Kui. In one instance, for example, he describes the Kui as a "very decadent, dirty and morally low standing lot with some few exceptions", and his view of Kui assimilation with Lao and Khmer as "a real advance for them" (p. 159).

The works by Seidenfaden and Giles, moreover, contain no interviews with the local Kui people themselves. Therefore, the product of such research emerges exclusively in the outsider author's voice and includes descriptions and conclusions tinged by their own biases, rather than reliable historical documentation (if such a thing exists). For example, in *Adversaria of Elephant Hunting,* Giles (1929, p. 68) refers to the "hunters on the Korat plateau where the inhabitants are Khmer, Sue, So, Sek, Puthai and Lao", (here "Sue" is an alternative spelling of "Suay"—another name for the Kui, albeit a pejorative one).[8] He does not, however, attribute this to any specific group or person individually, describing the hunters only by their provincial background, as "Surindr men"—Surindr meaning Surin (p. 95). His interest is thus in the exotic curiosity of the hunting itself rather than the hunters. Nonetheless, Giles witnessed and recorded his impressions of an event that later anthropologists

8 I discuss the complexities of this term in a later chapter.

studying the Kui Ajiang could not observe—the hunt for and capture of a wild elephant. Moving forward some 90 or so years into the future, I had the opportunity to interview the last generation of elephant catchers (mor chang), aged between 80 and 100, who participated in such a hunt as teenagers.

Cuasay (1995a, p. 3), in his thesis *The Kui of the Siam Society*, describes how Seidenfaden, a Danish policeman, "used geographic montage to serve notions of territorial sovereignty and racial superiority", presenting the Kui as "almost-wild inhabitants of hovels", and in doing so, furthered the hierarchical ethnic structuring of Thai society that originated out of a hybrid Thai–Western colonial ideology. The racial hierarchies in these Western-authored texts on the Kui intersect with Thai-authored civilisational hierarchies. Writing by Thai academics on Thailand's Indigenous and ethnic minority communities during the late 1800s, for example, only emphasised features considered particularly unusual (Thongchai, 2000), and thereby worked to distance these people from the rest of Thai society further.

Although most existing academic literature on the Kui has been the product of research on communities in Cambodia, the Kui in Thailand today are not as invisible as their historical counterparts. Certainly, the Thai Kui (and the Kui Ajiang in particular) have been a topic of research for both Thai and international ethnographers/anthropologists in more recent history, most notably Rote Sodesiri (1972), Paitoon Mikusol (1984) (who is part Kui himself), Chuen Srisawat (1990), Komatra Chuengsatiansup (1998), Peter Cuasay (2002), and Joachim Schliesinger (2010, but whose research took place from 2001–3). Having conducted interviews some 20 or so years before my fieldwork, these researchers were able to record the thoughts and memories of a generation of Kui who are no longer alive today. This can be seen, for example, in interviews with and ethnographic observations of the Khru Pa Yai—the highest-ranked mor chang (e.g., in Rote, 1972; and Komatra, 1998)—a group of Kui Ajiang society that had been lost entirely by the time my research began and that, because of strict traditional rules surrounding the cultural hierarchy, have yet to be replaced.

Before continuing, I must also make a distinction clear. My research focuses specifically on a subsection of the Kui community known as the Kui Ajiang (กูยอาจึง or กูยอาเจียง), which translates to "elephant people" in the Kui language. As the name suggests, this group of Kui people is associated with the community's elephant-related history and heritage. Not all Kui people, however, have elephants or relate to this aspect of culture. In my research, I examine the invisibility of the Kui Ajiang and, more specifically, the Kui Ajiang in Surin province, as different groups of Kui Ajiang will have slight cultural variations. It is perhaps ironic that in my discussion on invisibility,

I am taking the example of the most visible group of Kui people, and the most visible part of their heritage. Much of the existing research on the Kui does tend to focus specifically on the Kui Ajiang, whose elephant heritage does not reflect that of most Kui people. Nonetheless, I use the example of the Kui Ajiang in Surin to unpack the tension between the prominence of their elephant-related traditions and the lack of awareness of other aspects of their identity. In this way, it is misrecognition (per Fraser, 2000)—a partial, but inexact visibility, rather than strict *in*visibility—that punctuates the Kui Ajiang in Thailand.

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Abbreviations

AHD	authorised heritage discourse

2 Heritage, Authority, and the Anthropocene

Abstract
This chapter unpacks some of the central themes within the monograph: the AHD and the Anthropocene. The case study of Thailand's Kui Ajiang occupies an interesting position in relation to the AHD—existing both within national discourse as well as subverting it. This chapter establishes how the role of misrecognition within the AHD is a distinctive feature of this research. As the "elephant people", research on the Kui Ajiang is also inevitably linked to the Anthropocene—a period marked by nature/culture intersections. Various interpretations of the Anthropocene are presented before delving into issues of Indigenous heritage within this framework more explicitly.

Keywords
authorised heritage discourse, Anthropocene, authority, conservation, Indigenous heritage, elephants

The Authorised Heritage Discourse

At the centre of this book lies the question of authority and how authority in various forms has impacted Indigenous heritage in Thailand, using the example of the Kui. Heritage conservation is complicated by conflicts between local, provincial, national, and international values. Within heritage studies, the imposition of authority and control, defined by a single set of normative values, particularly regarding the national definition and valorisation of heritage, has become known as the "authorised heritage discourse" (AHD). Smith (2006, p. 4) first argued for the AHD in *Uses of heritage*, referring to a "dominant Western discourse about heritage [...] that works to naturalise a range of assumptions about the nature and meaning of heritage". This discourse encompasses the heritage decision-making and

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valorisation processes by those deemed experts or professionals, for example, by large-scale organisations such as UNESCO and individual countries. The AHD, therefore, refers to the formal designation (and management) of heritage *as* heritage by those in positions of power and authority—typically defined by Western value structures and perceptions of expertise. Its use in the field of heritage studies has, however, become so ubiquitous and widely applied beyond Smith's (2006) initial formulation (see Skrede and Hølleland, 2018) that it is necessary first to outline the specific interpretation of Smith's AHD that I take forward in this book.

The AHD is often misrepresented as a conflict of East versus West, with the AHD viewed as a monolith derived from Western value structures. Although Smith ostensibly locates the power of this discourse within the Western world, it is nonetheless applicable to all situations where authority and an imbalance of power frame the valuation of heritage more broadly, regardless of the originating region of the authoritative culture and its values. Smith's AHD is not a single or material discourse but is an example of one (of many) dominant discourses that emerge in the management of heritage globally. Smith (2006, p. 300) describes the AHD as "a process of mediating cultural change and of asserting, negotiating and affirming particular identities and values". The geographic location within which these values are formed is, therefore, a secondary consideration. One could argue about the pervasiveness and perceived authority of the "upper middle and ruling classes of European educated professionals and elites" (Smith, 2006, p. 28). When it comes to heritage, however, Smith's (2006) focus on dismantling these 'European' voices unintentionally undermines the authority and power imbalances that exist in, and are perpetrated by, players *within* the East itself. Yan (2014) similarly criticises the AHD as overlooking the hegemonic processes and inequalities within Eastern contexts in his work on heritage in China. Smith (2012, p. 1) has since addressed this issue by adding the distinction of "Western Authorised Heritage Discourse"; the caveat of this new terminology acknowledges that different authorised discourses exist outside of the West.

The primary juxtaposition established by the AHD in its broadest sense is between insiders and outsiders. Insiders decide what has value and thus what *is* heritage, while outsiders are excluded from heritage narratives. At the same time, these outsiders are still understood by the insiders as receivers, audiences and beneficiaries of heritage as defined from the insider perspective. In this book, I explore the consequences of and responses to the national AHD in Thailand. This AHD is formed and determined by the state to the exclusion of minority groups. In particular, the Thai AHD

excludes those perceived as "non-Thai". My exploration of the Thai AHD addresses Askew's (2010, p. 21) criticism of approaches that view the AHD as exclusively "Eurocentric and crypto-imperialist", producing literature dominated by Western discourse or analyses of international heritage bodies. I also examine the complications arising from *multiple* authoritative discourses that emerge at the provincial level and from within the community itself.

Another divergence from Smith's AHD occurs in the *type* of heritage that I focus on in this book and which is valued by the Thai state—intangible cultural heritage. Smith (2012, p. 4) writes that "[t]he AHD defines heritage as aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that are non-renewable". This AHD emphasises tangible things. Nonetheless, the AHD has increasingly been applied to notions of intangible heritage, which comes with its own challenges. As Smith and Campbell (2017, p. 1) write, "the acceptance of intangible heritage [...] has started to unsettle some of the central tenets of the authorised heritage discourse". The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to UNESCO (or the ICH Convention) meant that intangible heritage was eventually also encapsulated by the AHD. Although the language of the ICH Convention—unlike that of the 1972 World Heritage Convention—deliberately avoided privileging expert knowledge and aimed to prioritise the heritage of communities (Smith and Campbell, 2017), the structure of UNESCO places all functional power in the hands of the nation-state. As such, communities remain wholly reliant on their national governments to achieve representation at this level. Moreover, as Lixinski (2011, p. 81) contends, the ICH Convention allows states to "stifle internal dissent by ignoring minority cultures or even appropriating them"—a point I will also demonstrate. While communities may appeal directly to UNESCO as an international body, issues are ultimately arbitrated at the nation-state level and voted upon by state representatives. The power this platform can provide individuals and communities is thus inherently limited. One difference between ICH and built heritage is the central role non-Western actors such as South Korea, China, and Japan, have played as "co-producers of the new emerging AHD" (Svensson and Maags, 2018, p. 16). While this partly addresses the criticisms of a Western-dominated AHD, the continued reliance on state-level nomination means that what is defined as a nation's ICH continues to be decided based on top-down power, and community voices are largely silenced unless they fit into the national narrative.

The Kui Ajiang and their elephant-related traditions are an interesting lens through which to consider the AHD because this community sits at an intersection. The Kui fit the AHD—through the role elephants play as

part of the national heritage image developed during Thailand's colonial and postcolonial periods. Even before the colonial period, there was an AHD wherein kings and chiefs valued elephants and their keepers. The Kui, however, also defy the AHD as an Indigenous community living in a country that does not recognise Indigeneity and views cultural distinctiveness as a threat to a constructed national identity. The threat to Kui heritage did not come from a state policy directly targeting the community. Rather, this threat was prompted by a history of being overlooked and unacknowledged by the Thai state, which has continually failed to acknowledge their Indigeneity.

I should also clarify that my research focuses on only one specific community of Kui people—the Kui Ajiang or "elephant people", who, as the name suggests, have a deep history and culture centred around elephants. Wilat Photisan (2005) identified four different Kui communities in Thailand—each with their own distinct cultural practices and beliefs: the Kui Melo (เมโล) or Malua (มลัว), the Kui Yoe (เยอ), the Kui Boru (บรู), and the Kui Ajiang (อาจึง). Cuasay (1995b), meanwhile, identifies Bai, Hai/Eng, Haut, Kandrau, Kantou, Lo/So, Man, Nao, Per, and Yau as different subpopulations of the Kui community, stating that the Kui Ajiang are part of the Hai/Eng group. Regardless, the Kui Ajiang are the most visible among the Kui community and the focus of most academic research, but only represent a small part of Thailand's Kui community as a whole. For my research examining the intersection between environmental and cultural policy and Indigenous rights, I chose to focus on the Kui Ajiang and their elephant heritage. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the Kui are much more than elephants. Today, while parts of Kui Ajiang elephant heritage are not only acknowledged but celebrated by the state, including through financial support, the Kui still face misrecognition. One part of this misrecognition is in the conflation of Kui Ajiang culture with all Kui culture. Moreover, the state has championed only select parts of Kui identity, while other aspects—including their Indigeneity—remain hidden. How this concomitant platforming and exclusion of a community's culture can produce misrecognition is an unexplored consequence of the AHD, as most studies tend to focus on more overt instances of value conflict rather than the process of quiet erasure that has occurred here because of the Kui's liminality.

The Anthropocene

While this book is about the Kui and their heritage, discussions of their culture cannot be separated from discussions of nature, as the two are deeply

enmeshed. This entanglement of people and the natural environment is a hallmark of our current epoch—the Anthropocene. Although this designation as a new geological period in our earth's history remains debated, it is undeniable that our world is changing in an unprecedented way.

Scientists have warned that we are amid a sixth mass extinction, with species disappearing faster than they can be replaced (e.g., Kolbert, 2014; Dasgupta and Ehrlich, 2019; Cowie et al., 2022). While extinction has always been a part of our planet's history—with estimates suggesting that 99% of the species to have ever lived on Earth are now extinct (Greshko, 2019)—the mass extinction event facing our epoch, described as a "biological annihilation" (Ceballos et al., 2017), is the first driven by human intervention. This period, in which human activity has begun to impact the planet's climate and ecosystems substantially, has been termed the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). The changes that humans render upon the natural world have also had far-reaching consequences for human society. Many of the world's Indigenous peoples have a particularly close cultural relationship with nature. Among others, this can be through perceptions of kinship (Salmón, 2000; Wilson and Inkster, 2018); a collapsing of the nature/culture divide (Rountree, 2012; Inoue and Moreira, 2017), and through uses of natural resources for traditional livelihoods (Daes, 2004). The epoch of the Anthropocene, combined with increasing pressures of globalisation and modernisation have, however, strained these resources and relationships. As a result, Indigenous communities have had their access to the environment restricted, strongly impacting the enactment and transmission of their heritage. Regardless of whether we view the Anthropocene as an official geological epoch, using the Anthropocene as a theoretical framework for understanding the entanglements between the natural and cultural worlds is useful, if not necessary.

The term Anthropocene—using the Greek "anthropos", meaning "man"/"human"—places people in a relationship of domination over the environment rather than mutual entanglement (Haraway, 2015). This concept is underpinned by an understanding of human evolution that sees progress and development in societies moving out of a "primitive" state tied to nature and into a cultured one (Simpson, 2020). Within this approach, the ultimate stage of civility is represented through the subjugation of the natural world. Such a view also creates a hierarchy where communities with a closer relationship with nature—one of coexistence rather than force—are seen as not only less developed/civilised but also lacking culture entirely (Simpson, 2020). Haraway (2015) centres the *Pimoa cthulhu* spider (not the Lovecraftian sea monster, Cthulhu) in her alternative category—the Chthulucene.

Although in part perhaps a tongue-in-cheek commentary on our focus on terminology, trapping humankind within the spider's web rather than allowing us the glory of the Anthropocene, her reconceptualisation is one in which humans and non-humans are mutually agentive, working together to construct a "multi species story" (Haraway, 2016, p. 56). She similarly uses the term "natureculture", removing any separating hyphen, slash, or space between the two words to symbolically collapse the division between these concepts (Haraway, 2003, p. 1). In the same vein, Tsing (2012, p. 141) asserts that "[h]uman nature is an interspecies relationship". This is undoubtedly the case with the Kui. You cannot speak of the Kui Ajiang in Surin without speaking about elephants, just as you cannot speak about the elephants in Surin without mentioning the Kui—even if only indirectly or implied. Therefore, this is the approach to the Anthropocene that I take in this book—not one of human dominion over nature, but webs of multidirectional entanglements between human and "more-than-human" actors, although not all of these actors are assumed to have equal power and agency.

Although this literature on multi-species connections is a crucial part of this book, my research differs in one critical regard. While many (e.g., Haraway and Tsing) argue for the decentring of the human, one of the problems I came across in my research was, in fact, a lack of focus on the *Kui,* not on the *elephants.* It is the elephants, not the Kui, who have historically been accorded a higher societal value—a phenomenon perhaps quite culturally specific to Thailand. Therefore, rather than creating a more balanced account of the Kui Ajiang-elephant entanglement by focusing on the elephant, my research does the opposite, searching for the untold human story and the cultural heritage obfuscated by the Thai elephant narrative. Moreover, the elephant's particular role in Thai history and civilisation—as animals embedded in human warfare, construction, and deforestation—seems to place the animal in a very human web that implicates the elephant in environmental control and destruction. Such a relationship differs slightly from approaches of entanglement discussed by, for example, Haraway and Tsing.

Multiple and complicated relationships between elephants and humans are present not only in the case of the Kui Ajiang but within Thai society more broadly. That of the sacred yet tamed animal and the devoted yet dominating human that characterises Kui Ajiang interactions with elephants has also been observed by Locke (2013) in his research on elephant handlers in Nepal. Locke (2013, p. 80) writes that the interactions between the handlers and their elephants produce two "converse hierarchies [...] On the one hand, the inferior devotee venerates the superior god, but on the other, the superior

human attempts to dominate the inferior animal, bending it to his will". The Kui Ajiang's relationship to elephants in the Thai context adds a further dimension to Locke's work, as the Kui Ajiang's position within society labels them so-called uncivilised people who are curiously responsible for the domestication of a civilised animal. Although in this case, the elephant is not imbued with elements of religiosity but is symbolic of kingship and the nation. Unlike what Locke (2013) observed, in the case of the Kui Ajiang, this interplay is a conflict between national image and identity. This tension and contradiction are also visible within wider Thai society, which views the elephant with a cognitive dissonance that separates the elephant as an important and sacred symbol from the actual living animal. In doing so, the subjugation of the species—through the continued existence and patronage of circus-like elephant shows and elephant rides—is allowed to continue. Furthermore, while wild capture has since been banned, the trades in domestic elephants and domestic ivory remain legal.

Indigenous Heritage in/and the Anthropocene

Tilley et al. (2000) paint the intellectual and institutional separation of nature and culture—and the consequent perception of the natural world as something other—as a product of the Enlightenment. It is a European paradigm of Cartesian dualism, which places human and non-human in opposition (Byrne and Ween, 2015). Such a view of nature and culture is, however, not so neatly applied to non-Western contexts. Descola (2013, p. 407) describes the Western relationship to the environment as one punctuated by naturalism—the view that agency and intentionality are only actionable by humans and wherein "nature and society" are held in opposition but also presents alternative ontologies—ways of seeing and living in the world—that highlight other potential nature/culture interactions. Ontologies that do not neatly distinguish between nature and culture are particularly prevalent in Indigenous communities. This is an area that has been explored in depth by academics such as Harrison and Rose (2010), referencing Indigenous Australians, and by Descola (2013) and Viveiros de Castro (2005), in their writings on Amazonia. Harrison and Rose (2010) argue that Indigenous ontologies destabilise Western dualism and propose that relationships exist in a web of interactions between people and the natural world across time. In this way, heritage "is a cross-species collaborative project" (Harrison and Rose, 2010, p. 249). For the Kui, like many Indigenous communities, the Western dichotomous view of nature in opposition to culture/society contributed

to their historical and continued marginalisation, as those perceived to have a closer relationship with the natural world were (and sometimes still are) viewed as being uncivilised. In such Cartesian thinking, to be "more natural" is to be "less cultural".

While one can argue for the recognition of "ontological pluralities" (Harrison, 2015, p. 24)—an acknowledgement that different groups perceive and interact with the world in different ways—this does not change the fact that the Kui are living in a society that views the natural world in a very different way to their own. The Thai state's own ontological positioning is embedded in and enforced through various societal structures, including the AHD. As Fredengren (2015, p. 112) asserts, "[i]n the extreme, both cultural and natural heritage is created in and for the representational sphere of the human mind and primarily an asset constructed for the benefit of the human being, with no acting back or benefit for either things or the environment". This division of heritage also has no benefit to communities that do not sit neatly within this nature/culture paradigm or who are perceived to be more aligned with the natural world.

Although it might be assumed that nature conservation would benefit such Indigenous cultures, the ways in which many communities interact with the environment can be incongruous with the values of global conservation agendas, which have mainly been shaped by Western ideals of progress and relationships with the natural world. While it is difficult to speak of Western conservation as a single and all-encompassing phenomenon when national environmental values are inevitably locally and regionally derived, this approach has some generalisable features. One notable element is an emphasis on preserving a romanticised wilderness or pristine nature and its biodiversity (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2021; Scatchard, 2021) through exclusionary approaches focusing on domination and control. This includes, for example, the creation of highly regulated protected areas where people are kept separate from nature (see Dowie, 2011; Martin et al., 2016). Within this approach, there are also views that criticise and argue for the control of individual and local human behaviours seen as destructive to the environment (e.g., Fox, 2000; Aiyadurai et al., 2010). The parameters of appropriate behaviour or harmful relationships with nature are, however, often ontologically restrictive and influenced by a top-down model focused on national and global benefits. Nature conservation actions based on these principles of Western conservation make judgements that weigh natural versus cultural values, and local versus global importance. This is something I term the "authorised environmental discourse" (AED). The global imposition of restrictive values underpinning the AED creates problems when we accept

that there are, as Inoue and Moreira (2017, p. 1) note, "many worlds" with "many natures"—as well as many *cultures*—within these worlds.

Indigenous relationships to the environment are frequently presented through a positive lens in discussions of Indigenous heritage. As the often deeply entangled natures of these human-environment relationships are built on foundations of understanding and respect, and nature is accorded with greater meaning and agency than is normative for those of non-Indigenous populations, it may be easy to then paint Indigenous peoples as environmental saviours, at one with the natural world. This characterisation, which Davidov (2012) terms "ecoprimitivism", risks simplifying Indigenous ties to the environment, rendering them one-dimensional and ignoring the complex realities of these relationships. This can be seen as an extension of colonial-era views that depicted Indigenous peoples as cultureless savages for this same environmental relationship (cf. Kuper, 2003). Adhering to this narrative also allows us to overlook the genuine issues that arise when these Indigenous cultures conflict with Western conservation values, as Indigenous knowledge is only valued insofar as it conforms to these Eurocentric conventions. When conflict emerges between Indigenous heritage and environmental conservation, these Western value frameworks that inform conservation practice are imposed upon Indigenous peoples to the detriment of their culture and in the name of preserving nature. This is an act Driessen (2007) considers a form of "eco-imperialism". By promoting a simplified view of Indigenous relationships with the natural world, those who hold control over authorising discourses—of cultural *and* natural heritage—can focus on supporting the aspects they view as positive while simultaneously justifying the loss (or wilful ignorance) of less desirable elements, which are then rendered invisible.

While Western-derived conservation values and practices are increasingly being challenged (e.g., Domínguez and Luoma, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2021), they are still dominant. The issues that arise stem primarily from the fact that these approaches to conservation continue to be largely top-down. This is particularly problematic for communities whose existence and cultural practices are not valued by those in positions of power, as this can result in their being dispossessed of their land through the conservation project. This is also a concern when the environment is viewed as individual fragments needing protection rather than far-reaching interconnected ecosystems in which humans and culture play an integral role. Here, by focusing on conserving the environment, even if it may come at the cost of a group's culture and heritage, the values of those in authority often fail to represent the communities most impacted by conservation actions, thus

perpetuating environmental injustice. These communities, although ignored, nonetheless form parts of the broader ecosystem, and exist in complex and interconnected webs of relationality with their natural environment, so what happens to these webs when the sticky threads of culture are removed?

In emphasising the intricate relationship between people and the environment, the conceptual framing of the Anthropocene makes clear that changes to one impact the other. Therefore, any policy and management decisions in this era cannot be made in the bubble of Enlightenment thinking. The Anthropocene necessitates adopting an ontological approach that was once assumed to be limited to small, relatively powerless groups within society, and making it the norm worldwide. As I will show, the endangerment of the Asian elephant in Thailand, alongside a loss of wild forest spaces, resulted in the endangerment of Kui culture. When managing the natural world, the impact these changes might have on the Kui and other communities dependent upon the natural environment was never considered. In the Anthropocene, the effects of similar endangerments and extinctions will not be felt only by a select few Indigenous communities but by everyone, as we can no longer claim to be separate from the natural world and free from the consequences of our actions.

Authority, the Anthropocene, and the Kui (i.e., What This Book Is All About)

The Kui are an Indigenous community in Thailand whose heritage is intimately connected to elephants and the forest. Thailand, which holds around a tenth of all Asian elephants globally, has seen its elephant population numbers plummet since the beginning of the 20th century, from over one hundred thousand to now only around three thousand (Williams et al., 2020). Unlike African elephants, known for their long tusks, the Asian elephant's main threat has not been ivory poaching. Their endangerment, however, is still human-induced and has been influenced by habitat loss and fragmentation, leading to a reduction in space for food, shelter, and breeding and an increase in human-elephant conflict (Williams et al., 2020). According to the World Wildlife Fund, today, only 15% of the Asian elephant's traditional forested landscape remains, in which approximately 50,000 wild Asian elephants reside (Menon and Tiwari, 2019).

The threat of elephant endangerment has triggered global concern for the total extinction of the species and brought about greater recognition of the need to conserve elephants on an international scale, with major

conservation organisations including the World Wildlife Fund, Wildlife Conservation Society, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) all supporting programmes targeting elephant conservation across Asia. Asian elephants are further protected through local legislation and international agreements, most prominently the 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Within Thailand, the government's response has been twofold. First, through the enactment of legislation to protect the wild elephants themselves, and second, through the implementation of a series of acts to halt the rapid loss of primary forest; these include the 1985 National Forest Policy, 1989 logging ban, 1992 Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act, and the establishment of the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment in 2000. Both approaches have been met with some success, evidenced through a decline in deforestation, with national forest coverage remaining at around 30% for the past two decades (Forest Land Management Office, 2017, 2023) (of this, Surin's forest coverage is 8.47%), and a 7% increase in wild elephant numbers between 2002 and 2017 (Darunee, 2019).

While Thailand's efforts have offered cause for optimism, conservation measures throughout mainland Southeast Asia have not been as successful, and elephant population numbers have continued to decline. Moreover, the actions designed to protect the Asian elephant and Thailand's forests have had an unforeseen negative impact in the form of cultural loss. This has occurred because elephants are more than animals, forests are more than natural, and culture is more than human. Within the Anthropocene, as the divide between nature and culture has blurred, the fates of animals, the environment, and people have become deeply intertwined. The use of the term Indigenous in the Thai context will be discussed in more depth later. For now, however, it is important to note that, in Thailand, roughly 70% of Indigenous peoples rely on traditional occupations for their livelihoods (AIPP, 2010), occupations dependent upon access to natural resources and land (Errico, 2017). Many Indigenous communities, therefore, have their heritage impacted by dual pressures. The first is environmental conservation agendas—informed by the AED—which restrict their use of the environment and value nature over Indigenous cultural ties to these resources. The second is the AHD, which often prioritises state values ahead of Indigenous heritage and adopts a view of culture as separate from nature. This book traces the historical formation of these discourses within Thailand and how Kui culture today has been impacted by them, outlining how the community has responded to threats to their heritage within the confines of these discourses.

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Abbreviations

AED	authorised environmental discourse
AHD	authorised heritage discourse
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

3 Formation of Attitudes Towards Indigenous and Ethnic Minority Communities in Thailand—from the Colonial Period to the Cold War

Abstract
Modern attitudes and state policies toward the Kui and other Indigenous and ethnic minority groups in Thailand are the byproduct of a long historical relationship between the Thai/Siamese state and the communities living within its borders. I examine the threefold impact of the (post) colonial and the Cold War periods on Thai society, focusing on the narrative of Thai history, attitudes towards ethnic minorities and expressions of difference, and, finally, the formation of Thai national heritage. Thailand's experiences of colonialism and the Cold War, and the state's reactions to these periods, played an essential role in establishing the contemporary image of Thainess and attitudes towards ethnicity/difference, the retelling of Thai history, and the creation of national culture and heritage.

Keywords
heritage; nationalism; wildness; civilised; cryptocolonialism; identity

Avoiding colonisation by Europe simply meant that we colonised our own people.
– General Saiyut Kerdphol

To understand the origins of Thailand's attitudes towards race and ethnicity, and in particular the development of the Thai national and "Tai" ethnic identities, we must look back to the country's interactions with the Western world and its colonial ideologies. At first glance, it may seem somewhat odd to consider the concept of colonialism in what was then known as Siam, as the narrative of the nation as never having been colonised is pervasive

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(Jackson, 2008). While the country technically remained politically independent, Siam still faced certain pressures from surrounding colonial regimes, resulting in changes both practical and ideological. The nature of the Thai/Siamese state has been called "cryptocolonial" (Herzfeld, 2002) and "semicolonial" (Jackson, 2008). These terms describe a paradoxical dependency on the colonising power as the condition for remaining independent. To withstand external pressures from Britain and France, Siam accepted influence from the surrounding colonial states, both ideologically—in the forms of racial hierarchies, Western models of civility, and modifications to the Thai language—and more tangibly through land and trade concessions. Sakdipat and Supatra (2017) use the term "internal colonialism" to discuss a further layer of the country's relationship with coloniality—the merging of vassal states to form the Siamese nation was an act of colonialism perpetrated by Siam against its citizens. This internal colonisation is also a feature of countries that we can regard as cryptocolonies. To avoid external colonisation, the local elite push an assimilationist agenda of "aggressive national culture" (Herzfeld, 2002, p. 901). All these changes ultimately produced the modern Thai state, incorporating both East Asian and European characteristics (Damrong, 1926). They have also directed the state's value constructions—including the Thai AHD and AED—to this day.

Although the Siamese nation had contact with foreign cultures such as India and China from early on in its history—and contact with European nations, including Portugal, as early as the 16th century, followed shortly by Spain—Siamese policies remained largely isolationist (Damrong, 1926). It was not until the 1830s that Siam began to take note of the West because of three key factors (Jackson, 2008). The first is largely credited to the views of the monarch, King Rama IV (also known as King Mongkut), who was crowned in 1851. Rama IV is often described as "the real maker of modern Siam" (Smith cited in Johnson, 1997, p. 233), for his interest in Western scientific advancement and willingness to engage with the West—a position later built upon by his successor, Rama V. A second significant factor was the diminishing political potency of the premodern powers of India and China, whose loss of importance following the global reordering brought about by colonialism forced Siam to consider new alliances outside of the East (Peleggi, 2002). The weakening of India and China came alongside the final, crucial point—a rise in Western power (in particular that of Britain and France) in Southeast Asia through the colonisation/occupation of all of modern Thailand's bordering nations: Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Malaysia. Siam was, therefore, faced with pressure to adapt not only to reassert its position in the new global order but, more importantly, to

maintain political independence and avoid the fate of its neighbours. To do so, Siam underwent a process of "[s]elective hybridisation", which involved the adoption of "aspects of Western culture to support local rule" (Jackson, 2008, p. 160).

The biggest threat Siam faced was encroachment by the British and the French. Rama IV (cited in Loos, 2015, p. 2) described this as a choice between swimming "upriver to make friends with the crocodile [France]" or "out to sea and hang on to the whale [Britain]". Rama IV's strategy to hold these colonial nations at bay was to balance competing foreign claims, ensuring that no single power could take control of the country. This was achieved, for example, by signing multiple treaties with different nations—often not in Siam's favour, and ceding pieces of Siamese territory to Britain and France (Loos, 2015). The most (in)famous of these treaties is the 1855 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, between Great Britain and Siam—more commonly known as the Bowring Treaty. While signed to protect the sovereignty of the state, the treaty effectively caused Siam to relinquish judicial and fiscal autonomy to the British and later, in 1893, to yield territory in what is today Laos (Terwiel, 1991; Charnvit, 2000; Haacke, 2003). The most significant consequences of the Bowring Treaty were as follows: it gave Britain trade access, subject only to a 3% tax on imports and exports (Article VIII); it allowed British citizens the right to buy land within a "24 hours' journey from the city of Bangkok" (Article IV); and perhaps most importantly, it stated that British subjects within Siam would remain bound to British law and gave jurisdiction over these subjects to the appointed British Consul (Article II). This last concession effectively granted extraterritorial rights to Great Britain and placed the British people in Siam outside the Siamese monarchy's control. To prevent the country from becoming a "British vassal state", Siam signed subsequent, almost identical treaties with the United States, Japan, and "almost all European nations" (SarDesai, 1977, p. 90). Townsend Harris (1930, p. 151), who very shortly thereafter formed the eponymous Harris Treaty between the United States and Siam in 1856, commented that Siam had signed the Bowring treaty "not because they liked the English, but because they feared them".

France's 1893 annexation of Laos from Siam, 30 years after the French colonisation of Cambodia, was a crucial moment for the Siamese kingdom (see Streckfuss, 1993; Thongchai, 1994). At this point, the British and the French had colonised all of Siam's neighbouring countries. The population of Siam at the time was composed of multiple groups, among them the Laotians and Cambodians, with a 1903 French census conducted by Charles Lemire positing that of the six million inhabitants of Siam, there were

"only two million Siamese at most" (Streckfuss, 1993, p. 131). The French used this diversity to argue that any part of Siam occupied by citizens of nations France had colonised should belong to France (Edwards, 2001). The Siamese, in turn, began to engage with this colonial discourse of racial politics. Realising that to refute the French claim and secure its borders, Siam's population had to maintain a perception of unity, almost overnight everyone living within the country's borders was branded with a new ethnic identity—the "Tai", eventually becoming the Thai national identity as we now know it (Edwards, 2001). The creation of this identity is perhaps the most substantial colonial legacy felt in modern Thailand, as the influences of colonialism served to "defin[e] Siam racially" (Streckfuss, 1993, p. 125).

This policy of artificial ethnic homogenisation was a success. Where the French census conducted by Lemire in 1903 found only a third of the population to be Siamese, the Siamese census undertaken the following year found this number to be 85%, rising to 89% in 1912 (Draper and Peerasit, 2018). By the 1980s, a Thai census recorded 98.7% of the population as Thai (Streckfuss 1993, 2012). These censuses are biased towards the aims of the census makers. The census itself is an important tool and one of three "institutions of power" (alongside the map and museum) identified by Anderson (2006, pp. 163–4) as being crucial to allowing colonial states to define their subjects, territories, and ancestral legitimacy. In the case of Thailand, the census, map, and museum were instruments of power in the hands of neighbouring colonisers such as the French and the Thai state. While the French census attempted to delegitimise Siamese control over non-Siamese populations, the Thai census was part of a national agenda of ethnic assimilation. It was not until 1918/19 that a Thai-run census collected data on ethnic minorities, and, even then, it grossly underestimated these numbers (Grabowsky, 1996). This practice of recording ethnic self-identification stopped in 1937 and was replaced instead with census data recording "language usually spoken at home" (Turner, 2017, n.p.). According to the Thai Nationality Act of 1913/14, "any person born in Thailand was to be considered a Thai national" (Grabowsky, 1996, p. 79). This act, which was in place until 1953, ensured that everyone born in Thailand was recorded as Thai, regardless of ethnic origin (Grabowsky, 1996, p. 79). So far, there is no official demographic data on Thailand's ethnic composition, maintaining the government policy of assimilation from the colonial period (National Commission on Human Rights of Thailand, 2012).

While succeeding in keeping the European colonial powers at bay, this language and policy of ethnic and racial homogenisation came with its own set of consequences. Colonial attitudes towards race and civilisation became

ingrained into Thai society. This change came in two parts: first, the unification of a national Thai people; and second, a process of re-differentiation, wherein this new identity was defined, and the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion were drawn. Creating a unified Tai ethnicity, by nature, necessitated the creation of an unofficial non-Tai category. Non-Tai ethnic communities who had once coexisted with the ethnic Siamese and, up to this point, had been able to maintain their own ethnic identities, beliefs, and practices were erased "ethnically, historically, and demographically" (Streckfuss 1993: 193). The state's subsumption of ethnic groups under the Thai national umbrella replaced fealty to a given lord (or multiple lords, or even fealty to no one) with fealty to the nation-state. Groups who had previously lived outside of direct state control or moved between previously less-fixed territorial boundaries now found this intervention unavoidable.

Thongchai (1994, p. 5) observes that what it means to be Thai is not always clear and is more often defined against what is seen as un-Thai or other, in a process he terms "negative identification". Although often vague, the need to conform to a perceived notion of Thainess was subsequently enshrined in state policy and law. The Tai identity became more than just an umbrella term to cover the denizens of Siam. The creation of Thainess was also accompanied by a centralisation of power around the elite residing in Bangkok—the modern capital. These elites were the first adopters of Western culture, which was termed siwilai—the Thai rendition of "civilised", during the reign of Rama IV (1851–68) (Ribó, 2018). Although many people had different interpretations of what exactly constituted siwilai*,* it, in its most general sense, encompassed notions of Western etiquette and "proper conduct" (Thongchai, 2000b). As a result of this quest for siwilai*,* the colonial period that never was and its aftermath saw a shift away from many Thai traditions thought to make Thai people look "barbaric" or "uncivilised" in the eyes of the West. This particularly impacted traditions concerning bodily practices and presentation (such as dress/costume), as these were the most visible to outsiders (Peleggi, 2007). For example, traditional Thai costume was set aside in favour of more Western clothing to appear less "primitive" to the new world powers. Thai royalty began adopting a Western style of dress in the 1860s, with the Bangkok middle class shifting to a more contemporary style of clothing from the early-20th century (Peleggi, 2007, p. 66).

As part of this consolidation of power, the new capital, Bangkok, became an example of the perfect expression of what it meant to be Tai (Streckfuss, 2012). As a corollary, those living *outside* Bangkok—particularly in the north and northeastern parts of the country—were seen as "uncivilised" and less Tai (Streckfuss, 2012). Thus, creating a unified Tai ethnicity ironically

produced a stratification of degrees of Tai-ness. As those who became model Tai citizens chose to engage with the West, they did so at the expense of the ethnic minority communities who were not included in this process of modernisation. Here, we find a reconfiguration of a civilised/cultured versus uncivilised/wild dichotomy in Thai society that existed before the colonial encounter at the local level between city and forest (see Turton, 2000). This time, however, it is positioned with the Bangkok elite embodying civilised Western culture, in contrast to those occupying the border areas and continuing with pre-colonial ways of life.

This model of citizenship and civility also created new categories to define those living outside of the siwilai urban centres. In particular, communities were seen as different if they did not conform to what Pinkaew (2003, p. 158) describes as "the three pillars of 'Tai-ness'", a concept that formed under Rama VI (1910–25), represented by nation—manifested through speaking the Thai language, religion—equating Thainess with Buddhism, and the king—shown through loyalty to the monarchy. These three pillars were enshrined into the current Thai flag in 1917, represented by three colours—red, white, and blue; the white stripes representing Buddhism, red the blood of the nation, and blue the monarchy.

Although siwilai incorporated certain elements of Western culture, not all Western culture was desirable, especially when it conflicted with these three pillars. Therefore, the model Thai citizen incorporated approved Western elements alongside this understanding of what it meant to be Tai. Such a citizen would, for example, hold "faith in Buddhism" alongside an unshaken belief in "the objective knowledge of Western science" (Thongchai, 1994, p. 41). Those who failed to adhere to these three pillars were viewed as lesser, with the only way to remedy this negative perception being to assimilate and become "civilised". Rama IV himself supposedly commented that Siam was "half civilised and half barbarian" (Charnvit, 2000, pp. 3–6). The tension present in siwilai—a Western concept defining Thai behaviour—was later remedied by Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, who, in his 1939 cultural mandates, chose a different term for "civilisation"—arayatham (Natanaree, 2017). This new word—one embedded in the Thai language—marked a deliberate shift away from siwilai, and its colonial-era association with a Western model of civilisation. This change occurred immediately before the Second World War—when the Western world was no longer an essential ally to be emulated, but a "foreign enemy" (Natanaree, 2017, p. 289).

Initially, terms given to various "uncivilised" communities were based on their geographic location within Thailand. Chao bannok, meaning "village people"—or, more literally, the people (chao) of the outer/outside

(nok) house/village (ban)—was the term ascribed to groups living in the rural lowland areas, typically farmlands, placing them both geographically and conceptually outside of the centre of Thai power and society: the mueang (city).[1] This categorisation was applied regardless of ethnic identity. A second group of people were termed chao pa, meaning "wild" or "jungle people", and was used to describe those living in highlands and forests—an extra step removed from the chao bannok. Notably, while the chao bannok were viewed as "uneducated" and "backward" (Thongchai, 2000a, p. 536; Thongchai, 2000b, p. 48), because they fit within the three pillars of Thainess, they were therefore still "civilisable". Meanwhile, the chao pa, who spoke different languages and practised non-Buddhist traditions, were considered "uncivilisable" (Thongchai, 2000a, p. 536). Pa, or the wild, was thus seen as the antithesis to both siwilai (civilised) and mueang (city) and carried with it notions not only of wilderness but also "cultural paucity" and a "lack of domestication" (Forsyth and Walker, 2008, p. 28). Accordingly, the chao pa were seen as "inferior human beings" (Thongchai, 2000a, p. 535), related more closely to a primitive, natural state than the supposedly cultured centre and citizens of Bangkok. The description of communities as "barbaric", "raw", or "primitive"—that is, more closely aligned with the natural world—designates such people as ungovernable and in need of assimilation into the state (e.g., Scott, 2009).

By associating these groups with negative connotations attached to the notion of pa (the wild) as a "dangerous wild frontier" (Pinkaew, 2003, p. 60), a line was drawn separating these people from the rest of Thai society. This line, however, was not a clear one. For example, not all minority communities were given a separate classification, and not all those living in the highlands and forests were called chao pa. As Pinkaew (2003, p. 60) observes, this division "also relied on how unfamiliar a given group seemed to the central Thai, from the Thai elites' perspective". Groups that seemed more Thai, whether physically or culturally—such as the Lue, Shan, and Lao—were

1 This is a simplified and not entirely accurate translation of mueang, but it serves the purposes of the discussion at this level of detail. It would be more correct to define mueang as a projection of the mandala model of political organisation—describing spatialisation of political reach as a series of concentric circles of diffuse power notable in early Southeast Asian political development (e.g., Tooker, 1996; Herzfeld, 2012b; Tambiah, 2013)—projected onto the ground. The mueang thereby exists as the centre of this concentration of power and polity. The term mueang "largely disappeared" from common usage between 1900 and 1915 as it "imagined dominion in terms of sacred capitals and visible, discontinuous population centres" (Anderson, 2006, p. 173). This usage contradicted the state's efforts at homogenisation, and mueang was therefore replaced by prathet (country) as citizens were encouraged to identify with the concept of the nation state as a whole, rather than a particular city within it (Anderson, 2006, p. 173).

not subject to such categorisation (Pinkaew, 2003, p. 60). As Thongchai (2000b, p. 48) notes, "[p]a was the marginal space and [chao] pa the marginal peoples in it [...] different to the Bangkok élite at the centre". This division between people associated with nature, the wild, and the forest, versus those living in civilisation is vital to understanding the development not only of perceptions towards natural and cultural heritage in Thailand but also of the Thai attitudes towards ethnic minority communities that have continued into the present (see Fig. 3.1).

Today, the notion of the pa as a natural, untameable space has mainly been replaced in the Thai vernacular with the neologism, thammachat (nature). This word was invented as part of the Thai policy on language that began in the late-19th century and continued into the 20th century. This formed part of a project wherein the "[r]uling elites self-consciously re-defined old words in order to break down pre-capitalist categories" (Vandergeest, 1993a, p. 144). The Thai elite readapted traditionally Thai words to describe the recently introduced Western concepts, thereby working to consciously develop a national language to fit alongside the freshly constructed Thai identity and ideals. These changes were made not only to the meanings of words but also to the very structure of Thai grammar itself, allowing it to be more easily translated into English (Vandergeest, 1993a, p. 144). Thammachat was explicitly created to fill a gap in the Thai language to express an equivalent to the Western concept of nature (Vandergeest, 1993a, p. 144). Thammachat, however, does not refer to a wild nature, but one incorporating both a Eurocentric approach "influenced by the wilderness discourse of the West" and a Buddhist understanding of the natural world (Chusak, 2008, p. 112). The word is a combination of thamma (also spelt dharma in the Pali or dhamma in Sanskrit), meaning the teachings of Buddha, and chaat, meaning "life" or "incarnation" and has been interpreted as meaning "born of the dharma"—a concept imbued with notions of Buddhist morality (Darlington, 1997; Lohmann, 1999). This association between thammachat and Buddhism (the religion of the siwilai) is a distinct contrast to pa, which was, and continues to be, connected with wild spirits and animist beliefs.

As discussed, Siam's colonial experience meant that Western thought had an inextricable influence on the development of values in Thailand. The Thai relationship with the natural world was undoubtedly also informed by this. Despite being created as a translation of the western concept of nature, Thai thammachat is not an exact analogy for how nature is often perceived in Western countries. This is demonstrated already in the Buddhist precepts literally embedded in the term. As Pinkaew (2000, p. 19) notes, although thammachat is "used to accommodate the western term, 'nature,' it also means

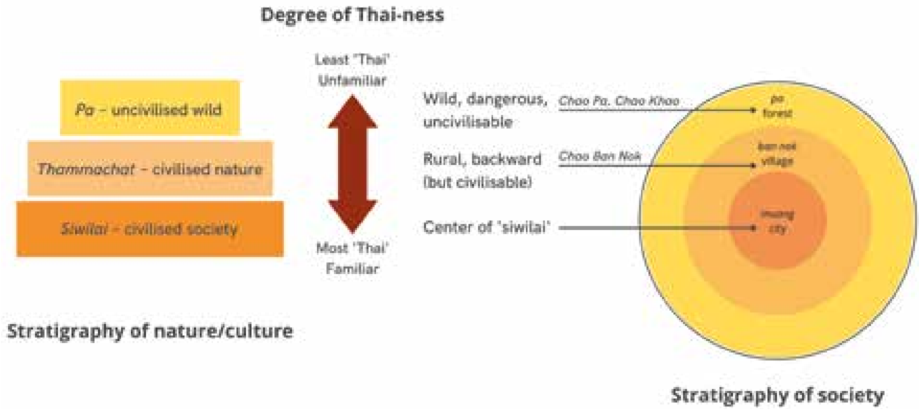

Figure 3.1: Diagram illustrating the relationship between the geospatial divisions of Thai society, different terms for nature and culture, and their perceived Thainess.

natural law, native (abilities), naturalistic (religion)". One key distinction is that thammachat does not approach nature and culture as a binary but rather encompasses aspects of both. It is a space that is natural and "abundant", yet also in "pristine order" (Forsyth and Walker, 2008, p. 28), implying a form of human control over this landscape. Nature as a concept was modified to allow the Thai urban middle class access to it to satisfy their "aesthetic, educational, and recreational needs" (Ribó, 2018, p. 42). In contrast to the often-pejorative uses of pa, thammachat carries only positive connotations, as it forms a point of unthreatening intersection between the civility of the mueang and the acceptable parts of the wilderness of the pa.[2] The products of this new nature have also been appropriated under the Western environmental ideology of natural resources (sappayakon thammachat), which has allowed elements of the wilderness, such as timber, to be transformed and adopted by the Bangkok elite, as these resources have become a "strategic form of public capital" (Ribó, 2018, p. 42). This perspective has transformed the relationship between people and the environment from symbiotic interconnectedness to one of domination and exploitation. This "new nature" is not only ideologically removed from the realm of the pa and the concepts it encompasses, but it has also produced (or is perhaps the by-product of) the social stratification of the natural world. The exclusivity of thammachat is even more critical today, as these purely wild spaces of pa no longer exist.

2 This distinction between a civilised nature and wild nature is influenced by Southeast Asian value constructs, and terminology distinguishing these two concepts can also be found in Malaysian/Indonesian (taman vs hutan), and Burmese (thabawà vs tàw) (Bankoff and Boomgaard, 2007, p. 5).

The elite, therefore, created a nature that those outside of this circle could not enjoy whilst simultaneously destroying the only nature left for the rest of the population. As Rigg and Stott (1998, p. 91) conclude, thammachat is an "elite Thai word". Although the view of thammachat as a space of human influence on nature has worked to bring the natural and cultural worlds closer together, its definition and application are exclusionary, as it delimits only a precise interpretation of nature. As thammachat does not encapsulate wilderness, the pa and many of its negative connotations applied to groups of people within Thai society still exist. This process of civilising and adopting the country's natural/wild spaces and resources did not extend to the "wild people"—the chao pa—who remain removed from society and continue to be seen and named as part of the pa, rather than the more acceptable thammachat. Therefore, while the Thai urban upper and middle classes expanded their realms to include the forests, they did so to the exclusion of the people occupying these spaces. Control over definitions—which mark the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion—is a central feature of any authorising discourse. This language of thammachat versus pa and the boundaries of exclusion it created through the definition of "nature" is a key feature of the Thai AED.

The encroachment on and adaptation of the pa has had an immeasurable impact on the lives and cultures of the groups tied to these spaces—including the Kui. Apffel-Marglin (2012, p. 7) notes that "the categories of wilderness and of nature have been, and continue to be, deeply implicated in colonial-type politics". The connection between culture, mueang and thammachat—as opposed to the uncultured pa—has also affected how the communities occupying these different spaces are perceived. As "civilised" is considered synonymous with "cultured", traditions associated with the wild are not considered heritage by the state and are excluded by the AHD.

The Kui have a close relationship with the pa. One of the temples where I conducted interviews, and one of the three sites of Kui heritage I present in this book, is Wat Pa Ajiang, the "Forest Temple of the Elephants". Since the Kui are so intimately tied with elephants and the forest (to the point where this community of Kui is called the Kui Ajiang—the elephant Kui), they do not hold these same negative associations with the concept of pa. Rather than being uncivilised, the pa is a sacred space central to many Kui beliefs. When asked what the role of the mor chang entails, for example, Sunthorn, a Kui man I spoke with, replied, "We do things related to the forest (pa)". To achieve the highest rank of mor chang is to become the Khru Pa Yai—the "Head Teacher of the Forest". Venturing into the pa is also essential to capturing elephants, and the beginning of the hunt entails several rituals

that "open the forest" as the Kui Ajiang ask for permission to enter from all the spirits living inside it (Giles, 1929). The Kui Ajiang's use of the forest and its natural resources is not considered a one-way extractive transaction or a right; permission is constantly requested, with offerings provided in recognition of the power of the spirits who have the primary claim to this space. In entering the forest, the Kui Ajiang shed their connection to the outside world and enter this realm of spirits and wilderness, changing their behaviour per a strict code of conduct and even altering the language that they speak when in the forest as they relinquish their connection to the land outside the forest and enter a liminal space between the pa and the corporeal world. The historical relationship between the Kui Ajiang and the pa has, therefore, always been one of respect—bordering on veneration—and deep entanglement.

A History of the New Thai State

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition.
– Nora (1989, p. 8)

Alongside Thailand's newly invented ethnic identity came a rewriting of the nation's history. Gandhi (2018, p. 4) notes that "[t]he emergence of [...] 'independent' nation-states after colonialism is frequently accompanied by a desire to forget the colonial past". This sentiment leads to a process of "historical self-invention" that works to erase the suppression endured as part of the colonial encounter (Ghandi, 2018, p. 4). Although they were never formally colonised, Thailand still felt the impacts of colonial pressure and could not act as a fully independent sovereign power. One way in which this will to forget its oppressive colonial past is visible is in Thailand's response to its postcolonial existence through the revision of its national history. In the Thai case, to forget the nation's colonial encounter, the Thai people—a product of this experience—needed to have existed from the beginning of time. Therefore, not only was the colonial past re-written but so too was the pre-colonial past. This new history has become what Thongchai (1994, p. 163) describes as "one of the most significant instruments in the identification of Thai nationhood" and one of the most vital "instruments of power" for the modern Thai state (Charnvit, 2022, p. 1).

The Thai historical narrative espoused by the state is nationalistic, royalist, and anti-colonial. It views Thainess—and with it, Thai people—not as

a recent invention but as a concept dating back to time immemorial (King, 2017). Thongchai (2014), in *The case of Thailand's royal nationalist history,* points to the traumatic humiliation of the Siamese court in 1893—wherein the French forced the court at gunpoint to relinquish their claim to the eastern region of the Mekong River, in what is now modern-day Laos—as the catalyst for this process of historical revisionism in the postcolonial period. This new history combined two main narratives, "one of Siam as an ancient civilisation, the other of Siam's enduring struggles for independence [...] reflecting the anti-colonial history of its neighbours" (Thongchai, 2014, p. 262). It was, however, not the more recent Western colonial encounter through which anti-colonial and nationalistic sentiments were explored but rather historical examples of conflicts with other nations in the East. We see this in the national narrative of the fall of Ayutthaya, the capital, to the Burmese in 1569 (Thongchai, 2014, p. 265). In this retelling, the capital is swiftly recovered, and independence is restored. The initial Siamese failure is furthermore attributed to a "lack of unity among Thais" rather than "the lack of moral power of its ruler" (Thongchai, 2014, p. 265.). While the influence of post-1893 colonial resentment is evident in such (hi)stories, accounts of Siam's experience with the European colonists are notably absent. Instead, Myanmar was repositioned as the main villain of the Siamese state, taking the place of the British and the French—although, in this version, the losses are not lasting. The historical narrative of Siam's triumph over its oppressors was used to project the ideals of the present onto the past.

To this day, the national historical narrative remains one of the Thai nation having fought off various colonial aggressors to maintain its independence. Thailand was never colonised after all. This project of rewriting the nation's history also served to establish the civility of Siam—and the Thai people—by according to it a rich and ancient history, with particular weight given to accounts of the ancient capitals and stories of royalty (Charnvit, 2000). Sukhothai, a kingdom from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, is viewed as Siam's first capital (Peleggi, 2015). It is from this Sukhothai period that Thai history is considered first to begin, progressing then to the Ayutthaya and then Bangkok periods, as the history of the Thai people is separated neatly into three distinct parts, tracking the movement of the capital city (Charnvit, 2020). Sukhothai represents not only the origins of the Thai kings—who are the victors of epic battles—but it is also the "centre of Buddhist religion" (Mulder, 1997, p. 44). This historical period thereby captures all three central tenets of Thainess—monarchy, religion, and nation—in one thread. This romanticisation and elaboration of the past enabled the removal of reference to the pre-Sukhothai period and more

local narratives. As Mulder (1997, p. 50) notes, according to history taught in Thai schools, "without the King, there is no Thailand, and there would be no Nation". There is no space for non-royal, pre-royal, or other-than-Thai histories. The diverse stories of the various cultures that eventually merged to become the modern Thai have been lost in this national history-making project. A convenient consequence of assuming the nation's history began with the Thai people is that the prior existence of all other groups is not officially acknowledged. The official history of Thailand is, therefore, a royal one—focused only on the stories from the ancient and modern capitals, linking nationalistic fervour to loyalty to the monarchy and providing a legitimised historical backdrop for this new Thai state and its citizens.

At present, the conventional Thai historical narrative and the nation's history taught in classrooms describe the ethnographic composition of the country as originating from a "southern migration from China by the many Thai-speaking people" (Connors, 2008, p. 38). Rather than acknowledging the diverse ethnic composition of the country, this account has allowed for attitudes of cultural superiority among the central Thai—who have adopted cultural customs from Bangkok—over other ethnic minority groups occupying the outer regions of the country. Trouillot (1995) describes two intertwined sides of history—one consisting of the socio-historic process (i.e., what happened), and the other of the narrative process (i.e., what was written about what happened). In this narrative process, Trouillot (1995, p. 49) notes that "[s]ilences are inherent in history" and the absence of both peoples and things "is constitutive of the process of historical production". What is *not* written about can be as informative as what *is*. Within much of Thailand's official, authorised historiography, the country's marginalised groups have had their histories ignored in the national record, and, as a result, their cultures lack the same official, rich, and embellished origin story of the Thai people to give their traditions and beliefs credibility. This undermining of local and Indigenous histories has fuelled the flawed perception of these communities as lacking culture and civility.

Phibunsongkhram's Cultural Mandates: A Thai Cultural (R)evolution?

Starting in the 1890s, the state instituted a series of reforms that worked to remove the influences of "local political and cultural autonomy" in favour of a centralisation of power around Bangkok—the new cultural capital and model of the civilised Thai (Jory, 1999, p. 338). For example, the use of

any language other than central Thai was banned in educational settings until the early 1990s, and as per the Surname Act of 1913, "all family names must have a meaning in the Thai language", effectively mandating that all Thais must have a Thai surname. Although this latter policy was targeted primarily at Chinese immigrants to Thailand, it impacted all communities for whom Thai was not the primary language—particularly immigrants and Indigenous populations—and fed into the state's policy of cultural assimilation (Jory, 1999). Many of the desires for cultural uniformity under the single image of Thainess that began during and immediately after the colonial period were later codified in a series of cultural mandates (รัฐนิยม/ratniyom)[3] issued under Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, the prime minister at the time.

Phibunsongkhram came into power in 1938—a member of the same political party, the People's Party (คณะราษฎร), that led the 1932 revolution/coup d'état that resulted in the abolition of the absolute monarchy in favour of a constitutional monarchy. The atmosphere of national instability and anxiety that punctuated the inter-war period (1918–39) meant that the institution of the royal family no longer wielded the "social and semantic" power needed to hold the Thai nation together (Thepboriruk, 2019, p. 237)—although the symbolic potency of the monarchy remained largely intact. For Connors (2005, p. 527), it was from this moment that Thailand began issuing "overlapping waves" of cultural policy, each drawing on these earlier policy precedents emerging after the colonial period—such as the 1913 Surname Act. These policies centred around the notion of "cultural security"—creating national stability and cohesion through culture (Connors, 2005). Nonetheless, Phibunsongkhram and his cultural mandates ultimately exemplified this cultural security policy. Notably, Mandate 1, issued in 1939, involved the renaming of the country from Siam to the "ethnically specific" (Connors, 2005, p. 338), prathet Thai (ประเทศไทย), or Thailand—a land of Thai people. The mandate declared that "[t]he country will be called 'Thailand'" and "[t]he nationality and people will be called 'Thai'" (Royal Gazette, 1939, p. 810, own translation), a move that explicitly linked the name and nationality of the country with the recently established Thai ethnicity.

The 1939 push towards Thai cultural assimilation was further emphasised in Phibunsongkhram's Mandate 3, requiring citizens to "stop using names

3 Although "cultural mandates" is the usual translation for Phibunsongkhram's decrees, รัฐนิยม technically translates to "state-favouring", and is also described as "state convention". This more literal translation is interesting, as it equates this ethnicization and codification of culture to state worship.

that do not follow the name of the nationality or accord with the preference of the group" and to "call all people 'Thai' without separating them [into groups]" (Royal Gazette, 1939, p. 1281, own translation). This third mandate prevented citizens from identifying with or being identified by previously-used categories such as Thai-Khmer or Thai-Malay—terms encompassing both ethnic and national identity. Phibunsongkhram's cultural mandates used culture as a tool for delimiting the Thai identity through the enforcement of proper conduct, as well as suppressing expressions of difference, something that is further evidenced in Mandate 9, "On language and writing and the duty of good citizens" (Royal Gazette, 1940, p. 151). This mandate dictated that:

> 1. Thai people must extol, honour and respect the Thai language, and must feel honoured to speak it.
> 2. Thai people must consider it the duty of a good citizen to study the national language, and must at least be able to read and write; Thai people must also consider it their important duty to assist and support citizens who do not speak Thai or cannot read Thai to learn it.
> 3. Thai people must not consider place of birth, residence, or regional accent as a marker of division. Everyone must hold it to be true that all born as Thai people have the same Thai blood and speak the same Thai language. Place of birth or accent makes no difference.
> 4. Thai people must consider it their duty to conduct themselves as good Thai citizens should, and to urge and instruct those who do not yet know and understand their duty as to the duties of a good citizen of the Thai nation.
> (Royal Gazette, 1940, p. 151)

Despite no direct colonial occupation, European/Western influence greatly impacted Thailand, its people, and its culture. Therefore, I take the view of Thailand/Siam as being autocolonial or self-colonising. Where Thai people had already begun to adapt their way of dress in line with the Western ideals central to the concept of siwilai, a series of state policies implemented during the 1940s further enshrined this move towards "presentability" into law. The tenth state edict issued in January 1941, for example, required all Thais to "not appear in public [...] without proper clothing", citing acceptable dress as "authorised uniforms", "Western clothing properly worn", or "[t]raditional clothing properly worn" (Peleggi, 2007, p. 73). The state's definition of proper attire is further elaborated upon in Section 5 of the 1942 Royal Decree Prescribing the National Culture (B.E. 2485):

> no person shall dress in a way which shall deride the honour of the nation, for example, by wearing garments gathered up, wearing only underpants, wearing trousers intended to be used as sleepwear, wearing only Pha Khao Ma [a loincloth] or being topless, or for women, wearing only brasiers, wearing only a band of cloth over the breasts.

Increasingly, the clothing customs of those living in the provinces were banned, and both legislation and state propaganda pushed for a more Western style of dress as the national standard. But how do we reconcile this incorporation of Western influence with Phibunsongkhram's desires to reify Thainess? This preference for Western-ness was often hidden behind the term สากล (sakon), meaning "international" (Feangfu, 2011). In the case of culture, sakon was used to describe certain types of culture as universal phenomena, rather than having a specific reference point within a foreign country (Feangfu, 2011). Meanwhile, other cultural changes were explained as ancient Thai tradition that had been rediscovered (Feangfu, 2011). Thainess, therefore, involved adopting and reformulating Western values as either universal human constructs or as having always been Thai. These policies also saw another shift in language away from the now-outdated concept of siwilai and towards wattanatham (culture), a notion that still defined etiquette and Thainess, but in a more encompassing way and through a more updated, global language (Charnvit, 2000, p. 130).

Phibunsongkhram's cultural mandates also changed how Thai citizens identified, which, in turn, impacted the broader structuring of Thai society. Terms previously used to designate difference—chao pa and chao bannok—fell out of use in the early-20th century. Instead, they were replaced by khon klum noi, meaning "ethnic minorities" (or the literal translation, "people from small groups"). This was then subdivided to encompass the chao khao (ชาวเขา), meaning "mountain/hill people"—those communities living in highland areas, more conventionally known as "hill tribes" (Pinkaew, 2003, p. 162).[4] At the same time, those perceived as being close enough to the central Thai had their ethnic identities relabelled under expressions of regional distinctiveness. For example, the Lao living in the northeast of Thailand were renamed Khon Isan—"Northeasterners".[5] Keyes (1966) refers

4 Chao khao has its origins in the British designation of upland groups in Myanmar as "hill tribes" during the colonial period (Sakboon, 2013, p. 234).

5 This reordering of identity classification has been so pervasive amongst the Lao in the Northeast that the Lao language has become entirely conflated with the regional Isan dialect (Vail, 2007, p. 113).

to this shift away from ethnic identification towards attributions tied to geographic regions of Thailand as "ethno-regionalism", and this remains the most common form of identification in Thailand to this day.

Although some communities still maintain a sense of identity with their historic ethnic classifications, this comes secondary to their ethno-regional identity as a "Northerner", "Southerner", etc. This change was fuelled by the 1939 cultural mandates, which intended to suppress any ethnic identification that did not conform with the Bangkok model of Thainess (Keyes, 1966). One of the later state mandates issued in 1941 decreed that all Thai people were to be called Thai "without identifying the diversity of their ethnic origin" (Thongchai, 1994, p. 165). The negation of ethnic identity in favour of regionalism contained a citizen's identity "within the frame of the newly created body of nationhood" (Thongchai, 1994, p. 165). Indeed, King and Dinkoksung (2017) describe this encroachment of the values of Bangkok into the northeastern Isan plateau and the other peripheral regions of the country as an act of colonisation perpetrated by the Thai state against those living on its borderlands. In this way, Thailand avoided colonisation from the West, only to colonise itself in the process.

From 1942, with the Japanese declaration of war against the Allies of the Second World War, Phibunsongkhram underwent another change—from prime minister to "the Leader". This style of nation ruling was modelled on other nationalist/dictatorial regimes emerging or already established at the time: Stalinist Russia, Mussolini's Italy, Franco's Spain, and Hitler's Germany (Thepboriruk, 2019). The National Cultural Council was also established in 1942 under the National Culture Act as a "means for the mass education of the population" (Thamsook, 1978, p. 237)—a tool of political control.

The Cold War in Thailand: Impacts on Thai National Image and Heritage

> *Thai brothers and sisters, be united. Believe in our government and our military. Be sure that we must win. Remember that the news that comes from the enemy is against us, and that which is bad for us is the enemy.*
>
> – Thai Cold War propaganda poster

Despite the existence of policies of integration based on the newly constructed notion of Tai-ness, the Thai state did not begin to take a real interest in ethnic minority groups living within the country until the Cold War period (1947–91) (Kwanchewan and Prasit, 2009). Ethnicity was not deployed as

a "rhetoric of control" until the mid-20th century, amidst the atmosphere of fear for "national security [...] and territorial integrity" fuelled by Cold War tensions (Pinkaew 2000, p. 161). The ideologies of the Cold War and the perceived looming threat of communism in the region went a long way toward heightening the Thai state's policy of suppressing expressions of ethnic difference. This atmosphere peaked with the Vietnam War (1955–75) and its immediate aftermath (Forsyth, 2020). During this period, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) waged an armed insurgency against the Thai government and actively recruited new members.

Communities living on the nation's borders, distanced from the cultural centre of Bangkok both geographically and ideologically, were thought to be at the highest risk of siding with the CPT and were therefore seen as the greatest threats to the nation's security (Chayan, 2005). These suspicions helped cement the fear of difference that had been building within Thai society since the colonial period and further redirected this fear towards the Indigenous communities occupying the country's borderlands. Communism was considered a threat to Thainess overall, as to be communist was incompatible with Thainess in the eyes of the state (Thongchai, 1994). This is visible in a series of posters financed by the United States Information Service in the 1960s. These posters compare "Communist versus Freedom", pitting hellish images of a communist world against idyllic depictions of Thai society and Thai cultural heritage. For example, one poster meant to depict the communist experience is a dark illustration featuring an emaciated figure clutching a child to their chest, accompanied by the caption, "Millions of Chinese people fled from the 'workers' paradise' of Red China because they were fed up with communism". The image of "Freedom" on the right, in stark contrast, depicts a sunlit and brightly attired couple in Thai costume, engaging in traditional dance, with the caption reading, "In Thailand, citizens are happy and show joy and enthusiasm through art and dance". This ideology positioned communism as another other to be feared, in opposition to Thai and also explicitly tied Thai culture to national politics. Although the United States played a key role in promoting the anti-communist rhetoric in Thailand to prevent the spread in the region, there were also probably more localised motivations from the Thai state. I suggest that the threat of losing land and governance to the communist insurgents may also be an unwanted reminder of Siam's earlier struggle to maintain independence from the European colonists, reigniting this previous fear of loss of territory and autonomy.

The Cold War period also influenced the formation of a Thai national heritage. During this time, the three pillars of Thai culture: nation, religion,

and monarchy, were promoted by the military leadership to build social and national cohesion, as well as to "legitimise Bangkok" (Linantud, 2008, p. 653). The nation turned to the monarchy for support—reaching for the stability of this traditional institution despite the earlier change to a constitutional monarchy in 1932 (Linantud, 2008, p. 653). This nostalgia and desire for national cohesion also played out in the national heritage sphere. The instability of the Cold War resulted in a resurgence of Thai culture discarded during and after the colonial period. Restrictions of culture in reaction to exposure to the contemporary "'global flows' of culture" that mark our modern-day world are not a unique phenomenon (Harrison, 1999, p. 10). Rather than resulting in global acceptance and a greater homogenisation of culture, Thailand, like many other societies, responded to this constant bombardment of external (Western) cultural stimulation by becoming more insular and solidifying its own national and cultural boundaries in a process of "cultural closure" (Harrison, 1999, p. 10).

Although this sentimentality produced a desire for more traditional ways of life in Thailand, this did not result in a total return to premodern (or rather, pre-colonial) practices. Notably, a clear line distinguished these older traditions as remnants of the past—separate from modernity. In this way, although traditional elements such as Thai costume might be celebrated on special occasions, they were not brought back as part of everyday life in the way they had been in the past. Thailand's Cold War policies still pushed for a uniform Thai culture closely aligned with Western values. The wearing of "proper" contemporary Western attire was, therefore, still the model for the urban Thai. Those who did not conform to these standards continued to be perceived negatively. The past and past ways of living were instead "historicise[d] and memorialise[d] [...] in order to project a modernising society" (Phillips, 2016, p. 77), setting contemporary Thailand up as separate from the bygone era in which such traditions were the norm. These actions parallel Meyer and Geschiere's (1999, p. 2) observation that cultural closure is often marked by "efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries", as seen here. In this way, what was once common and ubiquitous underwent a process of heritagisation—becoming a form of officially sanctioned heritage—highlighting both the importance of these traditions and their difference from the newly established conventions in the modern era.

Thus, the Cold War period significantly impacted the formation of the Thai AHD and, more specifically, the image of Thai national heritage still used today. Under the command of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958–63), the Thai regime established itself as the leader of a cultural renaissance,

hosting events that created an image of Thailand (and, by extension, the regime) as "stable and timeless" (Phillips, 2016, p. 146). During this time, a select number of festivals and ceremonies were picked to become representative of Thai culture and Thai people, regardless of the actual historical origins of the traditions. Given the creative dynamics of ethnic identity and cultural change, the state was also forced to invent an entire cultural background to go alongside the new Thai identity. The festivals that came to represent Thainess during this time included: the Royal Barge Procession (symbolising loyalty to the royal family—the third pillar of Thainess), Buddhist Lent (representing the second pillar of religion), the Surin Elephant Round-Up (as elephants are one of the main symbols of the Thai nation), and Loy Krathong (a basket floating ceremony marking the first full moon in the twelfth month of the Thai lunar calendar) (Phillips, 2016, p. 146). All of these festivals became symbols of the first pillar of Thainess—the nation; becoming models for authentic Thai tradition, to be celebrated nationwide.

As can be seen from the examples above, Thailand's official AHD and national heritage corpus parallels the three pillars of Thainess: nation, religion, and monarchy. This focus has also significantly impacted intangible heritage in the country. Since Thais in Bangkok had abandoned many of their traditions during the modernisation process prompted by the colonial encounter, they came to view the royal traditions as their own. Through this model of adopting royal and religious heritage viewed as high culture, other traditions that fell outside these boundaries were considered less evolved and therefore less valuable. A lingering consequence to this day is that more local traditions and expressions of culture are not celebrated outside of individual communities. Thai heritage, therefore, exists as a tense pastiche of local and national traditions. This division is one that Vandergeest (1993b, p. 843) describes as existing between the "great traditions" of Buddhism and the "little traditions" formed through local experience.

The state also appropriated select local cultures and repackaged them as national heritage. These traditions may be widely celebrated, but the cultural narrative behind them has removed individualistic claims and their original historical origins in favour of a broader Thai story. In the case of the Surin Round-Up, as will be discussed later, the government invented a new national tradition based on a culture belonging to the local Kui Ajiang community. In doing so, they removed this festival from Kui control. King (2017, p. 7) observes that "[t]o attempt to define the heritage of a people is always a profoundly political act". When Siam created the imagined community of Thai, incorporating multiple groups under this single term, it also attempted to condense multiple histories and heritages into one. The

government's appropriation and nationalisation of minority heritage under this policy of assimilation did not accompany any significant increase in visibility or favourable treatment of the associated minority group by the state or the wider Thai population.

As part of this nationwide heritagisation process, the Bangkok urban elite and middle class established themselves as cultural gatekeepers. They adopted a modern, Western way of life but were also responsible for showing the world traditional Thai culture. The heritage-making process extended beyond festivals and into local community life, demonstrating the Thai ruling and middle classes' paradoxical relationship with tradition. On the one hand, such ways of living and dressing held them back from seeking equal footing with the West. On the other, presenting these traditions to the world was a means of attracting tourism and showing the West that Thais were non-threatening, especially given tense international relations with the spread of communism in the region. The selective presentation of culture further allowed the urban Thais to sate their nostalgia without needing to revert to such customs themselves. Traditional communities were therefore held up as representations of authenticity. Their livelihoods and perceived backwardness made them both incapable of assimilating and also the ideal representation of traditional Thai life. Their authenticity became a "function of their cultural dislocation" (Huggan, 2001, p. 16). Rural populations, the chao bannok, were positioned as exemplars of a safe, customary way of life. The people of Bangkok, in contrast, were modernised, observing these rural communities through the Western gaze, rather than considering them to be peers or contemporaries. The urban Thais, at this point, began engaging in what Huggan (Huggan, 2001, p. 44) terms "post-colonial exoticism".

Imagined Communities and Nationalism in Thailand Today

The ideals formed and disseminated during the colonial and Cold War periods are not necessarily felt as strongly now as time has passed. For example, the three pillars of Thainess, which were fundamental aspects of state ideology during these periods, have recently begun to erode. For the pillar of religion, this came about through public criticisms of the Thai sangha, or monastic order. Accusations made by the press of "moral failure and financial impropriety" perpetuated by certain members of the order, accompanied by "high-profile court cases" involving the leadership of the sangha (Mackenzie, 2007, p. 29), have resulted in a weakening of public faith in the monastic order, and therefore in the pillar of Buddhism

more generally. Since the scandals mentioned by Mackenzie in 2007, the sangha has continued to be plagued by controversy, including accusations of embezzlement and corruption, sexual misconduct, money laundering, and involvement in the illegal wildlife trade (Guynup, 2017; Holmes, 2017; *Nation Thailand*, 2018; Sanitsuda, 2019).

While the pillars are certainly not as relevant as they once were, they remain important features of Thai society and culture. As of the 2015 census, 94.6% of the population still identified as Buddhist. The monks at the Kui temples continue to be highly respected and ranked societally, even amongst other traditional leadership roles like the mor chang. The temples are also key community spaces. Protests in 2020 with antimonarchy undercurrents, including the laying of a plaque on 20 September that read: "The people have expressed the intention that this country belongs to the people, and not the king" (*BBC News*, 2020), also point to the changing perceptions and influence of the royal family in Thai society. The monarchy's role has undergone several transformations since the colonial period, including the shift from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. As with the pillar of Buddhism, however, there is no denying the historical importance the monarchy has played in forming the image of Thai history and society as it is known today. Despite these conflicts, the three pillars remain culturally relevant and are highly represented in the national heritagescape. Only recently, the new governor of Surin, Suvapong Kitiphatpiboon (2020, p. 2), released a statement on his policies and working principles, which include "loyalty to the institute of the nation, religion, and the king".

Thainess and the Thai national identity, constructed in part by these Pillars, form part of an imagined community—for which political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983) is justly famed. A community is considered imagined, he argues, because most members of the community will never meet, "yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). While Anderson's central exploration focuses on the imagined community at the nation level, he makes the more overarching assertion that there are no "'true' communities", but rather "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined". Once imagined, these communities can be "modelled, adapted and transformed" (Anderson, 1983, p. 141).

This idea of constructed communities and the origins and formations of social divisions have been analysed by many academics. In 1964, philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner (cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 6) put forward that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist". A few years later, anthropologist

Fredrik Barth (1969) suggested that ethnic groups define themselves as different from others through the construction of "boundaries" (in a book, aptly titled *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*). Anderson (2006, p. 7) similarly asserts that nations are inherently limited—characterised by finite yet elastic boundaries. Barth (1995) later expanded upon this idea, proposing that social division is based on cultural difference. Such theories fit well into the Thai state's deliberate construction of national identity and its attempts to reify culture and social norms. As mentioned, Thai identity was formed in opposition to that which was seen as non-Thai. As I explore in this book, one inevitable consequence of this fixed thinking is the creation of socio-cultural borders. In the case of the Kui Ajiang, a difficulty arises as their culture does not fit neatly into either of these bounded categories of Thai and other. The Kui Ajiang are simultaneously Thai and non-Thai and neither and all of the above, sitting in the margins of these fixed definitions. The Kui Ajiang, therefore, become what Turner (1969, p. 94) terms "liminal personae" or "threshold people". These are "persons who elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space". Turner (1969) also notes a common association between liminality, wilderness, and invisibility—concepts that also relate to the Kui Ajiang.

Rather than an organic occurrence of imagined citizenship, the origins of the Siamese/Thai sense of citizenship were the product of what Anderson (2006, p. 101) terms "official nationalism"—that is, "an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups who are threatened with marginalisation or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community". The deliberate machinations by the state, beginning with the invention of an ethnic category and the accompanying Tai/Thai national identity extending to a rewriting of history and reinvention of culture, overrode an emerging national consciousness and set the boundaries of the imagined Thai community that have continued into the present. This was made possible through the formal "institution of citizenship" (Vandergeest, 1993a, p. 135), which created a notion of "bounded universality"—the imagined Thai community—that has been perpetuated in the minds of Thai citizens.

To be Thai is to be part of an imagined community precisely because no such community existed until the colonial period. Anderson (2006, p. 149) makes an interesting observation on the relationship between the imagined national community and discrimination, stating that "nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contamination transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history". While, with the Kui

Ajiang, we speak of ethnicity rather than race, the outcome is the same: despite fitting into many boxes, for the rest of Thailand and in the eyes of the state, the Kui are, and will be forever, Kui, “no matter what passports they carry or what languages they can speak and read” (Anderson, 2006).

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Abbreviations

AED	authorised environmental discourse
AHD	authorised heritage discourse
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand

4 Constructing the Authorised Environmental Discourse: Territorialisation and Indigeneity in Thailand

Abstract

This chapter outlines a key contribution of this monograph—the authorised environmental discourse (AED). The AED describes how the state or those in positions of authority define and weaponise nature and the environment to the detriment of those without authority (in this case, Thailand's Indigenous communities). I present how the environment has been defined throughout Thai history up to the present, and how conservation rhetoric has been used as a tool of the state to dislocate Indigenous communities from their land and the heritage tied to these natural spaces. In particular, I examine how the state's AED impacts the heritage that falls in between the Western division of nature and culture to take agency (in this case, over rights to nature) away from Indigenous communities like the Kui.

Keywords

nature; authority; heritage; Indigenous; forestry

Peluso and Vandergeest (2001, p. 762) use the term "political forests" to describe the state's appropriation and adaptation of forest spaces. These forests play a key role in the nation-building process of colonial countries more generally, as Peluso and Vandergeest (2001) trace the emergence of political forests as part of colonisation, postcolonial restructuring ("national forestry"), counter-insurgency ("war forestry"), and, more recently, what they term "non-state forestry", where the central actors are NGOs, corporations, and even local communities. The creation of political forests is a process that also accompanies a change in perceived ownership. In the case of

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postcolonial political forests, natural resources become *national* resources through the creation of national parks and forests, which remove local claims to the environment (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2001). In Thailand, the government's claim over the wilderness placed the power to control the environment, territory, and natural resources in the hands of the state. In doing so, local communities who had, up to that point, lived in and interacted with these spaces without disruption, were dispossessed from their land. Thailand's cryptocolonial status resulted in an act of internal colonisation. As part of this process, environmental discourse has been mobilised by the Thai state in an attempt to legitimise its control of ethnic minorities. The Thai state hid its political agenda in managing its forested spaces by adopting the language of Western environmentalism in crafting its AED. Ironically, although presented as being motivated by the protection of nature, the transformation of Thailand's wildernesses into these political forests was an act of *de*naturalisation.

Where Smith (2006) presents the AHD as an authoritative imposition that defines the bounds and influences the management of heritage, I present here a parallel concept, which I have accordingly termed the authorised environmental discourse (AED). This AED parallels the AHD, as both are tools for legitimising power/authority and are used to the detriment of minority communities that fall outside of state-derived normative value structures. Like the AHD, the AED uses authority, definitions, and management as tools of control, but—as the name suggests—in the scope of natural heritage and the environment. The AED describes an imposition of power that delimits nature and restricts access to environmental spaces and natural resources. Accordingly, territoriality is one such manifestation of the AED. Indigenous communities in Thailand have often found themselves (and their heritage) impacted by dual forces of exclusion from the AHD *and* the AED. This produces a vicious feedback loop related to heritage embedded in the environment. The AHD means that Indigenous culture is not seen as culture—an artefact of the close alignment of these communities with nature (an "uncivilised" realm) discussed previously. Combined with the fear of acknowledging Indigenous rights to land and history, Indigenous heritage is, therefore, not viewed as heritage (or at least, not one worthy of protecting) by the state. At the same time, Indigenous relationships with the environment are also not valued, and consequently, neither are Indigenous practices and knowledge tied to this environment.

The dislocation of Indigenous peoples from the environment—physically *and* ideologically, is a central characteristic of this AED. Indigenous heritage, therefore, has no recourse within either discourse. All of this is further

situated within the state-level denial of Indigenous existence within the country. The imposition of these three authoritative factors—defining culture/heritage, Indigeneity, and rightful uses of the environment, have shaped the heritage of Indigenous communities in Thailand, historically and to date. Thus, environmental injustice—which I see here in the removal of Indigenous peoples from the natural environment (in the name of conservation), can also be viewed as a form of cultural injustice.

Colonial Forestry in Siam (1850s–90s)

Much of the initial colonial interest in Siam's forests centred on the abundance of teak in the north of the country. Teak was popular in shipbuilding for its durability and quality and was a motivating factor in the British and French colonial expansion in Southeast Asia (Laohachaiboon and Takeda, 2007). The export of teak had been prohibited through an 1841 royal decree; however, this was overturned with the Bowring Treaty of 1855. As part of the treaty's trade allowances, Britain was permitted to expand teak logging in Siam with the caveat that European companies were not allowed to cut the trees themselves—a stipulation that did not change until 1883 (Pye, 2005). Before the Bowring Treaty, almost no teak was exported from Siam. By the early-20th century, Thailand produced almost a quarter of the world's teak (Pye, 2005).

Having largely exhausted the teak forests in Burma because of laissez-faire forestry practice, and facing newly increased royalties on teak imports imposed by the Burmese King in 1882, the British eventually began to look to the remaining teak forests in Siam. The early 1880s saw the Borneo Company Ltd and Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Ltd expand into the Siamese teak market, precipitating Britain's push to create a monopoly over Siam's northern teak forests, an act that Barton and Bennett (2010, p. 66) describe as "tantamount to informal empire". By 1906, British interests directed roughly 90% of Siam's northern teak forests, effectively integrating Siam into the British Empire economically (Tagliacozzo, 2004). Britain's control of Siam's teak was not beneficial in only a single direction, as it also helped deter encroachment from the French (Barton and Bennett, 2010, p. 66). This relationship further benefitted the Siamese rulers in Bangkok, who took control of forest management away from local princes to grant better access to the British, thereby facilitating the internal colonisation of Siam (Barton and Bennett, 2010; Vandergeest and Peluso, 2006). Those who profited the most from the teak trade were the British and Siamese elite. Before this

period, land had been used more for subsistence and "traditional revenue-gathering" (Lohmann, 1993, p. 181), with few issues of ownership. Britain's commercial interest in Siamese teak—leading in turn to the Siamese rulers' interest—produced a shift in people's relationships to these forests, as they began to engage with the environment in a more extractive and capitalist manner, taking on roles in the expanding (and destructive) forestry industry.

One limitation of the Bowring Treaty, however, was that it did not extend to Siam's vassal states, including the Kingdom of Chiang Mai in the north. This was rectified through two major treaties. The first Chiang Mai treaty was formalised in 1874 between Siam and the Government of India (then under British colonial rule) and extended Britain's extraterritorial rights to the north of Siam. This treaty had the added bonus of solidifying the Bangkok court's control over the northern princes. The second Chiang Mai treaty was signed in 1883 and mandated written permission from the central government to allow teak logging, providing a point of entry for British teak merchants into Siam (Laohachaiboon and Takeda, 2007; Barton and Bennett, 2010).

Postcolonial Forestry (late 1890s–1940s)

Official records show that teak exports from Bangkok grew more than tenfold from 5,600 cubic meters from 1873 to 1876 to 62,000 cubic meters from 1895 to 1899. These figures would have probably been much higher, as they do not account for the illegal trade, which was extensive. Following the damage to Siam's teak resources, the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) was eventually established in 1896, partly with the intent of providing Bangkok with "greater control over logging agreements between local rulers in northern Thailand and logging firms, usually from Britain" (Forsyth, 2019, p. 5). It is hard to delimit when the postcolonial period of a country that was technically never colonised took place. Still, the establishment of the RFD was an important moment in the country's forestry history, as it marked a moment of seizing institutional control over Siam's natural resources. In a chapter on forestry in the book *Kingdom of Siam* (Carter, 1904, p. 175), written by "the Conservator of Forests" at the time, Siam's forests are discussed in terms of their value—viewed as "natural assets" (p. 178). This characterises Siam's extractivist forestry policy during this period, which focused on the commercialisation of the environment, rather than conservation. The 1897 Forest Protection Act and 1913 Forest Conservation Law effectively took control of the country's forests away from local lords and gave it to the RFD,

although in practice influential individuals still retained more power than the state (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995).

Still not entirely free from external colonial influence, however, the newly formed RFD was headed by British forester Herbert Slade, a "British forest expert of the Indian Forest Service" (Brown, 1994, p. 75) who would later serve in the Imperial Forestry Service in Myanmar (Rigg and Stott, 1998). Slade maintained the role of director for almost three decades, from the RFD's inception until 1925. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the RFD modelled itself on both Burma—whose forest service was founded in 1856, as well as India—whose forest service was established in 1864 (Vandergeest and Peluso, 2006). The role of this British expert who had served/would serve in British colonies, further points to the impact of colonial ideology on the Thai state's environmental policies. In addition to being a tool for environmental and economic control, the RFD was linked to national security and politics from the beginning (Vandergeest, 1996). Despite this strong influence from Britain, the establishment of the RFD should also be seen as an essential tool in Thailand's playbook for avoiding direct colonisation, as it served to assert Siam's territorial claims. As of 1901, prompted by concerns over the loyalties of the British foresters employed in the RFD and their ties to British logging companies, Siam began to send their own foresters for training in India and Burma to eventually replace the British staff. Nonetheless, it would be a slow process of decoupling. As Pye (2005, p. 319) asserts, "[i]t is safe to say that up until 1923, the [RFD] was dominated by British forestry officers trained in colonial forestry".

A series of centralisation policies implemented in 1899 saw the annexation of the Kingdom of Chiang Mai and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) laying formal claim to all of Siam's forests. Local people were prevented from utilising forest resources like teak that were valuable to the state for export. This changed their relationships with the forests, which suddenly had an official owner who regulated their use. Thailand's AED has also been leveraged to mask the state's own capitalisation of natural resources, conveniently overlooking the history of the colonial and extractivist RFD, now one of the main offices in charge of policing the use of the environment. Coinciding with the creation of thammachat, nature was no longer seen as something to be left alone but as a resource to be tapped and tamed.

With the collapse of the absolute monarchy in 1932, control and ownership of the nation's forests shifted from the monarchy to the state government. The revolution also marked a turning point in national forestry, as the military leadership sought to focus on national development. In 1938, the government implemented the Forest Protection and Reservation Act, based

on the pre-existing Forest Acts in Burma and India. This Act allowed them to designate protected forests, although in practice it still focused on regulating foreign timber companies (Lohmann, 1993). Article 3.2 (own translation) of this Act, however, is important ideologically as it defined forests (pa) as the public domain of the state under the category of "wasteland", undermining the pre-existing relationships people had with this forest, and marking these spaces as unoccupied and, consequently, the property of the state.

Thailand's Cold War Forestry (1947–91)

The Cold War period also had significant consequences on the Thai state's use of the natural environment through the strategy of territoriality—the assertion of control over people through control over geographic space (Chusak, 2008). This process is one that Scott (2009, p. 12) also refers to as "botanical colonisation"—a continuation of internal colonialism, involving the transformation of a landscape to fit the image of the coloniser. Botanical colonisation focuses on bringing those occupying the "ungovernable" peripheries of society and geography into order (Scott, 2009). While Thailand's environmental values are the product of an amalgamation of both Western and local influences, the Eurocentric values that privilege the idea of nature as pristine and untouched have played a key role in forming the state's contemporary approaches to natural forests, which view people and nature as in need of separation. Territorialisation in Thailand has therefore most directly impacted the ethnic minorities who live in Thailand's forests and interact with the land in a way that does not necessarily conform with the state's image of proper use. During the Cold War, this tactic of territorialisation resulted in the government seizing control of forested land occupied by minority groups who were thought to be most at risk of sympathising with the Communist cause, targeting "hill tribe" communities. This policy also helped to strengthen the control of the Royal Forestry Department (Vandergeest and Peluso, 2006)

The concentric circles dividing Thai society and marking distance from the capital and its values of Thainess continued through to the Cold War and still structure Thai society in the present. More generally, this is characterised by an environmentally and geographically bound division of society, distinguishing between upland and lowland peoples, and between those living inside or outside of Bangkok. During the Cold War, the forest areas seized by the government through territorialisation further served as an analogy for the uncontrollable ideologies of the people occupying

them—the uplanders and outsiders, who were themselves once termed the "wild people". Stott (1991) warned that the only nature that would survive this elite conservation agenda would be thammachat—the newly formed tamed nature—as state policies sought to wipe out the pa and the people tied to it. By claiming ownership of these forests, the government endeavoured to assert control over both the people and the land. In removing communities from the influence of these wild spaces to assimilate and "civilise" them—bringing them under the control of the state and thereby making them less susceptible to communist ideology—the Thai government also tamed the forest itself, transforming it from pa to thammachat. The uncontrollable wild gradually became the carefully regulated nature of the elite.

In taking control of the nation's forests, the government also positioned itself as an authoritative guardian of the environment. While previous administrations had failed to introduce stricter environmental legislations, facing obstruction at the parliamentary level, the 1958 military coup granted Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat power to impose these laws unilaterally. Previously accepted ways of interacting with the natural environment were, under this new control, criminalised and enforced by state regulatory agents such as the so-called forest police (1960), the forest protection unit (1961), and the RFD, which had been established decades earlier through the colonial forestry agenda but whose staff expanded over fivefold during this period (Pye, 2005). The Forest Act was amended in 1960 and 1961, adding harsher restrictions on forest use and increasing penalties for violations (Vandergeest, 1996). The Wildlife Reservation and Protection Act, and the National Park Act (NPA) were implemented in 1960 and 1961, respectively, resulting in the creation of Thailand's first national parks and wildlife reserves. The 1938 Forest Protection and Reservation Act was eventually replaced with the 1964 National Forest Reserve Act, which took more power away from communities in the designation and management of protected forest land. The period spanning the 1960s and 1970s saw the introduction of "pink zones", where groups were moved out of forested areas once more in the name of environmental protection (e.g., because of the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries) (Forsyth, 2020). The areas targeted, however, directly correlated with sites of past insurgency and rebellion against the Thai regime and the resettlements were, therefore, primarily underpinned by political motives (Forsyth, 2020). For Stubbs (1981, p. 9), "conscious environmental legislation" was not attempted in Thailand until the writing of a new constitution after the 1973 October revolution.

Thailand's environmental policies are inextricably tied to its changing political landscape. Under Sarit, mistreatment of the natural environment

was also deliberately connected to the mistreatment of the nation through national propaganda. Sarit (cited in Pinkaew, 2017, n.p.), for example, declared, "[f]orests are significant resources for the lives of Thai people and the existence of Thailand. Those who destroy the forests are the enemy who destroy the nation's security". These modern environmental policies instilled new values in society and changed perceptions of acceptable behaviour relating to the natural world. Meanwhile, the repositioning of the government as the rightful caretakers of these wild spaces also allowed the Thai state to use any interaction with the environment that fell outside of the AED as ammunition in campaigns targeting minority groups. Where the government were environmental protectors, ethnic minority communities were portrayed as environmentally destructive. Thai environmental policy also primarily adopted a Western model of fortress conservation that viewed people as incompatible with nature and, therefore, in need of separation. Such an approach benefitted the state in justifying the removal of (the predominantly Indigenous) inhabitants of these forest spaces. Of course, while some people were removed from nature, others were brought in with seemingly no negative impact on conservation agendas. For example, within the AED, park rangers, tourists, and researchers were brought in to fill the space created by the displacement of Indigenous communities from their land. Between 1985 and 1993, the Thai army was also given special permission to use protected forests, resulting in deforestation to construct roads in areas surrounding sensitive borderlands (Grainger, 2004).

The 1989 national logging ban could be seen as the start of a more genuine environmental concern in Thailand, becoming the first nation in the world to introduce such a restriction. Nonetheless, this supposed turn to environmentalism (towards a protectionist rather than exploitative forestry stance) also had political motivations. At the time this logging ban came into place, the threat of communism in Thailand no longer held the potency it once had at the height of the Cold War. Instead, increasing natural catastrophes—mainly flooding—presented a new threat— environmental degradation. The 1989 ban followed a wave of protests that emerged in the 1980s against the expansion of large-scale commercial plantations and the impacts of deforestation (see, e.g., Grainger, 2004; Pye, 2005). These came to a head in the late 1980s, in the wake of devastating flooding and landslides in the South of Thailand in 1988 that killed around three hundred people. Around this time, in 1990, the first draft of a national community forest bill was developed by NGOs and academics (Chusak, 2008). There have since been multiple iterations of community forest policies in Thailand, as community forestry remains a potent tool for bottom-up forest resource

management, arguing against national forestry policy based on British colonial ideology (Chusak, 2008). For the Kui and other elephant owners in Thailand, this ban had another consequence—suddenly the thousands of elephants and their mahouts in the national logging industry became jobless, with few employment alternatives available.

Contemporary Forestry Policy

Although 1989 saw more of a focus on preventing national forest degradation, the Thai state's policy of territoriality in the guise of environmental protection has continued to this day. This more recent forest policy could also be viewed through a "war forestry" framework, coming after the 2014 coup d'état and implemented by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—established to govern Thailand following the political turmoil. Some of the main pieces of forest policy implemented by the NCPO were the forest reclamation policy, enacted through Orders No. 64/2557 and 66/2557, and the formulation of a new national forestry master plan. The forest reclamation policy was ostensibly aimed at the "suppression and cessation of encroachment and the destruction of forest resources", in line with a targeted 8.43% increase in national forest coverage to a total of 40% set out in the forestry master plan. The community's rights to the forest are highlighted in both the forest reclamation policy orders and the forestry master plan. The master plan (Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, National Legislative Assembly, 2014, pp. 1–2), for example, states that:

> "Inequality" is a major cause of conflict in Thai society that has to be resolved. Therefore, the government has set up land allocation guidelines for poor communities in the form of cooperatives or groups, allowing communities to manage their own land use.

The master plan also warns that the main problem arises when communities with ancestral rights to protected land are forced to sell it, transferring the land "from poor farmers to capitalists, to government officials and politicians" (Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, National Legislative Assembly, 2014, p. 2). Meanwhile, Section 2.1 of Order No. 66/2557 states that "any action must not affect needy people, people with low income, and those who rely on the land for food, who have lived in the area before this command came into effect". Despite these ostensibly formalised protections, the government has been accused of using both the forest

reclamation policy and the master plan to evict poor communities living in forest lands to benefit large-scale businesses. General Prayuth's 2014 "forest reclamation order" resulted in hundreds of Indigenous people being "charged with trespassing and evicted" in the name of environmental protection (Chandran, 2019). In the first half of 2019 alone, almost two thousand cases of forest encroachment were filed "against poor people" through this policy (Pratch, 2019). Since its implementation in 2015, estimates suggest that at least eight thousand households have been targeted (Le, 2020). In 2019, a new National Park Act was also implemented with more severe penalties for groups living in newly designated protected areas (Le, 2020).

The government's control over Thailand's forests took place not only legislatively, through a process of rezoning land, but also ideologically, by changing the names given these spaces—replacing pre-existing Indigenous names with new Thai ones, a process that had formally taken place in the northeast of Thailand in the mid-19th century (Komatra, 1998, p. 379).[1] This act, part of the state's "civilising" process, erased prior Indigenous claims to the lands whilst simultaneously "taming" once-wild spaces through new associations with the more acceptable Thai language (Komatra, 1998). This highlights how Thailand's AED continues to exclude communities through a top-down approach despite the language of these policies. The AED also views nature as a valuable resource; crucially, however, it is a resource that must benefit the state.

Being Indigenous in Thailand

The term "Indigenous" typically refers to a population whose ancestors inhabited an area before the arrival of other groups. As such, it has often been used to distinguish between the original inhabitants and the various others in a particular place. The term is, therefore, a political identity, as a person or group only becomes Indigenous when introduced to those who are not (e.g., Weaver, 2001). Historically, this introduction has entailed a loss of land, often because of the violence of colonialism. Indigeneity, in denoting an original inhabitant of an area, implies a sense of their ownership of that territory. State-sponsored attempts to oppress and destroy Indigenous cultures,

1 This renaming of places in line with a new national language is not unique to Thailand. It is an example of the assertion of control over space that is a common feature of colonialism (including cryptocolonialism) (see, e.g., Uluocha, 2015; Rose-Redwood, 2016; Clark, 2017; and Malloy, 2024).

therefore, ultimately try to eliminate this ownership by severing this tie between the community and their land (see Alfred and Corntassel, 2005). Agendas of Indigenous erasure can be overtly violent, as is the case with genocidal violence, or more subtle—through what Bourdieu (1998) terms "symbolic violence"—enacted in longer processes of assimilation, invisibility, and withholding recognition, as can be seen in Thailand. Thailand's history with minority groups and the perceived threat that they pose to national security permeate perceptions of Indigeneity within the country.

In 1932, the Siamese revolution ended the absolute monarchy and enabled the creation of Thailand's first constitution. Since then, the nation has undergone a further eighteen coup attempts—twelve of which were successful, with the most recent (at the time of writing) taking place in 2014—and 20 further constitutions and charters have been implemented. Despite these numerous revisions, it was not until a 2015 draft that Indigenous people (under the phrase chon[2] phuen mueang/ชนพื้นเมือง—literally "people of the earth of the kingdom") were explicitly named and recognised in any Thai constitution (Baird et al., 2017). Before this, other constitutions—such as the 1997 Constitution of Thailand—referred to "traditional communities" (chumchon thong thin dang doem/ชุมชนท้องถิ่นดั้งเดิม) instead of Indigenous peoples (Roy, 2005). Less than five months later, the 2015 draft was rejected, and the final version of the constitution in 2016 once again removed the term "Indigenous" (Morton, 2017). Thai state policy has followed the belief that to identify as Indigenous is to go against the unity of Thai people and culture. This position can be seen in a national report given to the United Nations Commission for Human Rights (1992, p. 2), which states: "[Hill tribes] are not considered to be minorities nor Indigenous people but as Thais who are able to enjoy fundamental rights and are protected by the laws of the Kingdom as any other Thai citizen".

Thailand's reluctance to use the term "Indigenous" is situated within prevailing views on Indigeneity in the Asian region more broadly, predicated on a belief that Indigeneity cannot be applied clearly in a context that did not experience "substantial European settlement" (Kingsbury, 1998, p. 418). UN Special Rapporteur Martínez Cobo (1986, para. 379) developed a working definition of Indigenous people as "having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories". The limitations of this emphasis on colonialism and

2 "Chon" and "khon" both mean people and tend to be used interchangeably, although some feel that the term khon emphasises the human aspect more and therefore prefer to be called khon in these contexts.

invasion have been acknowledged, and many organisations have chosen to use more inclusive definitions. The International Labour Organisation's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989), for example, combines both "subjective criteria" of "self-definition" alongside the "objective criteria" of "[d]escent from populations who inhabited the country or geographical region at the time of conquest, colonisation *or establishment of present state boundaries*" (own emphasis added). Martínez Cobo's delineation is, however, still used by agencies within the United Nations, including the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2004) and the UN Refugee Agency.

This is further complicated by the decision of the 1960 UN General Assembly to define a colony as "a territory which is geographically separate and is distinct ethnically and/or culturally from the country administrating it" (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV) Principle IV), explicitly excluding Indigenous peoples from decolonisation if based in the same territory as the colonial/administrative power. This approach has been criticised for denying Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, an issue that emerged as part of a post-Second World War decolonising agenda (e.g., Robbins, 2015; de Waal and Nouwen, 2021). For the Indigenous peoples of Thailand, this is important since the internal colonisation that took place in the country is not considered a form of colonialism within this framework. As Rongvudhi Virabutr (2021), Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, stated: "Thailand has consistently maintained the interpretation that the term 'Indigenous peoples' refers to those who are pre-settlers or had lived in the area in the pre-colonial period, which is not applicable in the case of Thailand". This view, however, ignores the very real marginalisation and dispossession of land experienced by minority communities because of Thailand's policies of internal colonisation.

While the Thai government adopted the United Nations Convention on Indigenous Rights in 2007, this was contingent on the ratification not entailing any changes to the national constitution and laws. This agreement therefore did not result in any significant changes to the lives and rights of Thailand's diverse Indigenous populations. As quoted in a press release on the vote by the United Nations (2007), Mr Punkrasin, the Thai delegate, stated that:

> Thailand understood that the articles on self-determination would be interpreted within the framework of the principle set out in the Vienna Declaration. Thailand also understood that the Declaration did not create

> any new rights and that any benefits that flowed from the Declaration would be based on the laws and Constitution of Thailand.

Instead of addressing Indigeneity directly, several terms have been used throughout Thai history to talk around the concept. They reflect the Thai government's discomfort with the concept and general avoidance of acknowledging non-Tai Indigenous existence. Chao pa, chao khao, and chon klum noi are all terms used to describe groups that differed from the norm. Chon klum noi (ชนกลุ่มน้อย) (ethnic minorities) was the state's description of choice during the Cold War and applied to any group who had language, religion/set of beliefs, culture, or race that did not reflect that of the national majority (Pinkaew, 2003, p. 162). This perception of ethnic minority as an identity separate from Thainess has continued into the present. In the same way, Indigeneity and Thainess are seen as oppositional. Sirijit (2013, p. 177), for example, notes that the designation of chon klum noi "seems to be reserved for those who cannot fully assimilate into the national imaginary of Thai citizens", pointing in particular to the "non-Tai-speaking highland ethnic groups"—the chao khao. In 1999, the Thai government's Department of Provincial Administration (CERD, 2011, p. 5) defined chon klum noi as:

> groups of persons without Thai nationality, who are less in number than the original inhabitants of the country and have distinct cultures and traditions; have entered Thailand in different ways, i.e., as illegal immigrants, or granted temporary shelter.

Under this definition, one could not be both a minority and Thai. This echoes the sentiment from the statement made in the Thai national report to the United Nations Commission for Human Rights at the beginning of this chapter, which implied that Indigeneity is seen as incompatible with Thai citizenship. Furthermore, the forms of entering Thailand mentioned in the Thai government's 1999 definition of chon klum noi not only conjure negative associations with minority groups (as illegal immigrants or refugees) but also further the distance between them and Thai people (who, conversely, must be rightful citizens). It also assumes that Thai people are the "original inhabitants", which further denies the existence of the country's Indigenous groups. These concerns were addressed when this definition was changed in 2005 to the following (CERD, 2011, p. 6):

> people of other races or nationalities that live among other peoples who are larger in number. This may include groups of people without Thai

> nationality, who have their own distinct cultures and traditions and who have entered or lived in Thailand in different ways.

Following this new definition, however, the Thai state party's report to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination found only 17 minority groups to exist in Thailand (CERD, 2011, p. 7):

> (1) Vietnamese Displaced Persons; (2)–(4) Chinese Displaced Persons in three sub-groups, namely ex-soldiers of the National Army, Haw or Yunnanese Chinese Displaced Persons and Independent Haw Chinese; (5) Ex Chinese Malayu Communist Militants, or Comrades for the Development of Thailand; (6) Thai Leu; (7) Laotian Displaced Persons; (8) Nepalese Displaced Persons; (9)–(11) Burmese Minority Groups in three sub-groups, namely Displaced Persons, Illegal Immigrants, Displaced Thai Descended Persons with Burmese nationality; (12) Persons on the Highlands; (13) Displaced Persons with Thai nationality from Koh Kong province of Cambodia; (14) Illegal Immigrants from Cambodia; (15) Tong Luang Race (Mlabri); (16) Communities on the Highlands; (17) Illegal Migrant Workers (of Burmese, Laotian, Cambodian nationalities).

The 2011 change only removed the category of "Illegal Immigrants from Burma/Myanmar". The state's list still focuses heavily on those communities not thought of as Thai or who are citizens of other countries—so-called "Displaced Persons" and "Illegal Immigrants"—and highlights a large discrepancy in Thai versus Western approaches to identifying and defining minority groups. The extensive ethnic diversity of other groups is mainly condensed into the categories of "Persons on the Highlands" and "Communities on the Highlands", which only encompasses Thailand's "10 main ethnic groups of hill tribes", and "[o]ther ethnic groups that live with the hill tribes" (CERD, 2011, p. 7). This category also continues to assume that minority groups are bound to specific geographic zones in the uplands. This list furthermore serves as an example of the issues that arise when using the term "ethnic minority" in place of "Indigenous". As can be seen in the state's list, ethnic minority encompasses a larger scope of the population, including displaced persons, illegal immigrants, migrant workers, and ex-army/militants/comrades.

Another term used to talk around the issue of Indigeneity in Thailand includes klum chatiphan (กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์), which emerged as a term to describe ethnic groups in the 1970s (Keyes, 2002). Chon phao phuen mueang (ชนเผ่าพื้น

เมือง), meanwhile, is an even more recent development and has been the official/preferred translation of "Indigenous" since the United Nations declared 1993 the "International Year for Indigenous Peoples'" (Thai Indigenous People's Council Act Appendix 3, 2018, p. 2). Chon phao phuen mueang was also the terminology decided upon for Thailand's first celebration of World Indigenous Peoples' Day in 2007 (Prasit, 2019, p. 45). Although it is used to mean Indigenous, this phrase actually combines the terms for Indigenous people (chon phuen mueang) with tribal (phao), to produce a direct translation of "Indigenous and Tribal Peoples". This choice of terminology follows the standard set by the International Labor Organisation's 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (Prasit, 2019, p. 45). Baird (2019) notes that when the Network of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand (NIPT) was first formed in 2007, this marked "the first time that the term 'Indigenous Peoples' had ever been used explicitly in the name of a nationally controlled Thai civil society organisation".

The uncertainty surrounding the definitions of "Indigenous" and "ethnic minority" in Thai is illustrated in Baird et al.'s (2017) survey of ethnic groups in the north of Thailand. This study found "considerable variation" in understandings of these two terms (Baird et al., 2017, p. 556) and disagreement within each group regarding whether they considered themselves Indigenous or an ethnic minority. The variation in preference between "Indigenous" and "ethnic minority" can also be understood by taking into consideration the state's historical division of groups. Lowland ethnic groups, for example, associate the designation "tribal" (ชนเผ่า/chon phao) with the so-called hill tribe groups in the upland regions of Thailand, adopting the national perspective of culture and civility as bound to geospatial location (Prasit, 2019, p. 45). This term, therefore, also comes with the negative connotations of being primitive, and, accordingly, the lowland minority groups, who see themselves as civilised, prefer the term klum chattiphan (Prasit, 2019, p. 45). To be designated Indigenous may, therefore, further alienate a group within Thai society (see Sirijit, 2013, p. 177 on the Phu Tai, and Baird et al., 2017, on the Lua, Khon Muang, Hmong, and Lisu). These negative associations with the term "Indigenous", together with the Thai government's avoidance of recording non-Thai ethnic classifications in the national census, have made collecting numbers on the nation's Indigenous communities difficult. Various estimates of Indigenous groups in the country include 20 groups and one million people (World Directory of Indigenous Peoples, 2017); 42 groups and over four million people (Council of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand, 2019), and 600,000–1.2 million people (Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand, 2016).

There seems to be a perception in Thailand that recognising Indigeneity would take power and authority away from the majority—a lingering artefact of the colonial battle for Siamese territory, played out through ethnicism. The issue of Indigeneity in Thailand is still in its infancy, as evidenced by the continued debate surrounding the best term to use for the Indigenous groups living in the country, alongside a noted lack of understanding within Thai society regarding the meaning of these terms and a lack of relatability many groups feel with the different terms on offer. One interlocutor I spoke with, who was working on formalising the protection of Indigenous rights in Thailand, pointed to problems over terminology as a significant barrier to progressing heritage policies, as he stated that no bill would be passed that used the word "Indigenous". His prediction turned out to be accurate. While the initial draft act that was proposed to the House of Representatives was titled ร่างพระราชบัญญัติส่งเสริมและคุ้มครองกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์และชนเผ่าพื้นเมือง พ.ศ. (Draft Act on the promotion and protection of ethnic groups and Indigenous tribal peoples, B.E.; own translation). The version that was approved in a cabinet meeting in February 2024, however, had its title changed to: ร่างพระราชบัญญัติคุ้มครองและส่งเสริมวิถีชีวิตกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ พ.ศ. ... (Draft Act on the protection and promotion of ethnic groups, B.E.; own translation). In consultations on the Draft Act, as well as four other proposed acts concerning the rights of Indigenous and ethnic groups in Thailand, concerns were raised regarding the Act's inclusion of the term "Indigenous Tribal Peoples". The Ministry of Interior, for example, recommended the change from "Indigenous Peoples" to "ethnic groups" (Secretariat of the House of Representatives, n.d., p. 2–9). Feedback on the ร่าง พ.ร.บ.สภาชนเผ่าพื้นเมืองแห่งประเทศไทย (Draft Act of the council of Indigenous peoples of Thailand; own translation) followed similar lines. The Ministry of Finance, for example, stated that "ethnic groups" is the term usually used in the Thai context, further arguing that "the use of the term 'Indigenous Peoples' has connotations of dispossession of land by later arrivals or colonisation", citing Aboriginal [Australians], Māori, and Native American communities as more aligned with such a definition, which is "inconsistent with the Thai context" (Pakorn, 2024, p. 4).

While some communities continue to view the label of Indigeneity as prejudicial, this category also has the potential to empower communities. Many Kui, for example, see their Indigeneity as a point of pride. This is particularly poignant given that a common phrase used to mock the Kui is that they are a "people without a state", which ignores the consensus amongst academics that they are one of the original Indigenous inhabitants of the northeast of Thailand. For Dr Sanong, one of the Kui interviewed as part of my research, acknowledgement as Indigenous is integral to rectifying the

Kui's previous (and continued) invisibility in Thai society. The Indigenous designation would also give the Kui greater visibility internationally—as global attitudes towards Indigenous peoples are different from Thailand's—as well as access to international protections on the rights of Indigenous peoples, which is essential should they seek alternative avenues for the protection of their culture outside of the Thai AHD.

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Abbreviations

AED	authorised environmental discourse
AHD	authorised heritage discourse
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIPT	Network of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand
NPA	National Park Act
RFD	Royal Forestry Department
UN	United Nations

5 Thailand's Authorised Heritage Discourse: Identity, Nationalism, and "Good Culture"

Abstract
This chapter focuses on the Thai state's approach to cultural heritage. The two defining features of the state's approaches to heritage and Thailand's cultural policy are 1) morality and the notion of "good culture"; and 2) seesawing between cultural unity and cultural diversity. Both facets have clear influences from Thailand's history with colonialism and the Cold War. The nation's more recent desire for recognition of its heritage at the international level has produced a hybrid of cultural values, with the state choosing specific elements of non-dominant cultures to promote itself as diverse. This selective multiculturalism, however, fails communities whose heritage is seen as "too different" or conflicting with the national narrative.

Keywords
morality; cultural policy; colonialism; legislation; Ministry of Culture

Creating a culture is to maintain the population.
– Chansuda Rukpollmueang, Deputy Permanent Secretary of Culture, 2011

Thailand/Siam has legislated the protection of its tangible cultural heritage, antiques, and objects of art in some form or another since the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767), which saw the implementation of two laws safeguarding "religious sites and objects" (Rewadee, 2012, p. 84). A royal decree issued in 1923 by King Rama VI extended the first legal protection over such objects. As part of his modernising and westernising agenda, Rama VI declared it the "duty of government to investigate and conserve ancient articles" within the

Santikarn, Alisa. *Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025
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Kingdom (Rewadee, 2012, p. 85). Today, Thai heritage is protected by three main pieces of legislation: the National Culture Act, B.E. 2486 (1943) and the Promotion and Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 (2016)[1]—which relate to more intangible aspects of heritage, and the Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art and National Museums, B.E. 2504 (1961)—which pertains more to built heritage.

A state's control of built heritage—what is preserved and therefore enshrined into the collective national memory versus what is left to decay and be forgotten—helps legitimise national narratives and subconsciously socialise citizens. Within Thailand, for example, the national built heritage corpus heavily privileges royal and religious built heritage/architecture over more vernacular heritage (Herzfeld, 2012a). Although national built heritage plays a major role in the Thai AHD, in this chapter I examine the construction of Thai identity through the state's approaches to intangible heritage, focusing on state perceptions and legislation of Thai culture. This is because the concept of Thai culture has been very explicitly codified, and control over the national expression of identity is an essential part of Thailand's cultural policy. The National Culture Act (1943) is of particular interest in this regard, implemented under the regime of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, who issued the cultural mandates between 1939 and 1942, as discussed earlier. The National Culture Act was accordingly formulated with similar rhetoric underpinning the Thai state's cultural initiatives at the time, which promoted a state-determined good Thai culture while restricting expressions of non-Thai culture. This sentiment is exemplified in Section 4 of the 1943 Act, which defines "culture" as "characteristics that demonstrate the prosperity, order, harmonious national progress and good morals of the people". The emphasis on 'order' is further delimited in Section 6, which outlines the seven types of culture that must be followed according to the 1943 Act (own translation, emphasis added):

1. *Orderliness* in dressing, ethics, and etiquettes in public places or as when appearing in public
2. *Orderliness* in personal conduct and in treatment of households

1 Although this law—the first of its kind in Thailand to explicitly protect intangible cultural heritage—was enacted in Thailand 13 years after the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, this gap should not be viewed as an unwillingness on the part of Thailand to embrace the concept of ICH up until this point. Rather, as explained by Pariyapa, one of my interlocutors at the Ministry of Culture, the delay was a result of complications with the constitution, which required the agreement of the cabinet, public hearings, and an amendment of national legislation, before being able to ratify the convention.

3. *Orderly* personal conduct so as to bring about *honour* to the Thai nation and Buddhism
4. Competency and *ethics* within professions
5. Growth in the minds and *morals* of the people
6. Progress in literature and fine arts
7. Preference for Thainess[2]

The aftermath of the nation's colonial experience meant that social and national cohesion was seen as essential to maintaining political autonomy. The legislative emphasis on order in the 1943 Act can thus be seen as a remnant of the tight control and regulation of the Thai identity needed to maintain this façade of unity.[3] Similarly, the preference for Thainess, indicated in the final point on the above list, aligns with the use of culture to forward assimilationist policies at that time. These same ideas are consolidated in Section 9 of the National Culture Act 1943, which describes the duties of the National Culture Council (established under Section 8 of the 1943 Act, own translation, emphasis added) as:

1. To research, *modify*, preserve, and promote existing national culture
2. To research, *modify*, and determine cultures that should be accepted or improved
3. To disseminate national culture to be suitable to the times
4. To *control* and find ways to cultivate national culture in the minds of the people until it becomes *habit*
5. To give opinions, receive counsel and act according to the objectives of the Government in affairs concerning national culture

2 This was difficult to translate. The Thai—khwam niyom Thai (ความนิยมไทย)—literally translates to "Thai preference". This would mean a preference for all things Thai, e.g., products, religion, dress, and acting in a Thai manner, and could be interpreted along the lines of "nationalism", although the actual Thai word for nationalism was not used. Today, it has a slightly different interpretation as can be seen in its use by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, in his agenda for Thailand 4.0 (Thailand in the digital age), declaring the project of Thai niyom to be: following rules, democracy, and international standards. He further defined khwam niyom Thai as: "[e]very Thai favours doing good deeds for the sake of public interest and others" (Chanwanpen, 2018).

3 This obsession with orderliness may also by a result of Italian fascist ideology that influenced Luang Wichit Wattakan, Phibunsongkhram's advisor and the man behind the renaming of the country to Thailand and the cultural mandates. Barmé (1993, p. 157) accordingly links the Phibunsongkhram regime to Mussolini's Italy in terms of their shared focus on image being "more important that its actual substance". Herzfeld (2017; 2021) has also discussed this need for order, image, self-presentation, and beautification in Thailand.

Here, the focus on modifying culture is strong evidence of the state's paternalistic approach to national identity. It makes it clear that culture is not viewed as organic and naturally created or evolving but needs manual interference to ensure it follows the correct path and sends the proper message. Culture must not only be preserved and promoted but modified.

Apart from the emphasis on order and Thainess, Section 6 of the National Culture Act (1943) is also notable for its inclusion of language relating to "ethics", "morals", and "honour". This relates to the Thai state's interpretation of the term "culture", which is rooted in a historical context. The role culture plays in Thailand today cannot be fully understood without this background. In the late 1930s, during the early years of the Phibunsongkhram era and just before the implementation of this National Culture Act, the Thai word for "culture" as it is used today—wattanatham (วัฒนธรรม), was invented (Streckfuss, 2011; Denes, 2015). Before this, culture had been discussed using words such as khanop thamniam (ขนบธรรมเนียม) (customs) and prapheni (ประเพณี) (traditions). This new word—wattanatham—combined "the Pali-derived term for 'progress' (wattana) and 'morality' (tham)" (Denes, 2015).[4] This etymology implanted morality into the Thai approach to culture. The creation of wattanatham and the subsequent importance given to morals in the National Culture Act further highlight Phibunsongkhram's use of culture to maintain power and control the Thai people. Streckfuss (2011, p. 233) describes this perception and creation of "culture" as a "prescriptive framework" that formed part of Phibunsongkhram's national civilising agenda. Accordingly, it was also under Phibunsongkhram's direction that the Ministry of Culture was established in 1952. This new ministry enabled the state to legalise and oversee the cultural ideology introduced through the earlier cultural mandates (Streckfuss, 2011). Shortly after Phibunsongkhram was overthrown in 1957, the Ministry of Culture and the National Culture Council were abolished by the new ruler, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat

4 The invention of wattanatham comes from the same movement of adapting Thai words to encompass new Western concepts as discussed in the previous chapter about nature—thammachat. We see the same stem used –tham/dharma meaning morality or the teachings of Buddha in both of these reconceptualisations. This stem is similarly seen in arayatham, which came to replace siwilai in the post-revolutionary period in Thailand (Natanaree, 2018). Where siwilai was imbued with Western values, derived from a Western word and conceptualisation of what it meant to be civilised, arayatham not only renamed but redefined civilisation in a Thai way—as "peace and happiness that lie on the basis of good morals and law which includes the prosperity of custom and tradition" (Natanaree, 2018, p. 288). The embedding of the phrase "good morals" makes it clear why it was arayatham rather than siwilai that was used in Phibunsongkhram's cultural mandates.

(Connors, 2005), as these two institutions—integral to Phibunsongkhram's previous control of the country—were too closely associated with the ousted regime to be kept.

While Sarit's cultural ideology, centred around a neo-traditionalist return to the three pillars of Thainess, at first seems a contrast to Phibunsongkhram's civilising/moralist agenda, upon closer inspection Sarit's focus on Buddhism and the moral elements inherent within Thai Buddhist practice shows the two approaches were not that dissimilar. On the difficulty in separating moral elements from the state's regulation of culture and identity, Kittiporn Chaiboon, director of the research and development group at the Department of Cultural Promotion in Thailand, informed me that "religion, beliefs and values are one part of culture in Thailand". The Department of Religious Affairs, for example, is one of the branches that falls under the wider umbrella of the Ministry of Culture. Consequently, culture and religion are, in this sense, "inseparable" (Kittiporn Chaiboon).

The Ministry of Culture was eventually re-established in 2002, following calls from within the government's various cultural and religious offices and councils to separate the cultural and religious remits of these groups from where they were currently situated—within the Ministry of Education. Chakrarot Chitrabongs, secretary general of the National Culture Commission, described his vision for this new Ministry of Culture as a "central coordinating agency to screen, watch over, and warn whether this thing or that thing will bring progress or loss to our society" (cited in Connors 2005, p. 536). Within the re-established Ministry, however, this perception was not generally accepted. As an interlocutor informed me, there was, for example, debate over the use of the term wattanatham to describe culture, as some felt it continued to embody older connotations of discrimination, judgements of good and bad, and of good behaviour as a prerequisite of civility. Although the ministry ultimately opted to continue using this term, one of its first undertakings was the re-education of what wattanatham meant regarding the more Western understanding of culture. Nevertheless, the interpretation and use of culture have continued to be influenced by political motivations, emphasising cultural unity and decorum. For example, morality was a core issue of the Ministry of Culture's more recent master plan for 2012–6, which named 2012 the "Year of the Promotion of Morals, Ethics, and Desirable Values".

The state's ongoing involvement in the monitoring and regulation of good and bad cultural expressions is exemplified by the formation of the Culture Surveillance Bureau in 1995. One of the roles of this Bureau is "to alert the society about potential cultural threats" (Rojanasuvan, 2019, n.p.).

More specifically, this involves the control of cultural "deviance" related to "the decline of morality in society, undesirable values, and the crisis of language use" (Fuhrmann, 2016, p. 27). This perceived deviance usually focuses on issues regarding sexuality (Fuhrmann, 2016, p. 27). Past actions of the bureau, for example, include warning against "underboob selfies", denouncing inappropriate sexual behaviour on TV dramas, and prosecuting car show models for indecent exposure.

In addition to regulating cultural "deviance", the Cultural Surveillance Bureau also controls the use and expression of Thai heritage. The Bureau's position on this was laid bare in 2016 in an article published on their website following the promulgation of the 2016 ICH Act. The article entitled "Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Precious Treasure That Should be Preserved" (2016, own translation) states (Culture Surveillance Bureau, 2016a, own translation, emphasis added):

> [A]t present, such *intangible cultural heritage has been affected by changes in society both domestically and abroad.* Sometimes, *intangible cultural heritage is used in a way that is distorted or inappropriate, causing damage and, which may, unfortunately, cause people to lose their intangible cultural heritage.*

Ill-defined descriptions of "distorted or inappropriate" uses of heritage give the Bureau unlimited discretion in the determination of "harmful" cultural heritage. While destruction or vandalism of a building or monument, for example, is a very tangible harm, problems arise when this control is extended to intangible aspects of heritage, as the misuse of ICH is more subjective. An example of the Bureau's policing of Thai cultural heritage can be seen in the condemnation of the Tourism Authority of Thailand's use of actors wearing Khon masks while driving go-karts in a promotional video, as the bureau claimed that this depiction "'defamed' tradition" (Kaewta, 2016, n.p.). In another instance, the bureau threatened to sue Singapore for appropriating the Thai Songkran water festival. Khon masked dance was inscribed onto the UNESCO ICH list in 2018, while the Songkran festival was listed in 2023. Both traditions can be considered important national symbols and cultural assets. As they help construct what it means to be Thai, the misuse of this imagery is taken as a threat to national identity by the state. In the case of the Khon masks, however, this was an initiative of the Tourism Authority of Thailand—another government agency—which further highlights the issues of ambiguity in the bureau's (lack of a) definition of the appropriate use of culture.

Nonetheless, Boonchit[5] from the Ministry of Culture informed me that despite these more recent examples, the Cultural Surveillance Bureau was much stricter in the past and that their main task has since shifted from passing judgement to now "hear[ing] the concerns of people". As Boonchit observed, the increased freedom of social media and the internet has meant that "people now don't want to be told what's good or bad". This has restricted the government's ability to overtly dictate and control the moral use of culture in the same way it has in the past. Indeed, the bureau's (2016b) own description in the *About the office* section on their website states that their intention is "to focus on prevention and building immunity for society rather than suppressing behaviour or cultural deviations". In this instance, immunity is assumed to be against these so-called changes in society (Culture Surveillance Bureau, 2016a). Similarly, the Cultural Surveillance Bureau's Facebook page (which can be found under their Thai title: กองเฝ้าระวังทางวัฒนธรรม) describes their remit as "coordinating the network to build immunity in society and develop safe and creative media". This is reflected in more recent activities by the bureau, which have focused, for example, on providing training for students to navigate information in the digital age and holding a creative media contest on the theme of "Good Things in my Home" to promote family values. Both programmes are targeted towards building "social immunity" among Thai youth, with the contest an evident change from top-down impositions of moral authority, instead encouraging students to engage with the idea themselves. This suggests a shift in their work from the direct control of individual uses of heritage to a more digital and youth-led approach to support Thai values.

Changing societal attitudes towards the state's role in regulating cultural morality were also reflected in the discourse surrounding the development of Thailand's 2016 Promotion and Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act (ICH Act). This particularly relates to sections in the 2013 draft that were ultimately removed from the final version of the Act released in 2016, such as in Article 5 and Article 40. In the 2016 Act, Article 5 simply lays out the domains of ICH. In the 2013 draft, however, this article is prefaced with the following statement:

> Intangible cultural heritage that is protected and promoted according to This Act must have historical, academic, artistic, or spiritual value worthy of preservation.

5 This is a pseudonym, as my interlocutor would prefer to remain anonymous.

Article 40 of the 2013 draft was removed from the 2016 version altogether. It stated:

> No person shall use registered intangible cultural heritage for the purposes of insulting the monarchy, affecting religion, affecting national security, or in any way that is contrary to public order and good morals, or in such a way that is detrimental to the intangible cultural heritage.

The 2013 draft legislation was subject to widespread criticism from Thai academics, with a primary complaint being the perceived "unnecessarily severe constraints" on culture set out by the Act (Denes, 2018, p. 199). The language of "worthy of preservation" in Article 5 and "good morals" in Article 40 are phrases that hearken back to the Phibunsongkhram era of cultural policy and the perception of good culture versus bad culture. Article 40's view of ICH as having the potential to subvert public order, the monarchy, region, and national security further recalls the nation's postcolonial fears. The removal of both sections and their references from the 2016 ICH Act highlights a shift in Thailand's approaches to culture.

Nevertheless, the most recent (2017) Thai Constitution shows that the development of a national cultural heritage policy that clearly separates culture and morality will take time (own emphasis added):

> A person and community shall have the right to: conserve, revive or promote wisdom, arts, culture, tradition, and *good customs* at both local and national levels. (Section 43.1, p. 13)
> The State should promote and provide protection for different ethnic groups to have the right to live in the society according to the traditional culture, custom, and ways of life on a voluntary basis, peacefully and without interference, *insofar as it is not contrary to public order or good morals or does not endanger the security of the State, health or sanitation*. (Section 70, p. 21)

Cultural Diversity and the Image of the Thai Citizen

Within this discussion of Thainess/national image and how it is perceived, defined, and controlled by the state, the issue of cultural diversity also emerges. Thailand's postcolonial policies of assimilation worked to erase cultural expressions that fell outside of the state's idealised image of Thainess and threatened the image of national unity. These attitudes

have also made their way into Thailand's cultural policies. More recently, however, the state's attitudes toward diversity within the country have changed. While the early cultural mandates under Phibunsongkhram were focused on crafting the image of Thailand in line with Western values—thereby suppressing elements of Thai culture deemed too "uncivilised" to be taken seriously by the new global powers—later cultural policy within Thailand was conversely influenced by a fear of Thai culture being entirely lost to that of the West (Feangfu, 2011). As Hathairat Jiewjinda (2014, p. 73), a cultural officer at the Thai Ministry of Culture in 2014, states in her paper *Thai Government's Perspective on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, "the ICH of the nation is threatened by the invasion of foreign cultures". Now, instead of trying to homogenise or modify the culture *within* Thailand, state efforts were redirected towards preserving the various elements of Thai culture that remained. This new fear, coupled with a growing realisation of the benefits of promoting Thailand's cultural diversity for tourism, explains the gradual shift in state cultural attitudes towards accepting (or, at the very least, capitalising on) notions of diversity. The Ministry of Culture, for example, deemed 2015 to be the "Year of Identity and Cultural Diversity Promotion", suggesting a practical shift away from promoting a single and homogeneous national culture. This is further evidenced in the messages opening the Ministry of Culture's publication on *Thai Art and Culture* by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (2019, p. 5), where he describes the "variety of customs associated with [Thailand's] diverse ethnicity and faiths", stating that "promoting the diversity and development of our art and culture is essential to the Thai nation, especially for future generations".

Minister of Culture Itthiphol Khunplome's (2019, p. 6) message in the same volume echoes these statements on the diversity of Thailand, describing the "roots of heterogeneities and homogeneities that have become Thai culture", which has been passed down "through an amalgam of ethnicities". He further states that the Ministry of Culture "is acutely aware of the cultural richness and diversity across the region" and is therefore devoted to "promoting and conserving […] a multifarious cultural heritage" (Itthiphol Khunplome, 2019, p. 6). The language of both statements, with emphasis on diversity, has clearly been influenced by international heritage discourse, particularly that of UNESCO, whose definition of ICH in the 2003 ICH Convention, for example, includes "respect for cultural diversity", while UNESCO's (2015) Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage also state that "[c]ultural diversity and the identities of communities, groups and individuals should be fully respected".

Despite this, the regulation of Thainess continues to be a concern for the Ministry of Culture. The statements by Prayut and Itthiphol (above) highlight how the idea of Thainess has been expanded to include select aspects of the nation's diversity, as this diversity has become a vital cultural resource that Thailand is trying to capitalise on. Nonetheless, echoes of older Thai nationalistic sentiments remain. This is noticeable in the third message in the Ministry of Culture's book by the Permanent Secretary for Culture Kitsayapong Siri. Unlike the prime minister and minister of culture's preceding statements, Kitsayapong (2019, p. 7) makes no careful references to diversity or ethnicities, instead applauding "the glory of the Thai race".

The rebranding of Thailand as culturally diverse alongside promoting ethnic minority communities for tourism purposes did not directly result in significant changes in attitudes towards non-Thai communities or the overall perception of what it means to be Thai. Consequently, ideas associated with otherness, and the delineation between Thai versus non-Thai continue today. As Boonchit, the Ministry of Culture employee explained, "we don't obviously discriminate against [minorities], but they're also not obviously our own". Moreover, as can be seen in Kitsayapong's (2019, p. 7) statement and its allusions to the deep history of the "Thai race", government legislation and policy regarding culture have continued to use language suggestive of assimilationist ideologies even up to the present day. Even the second attribution from the constitution (Section 70) that I mentioned earlier concerning the protection of ethnic minority culture is officially indexed not only under "right to culture" but also as "integration of ethnic communities". Yoko (2006, p. 290) likens this promotion of cultural diversity to the colonial process of defining Thainess, further cautioning that while certain aspects of minority culture have been accepted—such as costume, Indigenous knowledge (although not under the label "Indigenous"), and "certain ritual practices which do not contradict Buddhism" (Yoko, 2006, p. 290)—other elements have continued to be excluded deliberately. The state has ultimately created an acceptable and "safe" form of cultural expression for communities to adopt, one that does not contradict the principal ideals of the dominant culture. This is what Horstmann (2012, p. 132) calls an act of "selective multiculturalism", and Herzfeld (2021, p. 12) describes as "conceptual airbrushing".

This selective acceptance of multiculturalism—and, by extension, of expressions of difference—by the state can also enforce pre-existing cultural boundaries and hierarchies between the dominant culture and the other (Yoko, 2006). Many communities continue to contend with issues regarding citizenship and statelessness because of their ethnic affiliation and continue

to suffer from negative stereotypes perpetuated during the Cold War. The state's approach to ethnic diversity in Thailand oscillates between acceptance and denial. Acceptance is typically given to those cultures that do not conflict with conceptions of Thainess—whether this is related to abstract values or a more tangible conflict with national legislation—and the state's sense of security. For example, in the previous quotes by Prayut (2019, p. 5) and Itthiphol (2019, p. 6), it is apparent that the government is invested in the *image* of the country's cultural diversity—evidenced in practice through the addition of different minority heritage to the national ICH registry and ICH list. As the case study of the Kui will demonstrate, however, there have also been instances where minority heritage has, at best, been purposefully overlooked and, at worst, been deliberately pushed to the point of loss.

When I spoke with Suchat Kananon, the head of cultural wisdom (the preferred translation of "intangible cultural heritage" in Thailand) in the Department of Cultural Promotion at the Ministry of Culture, he admitted that "some things we can't protect". He gave the example of Kui elephant catching as a practice that cannot be preserved as it conflicts with legislation that bans the hunting of wild animals, informing me that the ministry "must follow the dynamics of it. There are many traditions we can't do anything about". While the issue of hunting wild animals is perhaps understandable, the second example he gave of heritage that cannot be protected is somewhat more contentious. He stated:

> For example, the surname of one ethnic group [...] tells the family's entire lineage up to the present. But we changed the law to say everyone in Thailand must have a Thai surname, so this tradition has to be lost. We can't do anything because there's a law.

This legislation on Thai surnames is one I mentioned previously as one of the many laws pushing the assimilation of ethnic groups in Thailand. While Suchat emphasised the importance of these last names to this community, he seemed resigned to their loss, stating as consolation that these traditions "will remain in memory", indicating that there can be no compromise on issues where culture comes into conflict with national values. It seems, then, that if minority heritage is to be preserved, it is to be done by the community itself—a phenomenon that I will expand upon later.

Boonchit argues that the government's behaviour towards minority cultures is not a natural swinging between acceptance and denial but rather an intentional design of give and take. As they told me, the government "intentionally steps on two sides with governing its people", as the state's

desire for nationalism is tempered by the recognition of a need for foreign investment in the country. Just as the state's approach to the environment changed upon realising the value of nature as a resource, the Thai government is also investing in preserving ICH, which "can be transformed into cultural capital or cultural assets". Bortolotto (2020; 2024) has described this relationship between ICH and commercialisation, particularly through the mechanism of UNESCO. The economic value of cultural diversity is a significant motivating factor for state actors. The state, therefore, must carefully balance its views of minority culture as a threat on the one hand and a valuable resource on the other. The director-general of the Department of Cultural Promotion echoed this sentiment of value, stating that cultural heritage is "an important capital of local communities and Thai society" (Pimrawee, 2017, p. i). This deliberate oscillation between the acceptance and rejection of non-Thai culture can also be seen in the structuring and organisation of the Ministry of Culture itself, where the ministry documents, records, and lists the diverse heritage of different communities around Thailand. At the same time, the Cultural Surveillance Bureau continues to monitor the use of culture and controls expressions of the Thai identity.

UNESCO and Good Culture in Thailand Today

What, then, does the state consider to be "good" Thai culture today? Section 4 of The Promotion and Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 (2016) outlined and defined Thailand's official categories of intangible cultural heritage. The Ministry of Culture has since expanded upon this, and the current categories of Thai ICH as they compare to UNESCO's domains for ICH (upon which the Thai divisions are based) are detailed in Table 5.1.

UNESCO ICH Categories	**Thai ICH Categories**
Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage	Folk literature 1. Folk tales 2. Oral history 3. Incantations 4. Folk verbal scripts 5. Idioms and adages 6. Riddles 7. Treatise
Performing arts	Performing arts 1. Vocal and instrumental music 2. Dance and theatre

UNESCO ICH Categories	Thai ICH Categories
Social practices, rituals, and festive events	Social practices, rituals, and festive events 1. Etiquette/Manners 2. Customs and traditions 2.1 Religious ceremonies 2.2 Festivals 2.3 Rites of passage 2.4 Ways of life and living conditions
Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe	Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe 1. Food and nutrition 2. Thai traditional medicine and folk medicine 3. Astrology and astronomy 4. Natural resources management 5. Site and settlement
Traditional craftsmanship	Traditional craftsmanship 1. Textile and textile production 2. Basketry 3. Lacquerware 4. Pottery 5. Metal work 6. Woodwork 7. Leatherwork 8. Ornament 9. Folk art 10. Other kinds of craftsmanship
	Folk games and sports 1. Folk plays 2. Folk games and sports 3. Martial arts
	Language[6] 1. Thai language 2. Dialects and related languages 3. Symbolic language

Table 5.1: Comparing UNESCO domains for Intangible Cultural Heritage with those developed by the Thai Ministry of Culture.

Suchat, speaking in his capacity as the head of cultural wisdom, noted that, "from our perspective, our ideas are based on the implementation of the UNESCO framework", which is divided into tangible and intangible heritage. The location of UNESCO's Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau in Bangkok since 1961 has also probably played a role in influencing Thailand's cultural policy in line with the organisation's values. As seen in Table 5.1, the Thai government's interpretation of ICH regarding the broader categories (e.g.,

6 Sometimes also called "Linguistic and communications tool".

performing arts) closely follows those laid out by UNESCO; however, where UNESCO has five domains of ICH, Thailand has seven. The remits covered by UNESCO's "oral traditions" category are divided into "folk literature" and "Language", while a new category of "Folk Games and Sports" has also been included in the Thai list. These categories have further been subdivided into different relevant sections. Notably, "etiquette/manners" is listed under "Social Practices", continuing the previous associations of culture and good conduct outlined in this chapter.

The AHD of UNESCO has clearly influenced Thailand's own AHD. This is not only evident in UNESCO providing the rough framework for the Thai ICH Categories, but also in what the state selects to be part of its national heritage repertoire. UNESCO lists heritage at the level of the nation-states. Since this process of listing can be long and competitive, countries may be more inclined (and, through this language of "national heritage", are, in fact, actively encouraged) to choose traditions they view as more widely representative of the country at large. This is undoubtedly the case with the Thai state, which, according to Suchat, will only decide to nominate heritage that many groups identify with and is therefore perceived as universally Thai—at least for now.

The local listing and documentation of ICH in Thailand is split between the provincial and national levels. The national government grants authority to each province to safeguard and document its own heritage. Items on each provincial list are then selected for consideration by the national committee, in consultation with experts on each specific heritage category and type, to determine if they should be listed at the national level. It is from this national list that UNESCO nominations are selected. Suchat describes the rationale behind the nomination process, stating that "there are many factors the board needs to consider in choosing national heritage. There is a lot of heritage that may not have been listed yet as we are only recently a party to the [UNESCO ICH] Convention". As a result of this backlog, Suchat states that "culture related to minority groups or that doesn't impact the majority" is not prioritised for listing, and they "only take the most prominent traditions that everyone already knows"; these traditions can "come from all over Thailand, but we will consider it from the impact [of the heritage] on the public as a whole".

Both Suchat and Kittiporn, from the Department of Cultural Promotion, point to limited resources as another reason why the Ministry of Culture must carefully consider and rank the traditions it chooses to nominate. Just as the state's approach to diversity emphasises cultural resource value, it is also a major motivating factor in the listing process. According to Suchat, big ticket items are prioritised "to develop tourism and the economy", while "other

smaller, more Provincial items" are being "se[t] aside for now". The four items currently listed as Thai Intangible Cultural Heritage on the UNESCO registry are "Khon masked dance", "Thai massage", "Nora, dance drama in Southern Thailand", and "Songkran in Thailand, traditional Thai New Year festival". In this way, UNESCO inscriptions enable the Thai government's cultural hegemony, as the listing of dominant cultural heritage not only permits but also legitimises the continuation of the state-regulated image of Thainess. As Connors (2005, p. 533) observes, "elite prescriptions on what counts as national heritage and wisdom are routinely advanced through UNESCO support".

Although the UNESCO nomination process is selective and does not prioritise more locally valued cultural practices, this is not to say that minority and local heritage is wholly neglected. Suchat, for example, explains that part of the Ministry of Culture's budget is dedicated to documenting minority heritage because UNESCO has requested this. These minority traditions are also included on the national list, even if they are not nominated as world heritage. Elements of Thailand's ICH that are documented at the national level are divided into two lists: the National Intangible Cultural Heritage list, consisting of 318 items as of 2015, and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Database, which, as of 2013, had information on 815 items (Hathairat, 2014; Ministry of Culture, 2016).[7] Kui elephant knowledge (gaja-sastra) was added to this list in 2012 under the category of "Knowledge and Practice Concerning Nature and the Universe", while the *Inherited wisdom of the Kui in Surin province* and the Kui language were added to the National list in 2015. While the Ministry of Culture *is* working to document the cultural diversity of Thailand, they are still making decisions on which culture is deemed to be of national significance. Provincial lists work to record diversity more locally, with support from the central government. At the same time, however, this focus on provincial culture and listings allows the government to discuss diversity through the language of local cultures without mention of the ethnic minority and Indigenous communities themselves.

Further evidence of this give and take approach can be seen in the wording of the 2016 ICH Act regarding community involvement. As it stands, the role of communities is mentioned just three times: in the inclusion of the term "having regard also to the participation by the civil society sector and communities", when discussing the roles of the government commissions tasked with carrying out the remits of the Act (Section 14.3, 15.3); the charge to "work together with communities" in the preparation of "preliminary lists

7 The Ministry of Culture's online registry has yet to be updated to reflect more recent activity and only contains listings up to 2013.

Figure 5.1: Ministry of Culture's new operations centre building (photograph by Sitthivet Santikarn).

of Intangible Cultural Heritage" (Section 16.2); and the Commission's mission of "direction for co-operation amongst communities which have Cultural Heritage" (Section 18.3). These deliberately vague references satisfy a need to include community involvement at the most basic level but, at the same time, fail to provide any meaningful role for communities in this process. Moreover, the lack of importance given to community involvement underscores the top-down structure of Thailand's cultural heritage management.

This hierarchical approach to Thai cultural legislation aligns with the top-down structuring of Thai society more broadly. Connors (2005, pp. 524–5) asserts that the Thai state uses culture to "shape collective and individual identity in ways that bind subordinate populations to elite ways of seeing". To this extent, the government has mobilised culture and worked to

construct the notion of Thainess to reinforce a hierarchical structuring of society, thereby achieving cultural hegemony (Connors, 2005, p. 525). Boonchit described the construction of a new Ministry building (Fig. 5.1), whose initial plans included a flat roof—a structure mainly concerned with function. After the coup d'état in 2014, those in power dictated that the building be redesigned to include a triangular roof "to make it more visible". According to Boonchit, however, the triangular shape—though reminiscent of Thai traditional houses and temple architecture—was chosen because it "represents the hierarchy of Thai society". The redesign of the Ministry of Culture's building to include this symbolism clearly indicates the (continued) role of culture in subtly guiding and overtly enforcing this top-down societal structuring.

Thai Culture vs Folk Culture

While Thailand's cultural policies continue to separate "good" and "bad" culture, Thailand's ICH categories highlight a middle ground between culture perceived as Thai and not Thai—"folk". This can be seen, for example, in the inclusion of ICH categories and subcategories of folk literature, folk games, folk plays, and folk art (Table 5.1). Although "folk" is not inherently prejudicial, neither is it a neutral term, as its use in some contexts often contains pejorative undertones (e.g., Buccitelli and Schmitt, 2016; Thompson, 2018; Reis, 2019). This is further complicated by a seeming lack of consensus on what the terms "folk"/"folklore" encompass (e.g., Bronner, 2016). Some definitions conflate folk and folklore with intangible cultural heritage or culture. For example, UNESCO's 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore equates folklore with "traditional and popular culture", defining it as "the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community". Other definitions, however, establish a hierarchical relationship between high culture and folklore (low culture). In such cases, the word "folk" often indicates a certain backwardness and is typically only applied to specific groups viewed in this light.

After its introduction as a concept in 1846, the study of folklore was initially an elite pursuit, with the primary purpose of salvaging what was "presumed to be lost in the process of becoming civilised" (Allen, 1996, p. 33). Although not explicitly stated, this implies that folklore and civilisation/modernity are incompatible, with folk heritage existing as a relic from the pre-civilised past. This view of folk tradition as backward has clear socio-political implications for those groups whose heritage has been

branded as such. Mendoza (1998, p. 166), writing on the uses of folklore within European and Latin American contexts, notes that "the use of the concept of 'folklore' has had a high political charge and has encouraged a subtle form of racism on the part of those who categorise certain cultural practices as 'folkloric'" within their given country. This concern was also discussed in a UNESCO roundtable on shifting the organisation's terminology from "traditional culture and folklore" to "intangible cultural heritage" (Blake, 2001). In particular, the issue was raised that Indigenous culture is often pejoratively labelled as folklore (Blake, 2001). This restriction on the boundaries of heritage versus folk is another manifestation of the Thai AHD.

Since the Thai state has primarily followed the model for categorising ICH outlined by UNESCO, the inclusion of the term "folk"—a deviation from UNESCO's categories upon which the Thai framework was modelled—appears to be a deliberate choice. For example, Thailand used "Folk Literature" rather than UNESCO's "Oral Traditions and Expressions". Thailand's ICH categories also distinguish between folk and Thai, as seen in the inclusion of both "Thai Traditional Medicine" and "Folk Medicine" as sub-categories of "Knowledge and Practices Concerning Nature and the Universe". This draws a clear line between Thai and folk/other, which is reminiscent of the historic conceptual divisions between those living in the capital of Bangkok and those living outside of it—the rural versus the civilised—where the "less-developed" practices of those living in the rural outskirts of Bangkok were held up by those living in the city as quaint examples used to satisfy their nostalgia.

In this way, the designation of some cultures as "folk" serves as a means of freezing both traditions and practitioners in the past. How a community's heritage is perceived impacts not only the way the community is viewed but also how the community views itself. Prayat Thanarath, a senior member of the Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand and secretary of the Sakhon Nakhon Provincial Cultural Council, in his panel at the 2020 Thai day for Indigenous people, stated that "[t]he policies of the Ministry of Culture protect culture (wattanatham)—and when I say culture, I'm saying culture according to the 'high public officials' (ขุนนาง),[8] that's the word I use, or 'Bangkok culture,' like Loy Krathong or Songkran", but they do not protect the traditions of minorities. By labelling something as "folk", there is a label marking this tradition as other, but also as something potentially less than.

8 I include the original Thai word, rather than a transliteration as I had some difficulty translating this term. Its direct translation is "nobility", however, in the context of Prayat's speech, "high public official" is a more likely interpretation.

Denes (2015) writes about the "folklorisation" of Khmer traditions in the northeast of Thailand and discusses how the rendering of heritage as lesser also paints communities as non-threatening. She describes the process of the folklorisation of Khmer culture as a way of "demonstrating loyalty and deflecting the stigma of neighbouring Cambodia" at the peak of suspicion during the Cold War (Denes, 2015, p. 9). Earlier, we saw how the Cold War sculpted Thai state attitudes toward minority groups and how policies were directed towards fostering a sense of national security through cultural unity. During this period, the folklorisation of the potentially dangerous minority heritage was also a part of this process of diffusing, sanitising, and "Thai-ifying" these cultures. Where a community with a rich and deep history of tradition and culture is a potential threat, the somewhat oxymoronic designation of folk culture is seen as rural and not at all to be feared. This transformative process from culture to folk can be done *to* communities to render them powerless or diminish their pride in their past, but the communities can also do it to themselves as a means of ensuring their cultural survival. Denes (2015) gives the example of Khmer traditional dances, which were adapted to match more closely with the style of Central Thai dances in order to be considered "appropriate" when viewed by a royal audience. Although the Khmer were targeted, this also impacted other cultures in the region more generally, including the Kui. This is particularly evidenced in the heritagisation and nationalisation of the Surin Elephant Round-Up, discussed later. Given not only Denes's perspective on the process of folklorisation as the depoliticising of heritage, but also the historical treatment of otherness by the Thai state, the use of the term "folk" in the categorisation of Thailand's ICH does not seem to serve a particular descriptive purpose. Instead, it carries implications of cultural hierarchy, where typically Thai traditions are ranked above those branded as folk culture—i.e., "not-Thai-enough" (Bolotta 2021).

Figure 5.2: Timeline summarising key events in Thai heritage and cultural legislation as they relate to global events and Thai/Siamese governmental regimes.

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Abbreviations

AHD	authorised heritage discourse
ICH	intangible cultural heritage
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

6 The Kui in Thailand: Identity, (In)Visibility, and (Mis)Recognition

Abstract
In addition to providing a more detailed background on the Kui in Surin, in this chapter I unpack the Kui's partial exclusion from the provincial-level AHD, which has been reinforced by cultural assimilation across the ethnic groups in the region. The Kui and Khmer, in particular, have contested and overlapping claims to heritage and provincial history, which has created conflict over rights to recognition. The misrecognition of the Kui and the accompanying restriction of access to resources are consequences of exclusion from the state and provincial AHDs. This, together with the nationalistic symbolism of the Thai elephant, has produced the interesting paradox of the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of the Kui.

Keywords
Khmer; Surin; AHD; elephants; politics of recognition

Limited documentary evidence exists for Kui origins (Chuen, 1990). Even the Kui name is contested. More common spellings include (but are not limited to) Kui, Kuy, Kuoy and Kuay, and Suay, Suai, Soai and Sue. Less often, the Kui have also been called Kha, and Moey, and conflated with the Lawa, Samre and Por/Pear communities (e.g., Seidenfaden, 1952, p. 144). Owing to the pejorative associations of Suay and its variants, I prefer to use "Kui". This spelling also accords with the convention set by the Kui Association of Thailand. The variety of nomenclature also highlights some of the complexities that research on this community faces; many sources, particularly those written during the colonial era, describe the Kui under some of the allegedly incorrect names.

Before the 14th century, there is limited evidence on when the Kui arrived in what is now Thailand, where they came from, why they migrated, and

Santikarn, Alisa. *Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025
DOI: 10.5117/9789048561995_CH06

in what numbers (Banyat, 2015). One blog suggests that the Thai-Kui from northern and northeastern Cambodia arrived around 3,000–2,000 BCE, moving as a result of "politics and war" (*Chao Kui Samrong Thap*, 2012). There is also little information on how many Kui there are in Thailand today. Suggested population figures include vague estimates of "a few thousand" (Thong-arb, 2009, n.p.), or 150,000 (Woykos, 1989, p. 96), or 275,000 (Smalley, 1994, p. 149), and even 400,000 (Eberhard et al., 2024). The Kui's own origin narrative, as I heard it from a monk at Wat Ta Khian (a Kui temple in Surin), is that they came from Assam in India and followed the river eastward. The rationale for tracing Kui origins to Assam lies in the Kui method of elephant catching—a rider on the back of a trained elephant, who lassos wild elephants one at a time. This method is thought to have originated in Assam, where this practice is termed mela-shikar (Kahl and Santiapillai, 2004). Upon leaving Assam, some Kui went to Mongolia, while others followed the Mekong River, branching off into Thailand and Laos, and finally ending in Cambodia and Vietnam. The monk, the late Phra Khru Upthamworakul, told me that the Kui do not possess an exact knowledge of their history, probably because of their exclusion from the national historiography; they instead trace the names of locations and geological features that are similar to Kui words to map their path. For example, he suggested, the name of the Mekong River may have its origins in the Kui language, in which "Khong" means "curve". Meanwhile, Surin, one of the main strongholds of the Kui in Thailand, was initially called Pathai Saman before being renamed in the 18th century. "Pathai" in Kui means "land" and "Saman" means "small", which suggests the Kui were the early inhabitants of this region and gave the province its original name. I heard about this same path of migration from Assam to Mongolia or along the Mekong from Phra Khru Dr Samuhan, the abbot of another Kui temple in Surin province. Anthropologists and linguists studying the Kui communities spread across Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, do seem to have arrived at a consensus that the Kui are part of the Mon-Khmer language branch and were probably Indigenous inhabitants of northeastern Thailand before the arrival of the Thai, Lao, and Khmer (Wanat, 1989; Smalley, 1994).

Later records from the Siamese kingdom also give us only limited insight into the Kui. There are references in local chronicles to a Khmer king at Angkor Thom who asked for help from the Kui people to quash a rebellion (Apichat, 2013). The Kui/Kuai may also have been mentioned in two separate clauses in the Three Seals Law, which probably dates to the 17th century. One clause warns Thai and Mon against marrying their daughters to foreigners,

Figure 6.1: Map depicting Surin province in Thailand (created using Scribble Maps).

including the กวย/Kuai, while the other regulates trade by land and sea. The Kui are considered foreigners here because they are seen as having their own land in the Mekong River basin (Suchit, 2021). As Thai historian Chit Phumisak (1976, p. 448) writes, the Kui "were not serfs in the kingdom, but had a separate country of their own", which also gives them political status. In 1717, the Isan chronicles mention a group known as Kui who lived in Attapeu, Champasak Province, and who captured wild elephants

(Surin Provincial Government 2013).[1] Following an economic and political restructuring in 1782 and the shift of the capital to Bangkok, historical references to the Kui begin to label the community using broader and more utilitarian terms that define their new relationship to the state, no longer recognised by a name signifying an autonomous identity but simply as "Suay" (tribute) or "Kha" (slave) (Suchit, 2021).

While a 1978 survey noted that the Kui could be found in six provinces in the northeast of Thailand (Buriram, Surin, Srisaket, Ubon Ratchathani, Maha Sarakham, and Nakhon Ratchasima), the Kui Ajiang are primarily clustered in the province of Surin (Fig. 6.1), often dubbed the nation's elephant capital (Somsong, 1994)—where I conducted the majority of my research.

The Fluid and Fragmented Identities of the Kui in Thailand Today

> [*Y*]*ou must remember that if you are speaking with a westerner on the one hand and Lao on the other, you must maintain that the westerner is "them" and the Lao is Thai. If, however, you are speaking with a Lao on the one hand and a Thai on the other, you must maintain that the Lao is "them" and the Thai is "us."*
>
> – King Rama V (cited in Connors, 2008, p. 38)

Thai identity is often relationally defined as a result of negative association. Thai is defined in opposition to the other or that which is viewed as not Thai. What is considered us or them in Thailand therefore frequently changes according to context. As King Rama V (cited in Connors, 2008, p. 38) proclaimed, if a Thai person is speaking to a "westerner on the one hand and Lao on the other", then the Lao person should be seen as Thai; but in a conversation between a Thai and a Lao, the Lao latter is automatically the other. Surin is a particularly interesting arena in which to consider these various interactions between the Thai and others as it is the site of multiple identities, the most prominent being Thai, Isan, Lao, Khmer, and Kui. The porosity of these identities complicates analysis still further. Moreover, identification as Thai does not preclude identification with other categories, particularly because

1 Even with this limited evidence, it is clear that the Kui were part of the pre-colonial mandala power system. The Kui's relationship to the different pre-colonial state powers, such as Champasak and Siam, was, in part, expressed through their mastery of the forest realm, and all that it contained—including animals (particularly elephants) and spirits. This recognition of their skill related to the pa and elephants gave them symbolic capital, providing them with recognition by the state. Their association with elephants today continues to be the main avenue through which the community is able to achieve visibility (even if only partially).

not all these labels denote ethnicity. For example, while state policy has encouraged the replacement of other Thai identities with that of Thai, the term also signifies nationality, so that the Kui I interviewed identified as both Thai *and* Kui. Meanwhile, another common category of identity in the province—Isan—relates to a geospatial regional identity (even though it has largely appropriated and come to replace elements of Lao language and ethnicity) so that a person may claim Thai and Isan as well as a separate ethnic label like Kui or Khmer (Vail, 2007). This raises an important point: the Kui are not maintaining that they do not want to be governed as Thai citizens (cf. Scott, 2009) but rather that they want their own space as Kui.

The Kui engage in a form of identity code-switching that is most apparent in the differential use of the words "Suay" and "Kui" in self-reference. Chuen (1990) explains that while the Kui speak their own language among themselves, they use "Thai-Lao" or Central Thai when speaking with other groups or government officials. With non-Kui, however, not only do the Kui switch language (to Lao, Khmer, or Thai), but they also switch the name that they use to refer to themselves. Amongst other Kui, they would use the word "Kui", but when speaking to outsiders they refer to themselves as "Suay". I repeatedly observed this code-switching during interviews, where, even though I deliberately only used "Kui" (unless I was asking how they felt about the term "Suay"), my respondents would still reply using "Suay" because I was an outsider.

As part of this code-switching, an issue emerged concerning my use of an interpreter. Interviews took place in any of three dialects/languages: Kui, Lao/Isan, or Central Thai. On occasions when I did speak Thai, my face sometimes got in the way. It marked me as a foreigner, because, for a mixed-race Thai person (or a luk khrueng/ลูกครึ่ง, "half-caste"), I also encounter the boundaries between Thai and others and am impacted by the resulting dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, my interlocutors most often saw me as other. As a result, I found that when I spoke, people were listening for English rather than Thai, and consequently often failed to understand what I was saying. I would sometimes ask a question in Thai only to have my interpreter repeat what I had said verbatim; my interviewee only understood after this repetition. Additionally, although most interviewees spoke Central Thai, it was probably not their first language. Central Thai, in fact, "is not a native language for most people in Thailand" (Smalley, 1994, p. 14); for example, Thai Lao is the lingua franca in the Northeast (Draper and Anong, 2015). Dr Sanong initially advised me that interviews should be conducted in Kui (with him acting as an interpreter) as it would produce more information and allow for a deeper discussion of ideas. This is what I did on my first field visit to Surin. Even with Dr Sanong speaking Kui,

however, the interviewees often switched back to Thai. Moreover, as many Kui do not speak the Kui language, relying on Kui alone would exclude those community members.

The choice of interview language has further and deeper implications. Tomioka (2016) presents a hierarchical relationship between the different languages and dialects spoken in Surin, with Central Thai—the de facto and de jure national language—at the top and Kui at the bottom. Just above Kui comes Northern Khmer, and above that is Lao Isan—the regional dialect (see Fig. 6.2). This hierarchy of languages parallels the social hierarchy of Thai society, with the Kui ranked beneath the other ethnic minority groups in the region and the Central Thais at the top (Premsrirat, 2007). The language of interview is therefore crucial to establishing a researcher's positionality. I faced the choice of speaking Central Thai, thereby aligning myself with those at the top of the social hierarchy, or speaking English—a language that, while not entirely separate from hierarchical relationships, does not form a part of this more local hierarchical structure. Speaking English would also require the use of an interpreter who would, in turn, use either Kui or Lao/Isan. In looking at differences resulting from the language used in an interview (in this case between Spanish and English), Lee (2001, p. 15) observes that "the language in which an interview is conducted can dramatically alter our substantive understanding of a predominantly immigrant ethnic group's political beliefs, racial attitudes, and their policy preferences". The language used in the first approach with an interviewee therefore contributes to establishing the relationship between the researcher and research subject and has the potential to shape the responses elicited through the interaction.

In the end, I used two interpreters during my time in Surin. Dr Sanong initially acted as a Kui–English interpreter. In practice, however, I noticed that even when Dr Sanong spoke in Kui, interviewees responded in a mixture of Kui, Lao/Isan, and Central Thai. Smalley (1994, p. 1) tells an anecdote about a high school teacher in Surin, who speaks Khmer to her neighbours, Lao with her husband, Lao, Khmer, and Thai with her children, teaches standard Thai to students at her school, and, finally, when she returns to her hometown, speaks her native language—Kui. This code-switching is everyday habit for the Kui. The mere fact of my outsider status, irrespective of my ability to comprehend the language, usually led interviewees to respond in Central Thai even when answering questions posed in Kui and answered through a Kui interpreter.

On later trips, however, I chose to use an interpreter called Chai, who was not Kui, but who was a local tour guide and who spoke the local Thai dialect, Lao/Isan. Although Freed (1988, p. 361) argues that "[i]deally, the

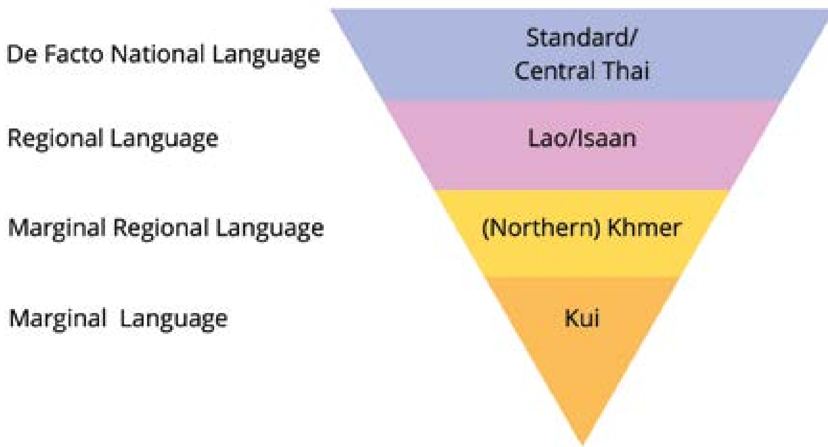

Figure 6.2: Hierarchy of languages in Surin, Thailand adapted from Tomioka (2016, n.p.).

culture of the interviewee and the interpreter should be the same", in a small community like that of the Kui in Surin, this brings with it certain obstacles. This is compounded when the interpreter is potentially of a higher social status than the interviewee, as the latter may feel reluctant to contradict the interpreter or contest conventional views in the community, or when the interpreter interjects opinions and embellishments and thereby produces what Skjelsbæk (2016, p. 508) terms the "hybrid parole"—a mixture of interpreter and interviewee. This is why, except in initial interviews, I decided to compromise and use an interpreter who was not a member of the Kui community but who was a local and who had met Kui people before. Chai was familiar with many of the Kui villages I visited and had worked with certain families as part of ecotourism projects. This familiarity greatly eased my introduction to Kui groups. As a woman, I also found that introductions that Chai made on my behalf were more gender balanced, whereas all introductions made by Dr Sanong were to Kui men. Interviews were based on ease of access and willingness to participate, rather than the more curated introductions to members of higher status that I had made during my first visit. Despite Chai's familiarity with many of my Kui interlocutors, I noticed that they were still often referred to themselves as Suay.

Although there is a regional ethnic hierarchy, with Lao, Khmer, and Kui all used as ethnic identifiers, there has also been so much movement and mixture of groups that it is entirely possible to identify as both Kui *and* Khmer, or Lao *and* Kui, or any combination of the three (or none of the above at all!). For many Kui, the ability to speak Kui is the only noticeable difference

from other northeastern Thai people. Nevertheless, many Kui people also do not speak the Kui language (Somsong, 1995). Boonma Saendee, the highest-ranked mor chang and perhaps one of the most highly respected members of this Kui community, describes his parents as being Suay and Khmer. I also learned from a different interlocutor that Boonma's granddaughter identifies as Khmer and not Kui. Very few families or villages have maintained ethnic insularity.[2] Consequently, this mix of ethnic identification is not uncommon, and has contributed to the assimilation of the Kui people into the more dominant cultural identities in the region—Khmer and Lao.

Smalley (1994, p. 343) suggests that integration, and then assimilation, often follows from a community's adoption of multiple identities, and "symbols of difference are muted" as a result. In this sense, just as the Kui code-switch between Kui and Suay, their identities—whether Kui, Khmer, Lao, Northerner, or Thai—are also fluid and can be relationally formed. In some instances, however, the shift from Kui to something else is concretised—potentially driven by social stigma. In these cases, rather than switching back to Kui in private, the memory of the Kui identity is eventually lost entirely. The new identity instead takes over as the one inherited and passed on through that family over generations until this too may change and be lost over time.

The process of assimilation has resulted in issues of identity loss. This is compounded by the fact that historically the Kui identity has often been left out of the official narrative. Not only is there a problem with the term "Suay", as it is a generic identifier that could be applied to multiple ethnic groups, but, often, the Kui are either unnamed entirely or conflated with the Khmer. The Kui's fluid identity, however, may have paradoxically contributed to their cultural independence. Scott (2009, p. x), for example, cites "pliable ethnic identities" as one of the ways in which communities fleeing oppression have sought to evade state control. Scott (2009, p. 242), moreover, argues that the need to draw such clear boundaries between groups itself is a colonial-era product stemming from a Western obsession with taxonomy and a need for classification. This demand to fit communities into the state's image of order is part of the state's desire to render these groups "legible"

2 Dr Sanong, for example, is proud that his family lineage is, in his words, "inbred"—only marrying within the Kui community. Meanwhile, Phratchayaphat, a Kui man I spoke with from Prang Ku (ปรางค์กู่) district in Si Sa Ket province, comes from a village of 17 households, all of whom are Kui. He told me that his village is the only one that has maintained this distinction, as mixture amongst the four main ethnic groups in Si Sa Ket—the Kui, Khmer, Lao, and Yer—is otherwise common. To Phratchayaphat, keeping the village strictly Kui is important to preserve Kui culture for the next generation and to ensure it is not lost.

and to prevent discord (Scott, 2020, p. 2). The confusion caused by this act of categorisation, therefore, does not lie with the community itself, but rather with the "historian and colonial ethnographer" (Scott, 2020, p. 243).

Suay

The use of the term "Suay" is controversial, and understanding its controversy requires an understanding of its historical origins. "Suay" (ส่วย) in Thai translates to "tribute", and phrai suay (ไพร่ส่วย), meaning "tribute people", was the term given to those who were made to pay a form of tax to the Siamese capital. This practice began for the Kui sometime in the late-18th century and continued into the reign of Rama III in the late-19th century (Grabowsky, 1995; *Chao Kui Samrong Thap*, 2012). For the court, the term "Kui" held no relevance and so preferred the more functional descriptor "Suay". The densely forested positioning of Surin meant that this tribute often took the form of forest products, including elephants (Paitoon, 1984). When the Kui were unable to meet the increasing demands of the Siamese court, however, "some native men were sent as tribute" instead (Komatra, 2001, p. 40). This practice is also documented in the Surin National Museum, which describes Kui men being sent to Siam when the Kui were unable to meet the tax demands of the court during the "Bangkok Period" (1762–1932) (Fine Arts Department, 2007). "Suay" was the blanket label given to describe any of the multiple ethnic minority communities made to pay tax through this corvée labour.

Why, then, is Suay only used for the Kui today? The Khukhan Cultural Council (2015, n.p.) notes that Thai people in the Northeast often referred to the Lao as "Suay" because of their distinctive accents, marking them as different. In order to remove this word from association with them, the Lao instead called other groups "Suay", asserting their dominance over them through this hierarchical language (Khukhan Cultural Council, 2015, n.p.). As the Kui were the lowest-ranked group in the Northeast, the term "Suay" may have stuck with them simply because there was no group lower that they could pass the name off to instead. Today, the Kui continue to use "Suay" as it has become the label they are known by. Even the Kui Association of Thailand, whose mission is to educate people to use the "correct" term—Kui—continues to use the word "Suay" in their Thai-language material, as, according to Dr Sanong, it is "more popular" and "needed for business". Figure 6.3 shows an example of a sign I drove past while in Surin, indicating a Kui village. In English, it describes a "Kuy community", while the Thai uses the term "Suay". Modern Thai/Siamese historians are also culpable in the perpetuation of the term "Suay", choosing to use this word to describe the Kui in their work "as if it had been their original racial/ethnic name since

Figure 6.3: Road sign for a Kui community in Surin with the text “Welcome to Kuy Community” in English, but “Welcome to Suay Community” in Thai (photograph by author).

time immemorial” even though “Suay” comparatively was applied to the Kui only more recently (Komatra, 2001, p. 41). The impact of the prolonged usage of this term by the dominant culture has meant that “Suay” continues to be the primary name used by Thai people to describe the Kui.

Many Kui find the term “Suay” to be pejorative, as they believe the historic associations with corvée labour means that this term can be seen as akin to “slave”.[3] “Kui”, meanwhile, means “human being”/“person” in the Kui language (Bos and Sidwell, 2014). There is, however, no consensus on this topic amongst the Kui themselves. Table 6.1 outlines various Kui perspectives on the word “Suay” based on my interviews with members of the Kui community in Surin.

Positive /Neutral	**Negative**
“It’s normal to be called ‘Suay’”. —Nuan	“Other people call us Suay, really, we are Kui. We paid ‘suay,’ but we are not ‘Suay’”. —Emcee at Kui Day of the World
“To call us ‘Suay’ is what we are. It doesn’t matter what we’re called, we’re just another type of person”. —Chamnan Thepkaew	“I’m only proud when I’m called Kui. When I’m called ‘Suay’ it makes me sad”. —Woraporn

3 Kha (meaning “slave” in Lao) was another term the Kui were sometimes called, grouped alongside other nameless Indigenous peoples (Bangperng, 2022).

Positive /Neutral	**Negative**
"Suay is normal, it's fine, it's the same as saying 'Lao' or 'Khmer'". —Somphon	"'Suay' is what Thai people call us, it's insulting. Some people don't care but that's because they don't know the history, the word has lost its meaning". —Dr Sanong Suksaweang
"If my mother was 'Suay', my father was 'Suay', I must be 'Suay'". —Boonma Saendee	"I don't like ['Suay'], it doesn't just mean tribute, it means slavery. We aren't things, we are humans. It's a derogatory term". —Phra Khru Dr Samuhan
"Whether 'Suay' is good or bad depends on perception. 'Suay' has a good meaning—it's a person who gave tribute to the King in the past, but nowadays it's a bad term because 'Suay' is used to mean bribery. I don't like the modern negative connotations, but the original meaning was good". —Phra Khru Upthamworakul	"'Suay' was not just for the Kui. If you couldn't pay, you had to give human tribute. The Lao and Khmer did this too, it's not fair to only call the Kui 'Suay', it's not right". —Sompoch Paree
"'Suay' or 'Kui', it doesn't matter. I can use both, they're the same. We call ourselves 'Suay'". —MTT1	

Table 6.1: Different Kui perspectives on the term "Suay", based on 2019 interviews.

The Kui and the Khmer

Aside from being called Suay, the Kui have also had to contend with maintaining cultural distinctiveness from the Khmer,[4] who constitute the second-largest ethnic group in the Northeast behind the Thai. Estimates suggest the Khmer comprise roughly 70% of the population in Surin (followed by 20% Lao and 10% Kui) (Naruemon, 2003, p. 11). While this data is now decades out of date and the exact figure may be disputed, complicated by a lack of national census data on ethnic minorities in Thailand, it remains the case that the Khmer are prominent in Surin, while the Kui remain a comparatively small minority. As one report notes, "[t]he provincial capital of Surin is essentially a Khmer city" (CIA, 1970, p. 3).

The origins of the conflation between the Kui and Khmer perhaps lie in historical terms used to describe the Kui as "ancient Khmer" (Khamen Boran/เขมรโบราณ) and "forest Khmer" (Khamen Pa Dong/เขมรป่าดง). The term "ancient Khmer" could result from a misunderstanding that considers the Kui and the Khmer to come from the same lineage, with the Kui therefore

4 The term "Khmer" in Thailand is used both to describe people who originally emigrated from Cambodia historically but are now Thai citizens, as well as being the term for current Cambodian nationals.

seen as the ancient ancestors of the Khmer. When speaking with the head of ICH at the Ministry of Culture, for example, I was informed that Khmer traditions are the most listed ICH of all ethnic groups in Thailand, with the Kui falling under this category of klum khamen (Khmer groups/กลุ่มเขมร). When I asked Dr Sanong about this label, he replied, "that is totally unacceptable for the Kui. Because we are different". Dr Sanong added that "Kui is one of the oldest Indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia but the Khmer evolved sometime later and [are] a very new group of people like Siamese/Thai, Laos, and Cambodian/Khmer". As has already been shown, however, the line between these different groups today is unclear, as a long history of relationships and marriage between the groups has produced somewhat fluid ethnic identities. The question then emerges as to why, today, there is a push to reinforce these ethnic boundaries to assert a more essentialised version of "Kui-ness" (just as we saw happening with the emergence of "Thainess"). One of my (non-Kui) interlocutors from a cultural institution in Surin, for example, stated that the current resurgence of Kui nationalism is generated by the government for tourism and marketing, pointing to the พิธีซัตเต (phiti satte), more popularly known as the "elephant back wedding ceremony", as a Kui tradition reinvented by the government to attract tourists. Another non-Kui interlocutor noted that many people are trying to use the Kui identity to further their political agendas.

The term "forest Khmer" has ties to the Kui's location in the historically densely forested region of Thailand's northeast, which borders Cambodia—the land of the Khmer. According to Thawat Punnotok (1999, p. 56), "Khamen Pa Dong" was the name the royal chronicle[5] gave to those living in "the lower Isan districts", including Surin. In the pre-colonial period, Surin was part of the tribute-paying semi-autonomous principality known as the huamueang Khamen Pa Dong (the Province of the Forest Khmer/หัวเมืองเขมรป่าดง) (Denes, 2009, p. 20). In 1899, however, the Thesaphiban (local government/เทศาภิบาล) administrative system was established, and along with it, "place names which denoted autonomous ethnic identity" were eliminated (Denes, 2012, p. 171). This was part of the process of replacing ethnic identification with geospatial orientation vis-a-vis the capital of Bangkok mentioned earlier. The province of the "forest Khmer" was thereby transformed into the "Northeastern Circle" (Monthon Isan/มณฑลอีสาน), placing it under the control of the central government (Murdoch, 1971). This change also marked the end of the tribute-paying system (Murdoch, 1971).

5 A type of text documenting the history of the monarchy.

As discussed regarding the chao pa, or "jungle people", the term pa and its associations with nature and the wild also has connotations of backwardness and inability to be civilised. These notions similarly arise with the label Khamen Pa Dong. For example, another translation provided for Khamen Pa Dong is "backward Cambodians/Khmer" (Komatra, 2001, p. 74). Phumchit (2009, p. 19) states that Khamen Pa Dong are Khmer who are "backward" and are "one of the less developed tribes when compared with the Khmer people in Cambodia". Such misconceptions have had harmful consequences on the perception of Kui heritage to date, as can be seen in an article from 2019 on the website *Tourism Thailand*, run by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, which lists "10 Things to do in Surin" and uses the following description for a Kui homestay (own emphasis added):

> The ethnic Kuys at Ban A-lue is a community that has still inherited the *primitive* living of the Kuy tribe in terms of costumes, lifestyle, culture and traditions.

The melting pot of Surin and the proximity of the Kui, Lao, Thai, and Khmer to each other in this one region has inevitably resulted in culture and population overlap, further complicating the presentation of the Kui identity. This cultural melange has negatively impacted Kui culture more than any of the other groups. Volker Grabowsky (1982, p. 29 cited in Van der Haak, 1987, p. 109), a professor specialising in language and culture in Thailand, observed even 30 years ago that the Kui were "linguistically and culturally almost completely integrated [...] the relatively strong ethnic group of the Kui has simply been attributed to the Khmer in statistics". Earlier still, Seidenfaden (1952, p. 159) noted that the "living together of several ethnic elements has led very much to the denationalization of the Kui who [...] do not respect their own language or customs". This language change is probably influenced by factors other than pride, as the Khmer and Thai languages, for example, are preferable to learn if looking to expand career opportunities into Cambodia. The Kui language, in comparison, is spoken only among the Kui community, with knowledge of the language providing no benefit for employment. When I was talking to a Khmer woman from Surin who now lives in Bangkok, however, she told me that "maybe only 20% of the kids in my village can speak Khmer now". She elaborated that "their parents want them to learn Thai, so they won't be made fun of. They also don't think learning Khmer is helpful because everything is in Thai and you're only taught Thai at school". This was an interesting contrast to the Kui who did not learn their language for this exact reason—that it had

little use in their world today—but many instead opted to learn Khmer, as it meant they could work in neighbouring Cambodia.

Views of the Kui as uncultured or backward undoubtedly facilitated the shift towards embracing Khmer, Lao, and Thai cultural elements to achieve social advancement and escape this stigma. This malleability of the Kui identity is therefore not wholly a product of a lack of respect for their culture, as Seidenfaden (1952, p. 159) implies, but rather a survival strategy, where individual Kui sought to gain social and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1986) within the confines of the Thai state and its views on minority culture. Phra Khru Upthamworakul confirms this, stating that in the past, people would not want to identify as Kui because of their perception of this group as "poor and uneducated". This was, however, not entirely a matter of free will, as this movement away from the Kui identity was supported by government efforts to "convert people to be 'real Thai' and forget about their roots". Despite the integration and assimilation that the Kui have undergone, some groups have managed to maintain their Kui cultural identity in one form or another. Furthermore, as attitudes towards ethnic and cultural difference in Thailand are slowly changing—particularly to embrace the marketability and financial potential of this difference—the Kui today are actively beginning to promote their cultural distinctiveness, and many Kui whose families had abandoned their traditions in the past are now seeking to rediscover this part of their heritage. It is, therefore, probably not a coincidence that two of the three Kui people in leadership roles in the Kui Association of Thailand at the time I was doing my research came from families where this transmission of heritage was disrupted, ending with the generation before them.

This further speaks to the idea of ethnicity as a form of strategic identification. In the case of one leader seeking to rediscover his heritage, this person has also been campaigning for election in local politics, with emphasising his Kui identity— always dressing in Kui clothing, the host of a Kui-based online show, conducting his own research on the Kui people—and involvement in local tourism an essential aspect of his campaign. In one encounter I had with him, after having met him just that morning, we had lunch with a group of Kui people at a small restaurant on the side of the road. I was sitting opposite this man, and when our food came out, he pointed at the rice and told me the word for it in the Kui language. After a moment, he then told me, "Joongka. That's how we say hello". Another man sitting further down the table snickered as I was being given my impromptu lesson, and when I looked at him, he commented that the man teaching me had only just started to learn the language himself and was, in fact,

the only person at the table (other than myself) who could not speak Kui. A few years later, someone else made it a point to tell me that this man was "half Kui", and criticised his pronunciation. This anecdote highlights how emphasising ethnicity can be a strategic identification (although that is not to undermine the Kui identity), as well as the relationality and fluidity of ethnic identity, which can also vary depending on a perceived situational advantage. Looking at the Kui Association's leadership, those who experienced a loss of culture—one man whose father never passed on his elephant knowledge as he was forced to sell the family's 50 elephants because of financial hardship following a seven-year drought, and another who was now trying to reconnect with his newly discovered Kui heritage—were those most active in its recovery and reification. Meanwhile, those who had not experienced this disruption—who continued to play a leading role in Kui elephant culture and its traditions—were least concerned about these projects to affirm Kui identity.

Kui (In)Visibility

History has been constructed in such a way that it has deprived the Kui even of their most intangible possession: their historical identity.
– Komatra (2001, p. 44)

While the Kui are known by many names other than their own, it is also the case that they are often not known at all. As one interviewee, Dr Sanong, responded, "[m]ost people don't know the Kui exist". Thai history was traditionally written by members of Buddhist temples or by the palace (Charnvit, 2020). It was not until interactions with the Western world and its own historiographic tradition following the colonial period that Thai history was recorded differently and by different people. The assumption that Thai history begins with the Sukhothai era in the 13th century, marking the "First Thai Kingdom" (Piyabhani, 2016), overlooks the histories of those, such as the Kui, who were living in the region prior to this time. As discussed earlier, the appearances we do have of the Kui in Thai historiography focus on their relationship to the state—whether it be through aid (in capturing a white elephant or in providing soldiers to defeat a foreign King) or in subjugation (through their identity as "taxpayers"). The failure to acknowledge the deeper history of these Indigenous communities in the national historical narrative has had a crucial impact on the recognition and empowerment of Indigenous groups living within Thailand today. The lack of a Kui written

language and the fact that Thai history is constructed from a top-down perspective have further excluded the Kui from the national narrative.

In contrast, elephants have been highly visible throughout Thai history because of their association with royalty and their use in warfare before the introduction of firearms. As the Kui historically captured and trained these elephants, it is through tracing the animals' histories and stories that they can locate themselves. Several Kui recounted their migration histories to me. Since no text explicitly mentions these movements in Kui history, when asked, "How do you know that?", in addition to charting movement through Kui-derived place names, I was told by Dr Sanong that "where there were elephants, there were Kui".

Although Phra Khru Upthamworakul told me that their knowledge of Kui history is partly informed by "stories from the elderly", the practice of storytelling has largely disappeared from Kui society. Ong (2002, p. 138) writes that "[m]ost, if not all oral cultures generate quite substantial narratives". Nonetheless, while it is likely that the Kui did have a corpus of such orally transmitted narratives at one point, the transmission of storytelling today is "almost non-existent" (Isaraporn, 2000, p. 55). Although certain community members may possess this knowledge—for example, the abbots I interviewed at the temple still retained knowledge of Kui history as passed on from an older generation—storytelling no longer takes place within families. The reason for this is unclear, particularly as there are very few still alive today who were part of this tradition, leaving large gaps in this knowledge and many stories unrecorded.

Isaraporn (2000) researched the remaining corpus of Kui oral literature called manaipalae and points to two factors that have contributed to the demise of this oral culture: assimilationist policies—particularly those promoting the use of the Central Thai language— and modernisation, resulting in rapid social and cultural change. Isaraporn (2000) observes that the preference for and legislation of the use of the Thai language could have resulted in Kui people feeling that their own language—and by association, the stories told in their own language—were too different from the Royal culture, which was seen as ideal or "good" culture. Parents may have ceased to share their stories with their children so they could better fit in with the rest of society (Isaraporn, 2000). Modernisation, in the form of new media innovations, would have also impacted the transmission of storytelling, as the newer generations of Kui turned to new technological inventions, no longer inclined to "sit in a circle listening to adults telling stories in the moonlight [...] we will not see young men singing, and local people dancing at merit-making ceremonies, there will only be the sound

of radio and television" (Isaraporn, 2000, p. 107). While the stories told around the campfire came from within Kui culture, the radio and television programmes contain stories external to the community and project images of the dominant Thai culture, where the Kui are absent. Another factor to consider is whether storytelling ceased because it no longer had a place and purpose in the modern world. During my time with the Kui Ajiang in Surin, it became apparent to me that stories relating to that elephant knowledge also ceased in families where the elephant traditions had stopped for whatever reason. As families opted instead to transition away from this aspect of Kui Ajiang culture, knowledge of these traditions was no longer relevant.

Vail (2007) notes that a community's invisibility or ability to blend in with Thai society is most typically associated with agricultural style—often in the form of wet rice farming and observance of Buddhism. For the Kui, who have taken up rice farming and practise religious syncretism—primarily identifying as Buddhist whilst still maintaining animist beliefs—their relative cultural inconspicuousness, in that their traditions do not conflict with the generalised notion of Thainess, has contributed to their invisibility, or integration. As Keyes (1997, p. 228) writes, "[b]ecause the Kui [...] speak Thai and are Buddhist, they have no difficulty being taken as Thai". The problem arises when this passing as Thai is not an active choice, making Kui culture invisible within Thai society.

An example I came across online highlights the wider Thai population's lack of knowledge of the Kui. In a blog post on *Chao Kui Samrong Thap* on the Kui and their history, the comments section asked the single question, "Do Kui people really exist?"

Identity Conflicts within Surin Today

The issue of Kui (in)visibility is complex and not uniformly applicable. Although largely invisible at the national level, this is not necessarily the case at the local level in Surin, as will become more apparent. Nonetheless, the strong historical overlap and erasure of distinctiveness between the Kui and Khmer, concentrated in Surin, created tension between these two groups. As a result, they continue to engage in a game of identity politics, each fighting for recognition by the state at the cost of the other. One key point of contention within this discourse of recognition arises with the origin story of Surin and its first mayor, Chiang Pum.

While the Kui have been largely absent from national historiography, they do have quite a prominent role in local history through the story of Surin's

founding. This was told in the *Chronicle of the Provinces of the Northeastern Circle,* compiled in 1904 by a Siamese official posted in the region, Mom Amorawong Wichit. He wrote that in 1759 (Chula Sakarat year 1121), a royal white elephant escaped from the capital in Ayutthaya. The king ordered two brothers, accompanied by soldiers and members of the royal department of elephants (krom chang) to recapture it. These brothers eventually ended up in northeast Thailand, along the Mun River, where they met five "Khmer, Suay Pa Dong"[6] villagers (Mom Amorawong Wichit, 1973, p. 10), who helped the brothers capture and return the elephant to the king. In exchange, the five villagers were each bestowed with the royal title, Luang*,* giving them the power to "control the Khmer Suay Pa Dong in the sub-districts of their homes" (Mom Amorawong Wichit, 1973, p. 11). As a result of the continued devotion to these leaders—through the provision of tributes such as elephants, horses, pine, turpentine, bird wings, rhino horn, elephant ivory, and beeswax—their titles were eventually raised to Phra (or "Lord") (Mom Amorawong Wichit, 1973, p. 11). One of the leaders, Chiang Pum, was bestowed the honorific title and name Phraya Surin Phakdi, and his village, which was moved to a larger area and elevated to a principality, was renamed Surin in his honour (Veeras, 2015).

This same story is told in the local history gallery of the Surin National Museum and is re-enacted as part of the annual Surin Elephant Round-Up performances. Étienne Aymonier (1901), a French linguist exploring the region in the late-18th/early-19th century, recounts a similar tale. He (Aymonier, 1901, p. 193) describes a "local legend" about a king who, while chasing after a white elephant, gets lost and shelters with a Kui woodcutter "whose simplicity of mind pleased [the King] so much that he made him his [...] adopted brother". The king tells the woodcutter to visit him in the palace one day. When the woodcutter eventually does, the king gives him the title of "Lord of Sanghapura" (meaning Lord of Sangkha, a district in the south of Surin). This story aligns with an observation from another French explorer in 1873 (Garnier et al., 1873, p. 98), who noted that "[t]he Siamese [...] no longer consider [the Kui] as savages, and I found a Kui installed as a governor in Sangkha". Nonetheless, if Thai history has consistently left the Kui and other ethnic minority communities out of national history, why are they mentioned here, particularly in such a prominent role as the founder of a province?

For Komatra (2001), the story of Chiang Pum works to place Surin inside the framework of the Thai historical narrative. It positions the Kui leaders

6 A combination of the terms "Suay" and Khmer Pa Dong.

and the people of Surin within the national hierarchy under the control of the Siamese court. Following the conventions of Thailand's rewritten national history, this account also marks Surin's origins at this point of interaction with the Siamese rulers. Although ostensibly about the rise of Phraya Surin, the focus of this narrative remains on the Siamese court. The Kui are only included when their history aligns with national history. Phraya Surin's success is a consequence of royal intervention, thus talking "around the history of local natives without talking about the historical experience of the dominated" (Komatra, 2001, p. 43). Surin is, therefore, portrayed as having become the province it is today, not because of the Indigenous groups who settled there but because of the benevolence of the Thai monarchy. Lowman (2011) similarly points to other occasions in Thai history telling wherein a hunt has been used to perpetuate a political myth of civilisation. Elephant hunt stories particularly, with the elephant's powerful relationship with the Thai nation and the royal family, have often been used to describe when a place was "first civilised or integrated into the royal domain" (Lowman, 2011, p. 90). Thus, the royal elephant hunt is symbolic of the shift from wild to civilised and the control of "native" groups by the Siamese state. The context in which the first official record of this narrative was told is also important to consider. Mom Amorawong Wichit's chronicle was written just two years after the 1901–02 Holy Man's Rebellion (กบฏผู้มีบุญ) that partly took place in the northeast of Thailand.[7] Thai soldiers eventually ended the rebellions in 1902 (Murdoch, 1971, p. 54). As Denes (2009) suggests, one must, therefore, ask if it is any coincidence that just two years after this destabilising, anti-regime event, led primarily by non-Siamese, an official history of the region was written that presents a picture of loyalty and duty to the nation and crown from the ethnic minority leaders of the various provinces in the area.

Within Surin, the attribution of Phraya Surin (and his fellow leaders) as Kui is a particular point of contention. While the strong cultural connection

7 The Holy Man's Rebellion spread across Northeast Thailand, Southern Laos, and Cambodia. Those involved in the uprising included members of the Kui communities (known also as Kha, Lawa, Suai, or Koy) spread across these countries (Cuasay, 1998). Within Siam, the rebellion occurred during a time of French colonial threat to the nation's borders, resulting in an attempt to consolidate power around Bangkok (Cuasay, 1998). Local resistance was, therefore, against colonialism in two parts: the first against this Siamese centralisation, and the second fuelled by the presence of the French looming at the northeastern border. On the other side, the rebellion in Indochina was responding to the more direct imposition from the French, whose colonial intervention sought to remove the local elites, and threatened traditional customs (Cuasay, 1998). This Holy Man's Rebellion is an example of how the Kui were involved in overt resistance to colonialism, even though it was, ultimately, unsuccessful.

of the Kui as elephant catchers fits neatly within this historical narrative of helping to find and recapture the white elephant, other minority groups in the region have also had a historic relationship with elephants and should, therefore, not be ruled out on this basis alone. The term used by Mom Amorawong Wichit in his description of the villagers, "Khmer Suay Pa Dong" (sometimes with a comma separating "Khmer" and "Suay" in the English-language translation, but not always) is certainly ambiguous. The historic conflation of the Kui with other ethnic groups in the region does not help clarify this. The intermarriage and inter-assimilation between the various ethnic groups settled in this region do raise the possibility that, if this story is indeed true, Phraya Surin could certainly be Khmer as much as he is Kui.

Denes (2012), a cultural anthropologist researching Khmer identity in Thailand's Northeast, details the sentiments of some of her Khmer informants on this issue. They state that the Kui could not possibly have been the leaders of the Khmer because they are "illiterate and uncultured" (Denes, 2012, p. 177). This notion was echoed in my interview with a Khmer historian from Surin, Chaimongkol. It was during my conversation with him that I was first made aware of the tension between the two groups. He stated that "many Khmer doubt that the Kui founded Surin", and calls the story a "myth" used to "delete the Khmer flavour in the region". Chaimongkol pointed to the Kui's lack of a written language as a primary reason why they could not have been in charge, arguing that "the Kui don't have a script, so how can they create a city like this? You need more education to do this". He also described a legend about a Khmer man engraving a story on stone, while a Kui man wrote the same story on the skin of a cow. On the way home, the Kui man made fun of the Khmer man for writing on such a heavy object as it was much more difficult to carry, but at night a tiger came into the Kui man's camp while he was sleeping and ate the cow skin, leaving the Kui with no written language. Rote (1972, p. 4) records the Kui version of this same story, describing how a group of Lao, Cambodian, and Kui chiefs went in search of written symbols for their languages, each of them sending a representative deep into the forest to speak with a "learned man" who created the letters for them. The Cambodian and Lao messengers were given their script on palm leaves, while the Kui messenger had their language written on cowhide (Rote, 1972, p. 4). He continues:

> On the way home the Kui messenger stopped to rest under a shady tree, leaving his piece of cowhide to dry in the sun. But while he slept, a dog came out of the bushes and ate the leather. When he arrived home and

> was asked by his chief to name the Kui letters, he could only say 'jor jar jim,' which means: 'the dog has eaten it all.'

The version told to me by Chaimongkol from his Khmer perspective establishes the Kui folly of the Kui man, who chose to write on the fragile skin rather than stone. Not only that, the Kui man mocks the Khmer man for his decision, rooting the sense of competition between the two communities deep into the past through this retelling. Nonetheless, where this story—even told from the Kui perspective— has the potential to cast the Kui in a negative light by making an error in judgement or a mistake that produced the loss of the Kui language, it does not seem to be interpreted that way by the Kui community. Cuasay (1995a, p. 24) notes the tongue-in-cheek tone of this Kui retelling, stating that it "mocks the superiority of alphabetic writing by talking nonsense to those spirits relying on written words". The Kui had their language written on the more durable cowhide, instead of fragile palm leaf, and yet a dog ultimately ate their written language while the leaf-inscribed texts survived.

For the Kui, the dog eating their language is presented as a story of defiance and empowerment and is an important part of their history. For example, at one of the Kui events I attended at the Wat Pa Ajiang temple, I saw a T-shirt for sale with a picture of a dog holding the Kui script in his mouth, with the phrase "jor jar jim" emblazoned above it (in Thai) (see Fig. 6.4). These shirts were so popular amongst the Kui in Surin that they have now sold out. I saw another example of this on a Thai social media and news platform in a post by a user, Suphot Somtang (2020). Suphot (ibid.) describes himself as "a descendant of the Kui people by birth", born and raised in Surin. In this post, he talks about his time attending elementary school in a class that was a mix of Lao, Khmer, and Kui cultures. This grouping had a hierarchy with Kui children at the bottom. Suphot (2020) recalls the Lao and Khmer children would mock the Kui students with the taunt: "We have a house (country) with a spoken language and a written language, do you have a country with a written language? Where is your country?" His response to this was always "jor jar jim" (Suphot 2020). In this way, this phrase becomes a means of deflecting the stigma associated with the lack of a written language, and more general insults levelled at the Kui and their history. This is, however, more than a story about a dog eating a language—the dog ate *it all*. I spoke to one woman about the T-shirt I saw for sale at the temple. For her, the message is about more than the loss of the Kui language—it is an analogy for their marginalisation, about how they have let their culture be taken from them, for example, by the Thai state.

Figure 6.4: T-shirt being sold at Wat Pa Ajiang temple, with the phrase "jor jar jim" in Thai (photograph by Wilaworn Salangam).

Similarly, for Suphot (2020), the phrase is not just a response to childhood bullies. Instead, it recalls the historical violence perpetuated against the Kui through systems that prevented them from studying and transmitting a written language. As Suphot (2020) notes, to cut a community off from its language is an act of violence and hatred.

A clear sense of competition exists between the Kui and the Khmer, which the story of the dog and the Kui language helps to situate in deep time. For example, Chaimongkol claimed, "I don't know the future, but I think that Kui in Thailand will not survive the change because they don't have deep roots, they have shallow roots, Khmer have deeper roots". Interestingly, though, Chaimongkol feels that it is the *Kui* who look down on the Khmer, and he further believes that government support of the narrative of Chiang Pum/Phraya Surin as Kui has helped to legitimise this sentiment. While the Kui Association of Thailand, for example, have a primary agenda of increasing Kui visibility and awareness of Kui culture, to Chaimongkol, this comes across as the Kui "boasting" about their culture and feeling a sense of superiority over the Khmer. It seems that at least in Surin, it is impossible to promote one minority culture without another culture feeling as though they are being pushed further down the hierarchy as a result.

Most recently, this discourse played out through the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the martial arts style of Muay Thai (or, as it is known in Cambodia, Kun Khmer) when, ahead of the 2023 Southeast Asian Games held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia announced it would drop Muay Thai

in favour of the Cambodian version, Kun Khmer. A related narrative that emerged as part of this came through rumours questioning the ethnicity of the boxer, Sombat "Buakaw" Banchamek, suggesting that he was Khmer, rather than Thai. On 24 January 2023, Buakaw issued a statement via his Facebook page (Banchamek Gym (Buakaw Banchamek, บัวขาว บัญชาเมฆ)) in response to these rumours, confirming that he is a "Thai person of Kui descent, not Khmer". In his post, he also details the history of the Kui, including their historical suppression and attempts to integrate the two communities. While these accusations concerning Buakaw's nationality have been positioned as Cambodia attempting to claim one of Thailand's most famous Muay Thai stars as part of this broader claim to the origins of Muay Thai (e.g., Coconuts Bangkok, 2023; Post Reporters, 2023; and Sherwell, 2023), for the Kui this is another example of Khmer/Kui identity conflict. As Dr Sanong—who shared this story with me—noted, the Khmer are "trying to claim world famous Kui". This is also the result of the ambiguity that arises as the term "Khmer" denotes both an ethnicity (Khmer) and a nationality (Cambodian).

I was speaking about the ethnic competition in Surin with a friend of mine, a Khmer woman who grew up there. She told me that making fun of other cultures is something she remembered doing a lot as a child. The Khmer, known for their silk-weaving culture in the region, would wear the silk clothing they made, whereas the Lao would wear cotton because silk is expensive if you don't make it yourself. The Khmer would make fun of those who did not wear silk. "We even made fun of them for eating a certain type of food, even though we also ate it!" This is part of the game of hot potato that occurs to establish a cultural hierarchy—to avoid being at the bottom, you need to mock another culture to place them beneath you. In this game, the Kui ended up last, thus being stuck with the name "Suay", but the hierarchy still impacts the other ethnic groups.

This struggle for authority over local historical narratives and culture within Surin is important as this acknowledgement can equate to increased government funding and attention. The Kui achieved visibility through the account of the history and founding of Surin at the cost of erasing the potential involvement of the Khmer. While still not fully visible, the Kui do benefit from their association with elephants, given the recognition of their relationship with the animal. Chaimongkol argues that "the Khmer also have texts about elephants"; they also have historical ties to elephants, but it is the Kui's elephant culture that has become the image for tourism in the region. The Kui and the Khmer are continuously pitted against one another as the AHD—in this case, at the provincial level—selectively

dictates each group's inclusion/exclusion from heritage that they share. In doing so, the power struggle is effectively repositioned away from the state as the antagoniser.

The Kui Paradox: The Visible Elephant and the Invisible Elephant People

The capital of Surin province is haunted, not by monsters, but by elephants. More specifically, it is haunted by the spectres of elephants that are everywhere and yet nowhere. Surin is haunted by the ghosts of elephants of the past, which once were ubiquitous but which no longer exist in the capital apart from once a year in early November when they make their pilgrimage in from the Kui villages at the borders of the province (as well as from other neighbouring provinces) for the Surin Elephant Round-Up. But rather than being forgotten entirely, these elephants—and their former presence—have now come to be replaced by material manifestations, golden embellishments on the tops of street signs or lamp posts, posters scattered around the town, and large statues in the city centre.

Elephants are more broadly a highly visible animal in Thai society. They have also played a central role in Thai/Siamese history, involved in protecting the state's sovereignty as the vehicles and weapons of Siamese kings during times of war. The first written evidence of this relationship between elephants and royalty can be traced to a stone inscription composed by King Ramkamhaeng in 1292, referencing an elephant duel (Warren and Amranand, 1998). Given this deep history, the elephant has become symbolic not only of the royal family but also of the very nation itself—with the white elephant a central motif in the Siamese flag from 1817 to 1917—and in 1963, was proclaimed the national animal. Much of the prestige associated with the elephant in Thailand pertains to this white elephant—a particularly auspicious animal according to Brahmin belief (Usa et al., 2018). These elephants are identifiable by the pale/white colour of seven specific areas of the body including the eyes, tail, nails, hard palate of the mouth, hair, skin, and genitals.

One of the Kui monks I interviewed, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan, is an expert on white elephants and is called upon to identify potential white elephants for the king. According to him, kings have had their own white elephants "from the beginning"—since the time of Buddha. During times of war, the more white elephants a king had, the more powerful he appeared. King Rama II, for example, earned the title "Lord of the White Elephant" for owning three such animals and was responsible for placing the white elephant on

the country's flag. Although not equated with military might today, the white elephants found during a monarch's reign still signify prestige and power. Phra Khru Dr Samuhan also notes that the Kui historically were the royal mahouts, responsible not only for looking after these white elephants but also for selecting the elephants for the king's army.

Today, the elephant has taken on a new role, that of a flagship conservation species. This has added a layer of complexity to the elephant's role in society and in relation to the Kui. In 2002, a video was released by the animal welfare group PETA of a young elephant undergoing the domestication process known as ผ่าจ้าน (phachan) (Cohen, 2015). This process is described as being particularly violent. It involves the young elephant being separated from its mother and beaten to break the mother-child bond and re-form the connection with the young elephant's mahout (Cohen, 2015). In interviews with Karen elephant keepers who perform this practice, however, Jinakul et al. (2002, p. 1, cited in Cohen 2015, p. 171) recorded that paah jaan is seen as a "sacred ceremony involving black magic and astrology", with "no intentional cruelty involved". This video resulted in international pressure on the Thai state to condemn this practice. The state, in response, placed the blame entirely on the elephant-owning ethnic minority groups in the country (the Kui included), issuing the statement, "Thai mahouts wouldn't do such a thing" (Changyawa, 2002, p. 4). This shifting of blame ignored the fact that these "ethnic minority mahouts" shown in the video were operating in the employ of the Thai government (Changyawa, 2002, p. 4). The perceived mistreatment of elephants is, therefore, only thought of as such when this behaviour is called out by the West. It is otherwise permitted internally and does not conflict with Thailand's normative value structures. Moreover, these actions are demonised when perpetrated by non-Thais, perhaps because it is thought that these groups (unlike the Thais) should not have the power to control and dominate an elephant (a powerful symbol of the Thai nation) in such a way. This raises the question, though: if the elephant is such a ubiquitous symbol in Thai culture and society, why are the elephant people, the original royal elephant keepers, themselves so invisible? Why are the Kui not mentioned in the long history of writing about elephants?

Just as Surin is haunted by these elephants, it is also haunted by the Kui—a similarly present absence. This invisibility prompted Cuasay (1995a, p. 9) to describe the Kui as a "ghost ethnicity"—a concept he attributes initially to a lecture by Stevan Harrell in 1993. The term 'ghost ethnicity,' according to Cuasay (1995a, p. 9), describes how "the markers of identity vanish in a complex flux of ambiguous, multiple histories". This definition certainly captures the Kui and their history well, as the combination of

past Thai assimilationist policies, alongside a historic close contact and intermixture of the local minority groups, has resulted in both the denial and dilution of Kui culture and identity. Nonetheless, these factors have failed to wipe out the Kui and their traditions entirely. Instead, although their heritage is preserved within select Kui communities and temples in the region, only a spectre of the Kui identity, sitting at the edges of visibility, remains in mainstream Thai society. This conceptualisation of the "ghost" also ties in with Derrida's (2006, p. 12) "hauntology", which describes the liminal space that many scholars overlook—a realm of ghosts "between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being". This "visible-invisible"—felt but not quite seen—that characterises Derrida's (2006, p. 125) ghosts and revenants provides a fitting analogy for the (in)visibility of the Kui in Thailand.

There is a belief in Thai culture that ivory can only be possessed by those with more power than the elephant from which the ivory came. As the elephant is considered an "animal which exists together with merit and power", only those with high merit and power can own an elephant (Komatra, 1998, p. 280). The fact that the Kui were/are the nation's predominant elephant keepers and hunters, therefore, directly contradicts the Thai state's perception and narrative of minorities as backward, weak, and less than. Consider the symbolism behind the image of a Kui person responsible for capturing and caring for any elephant, let alone a white elephant—not only the national animal but a royal icon. Imagine a highly cultured animal imbued with power and importance being tamed by a group depicted as barbaric and primitive. This is entirely inconsistent with the whole historical and ethnic narrative that has foregrounded Thai statecraft. To avoid the need for such a confusing cognitive restructuring to accommodate this symbolism, the role of the Kui historically was simply ignored. Elephants were and continue to be the property of kings, not minorities.

This visible/invisible relationship between the Kui and their elephants is typified in the presentation of Surin, which paints itself as the elephant capital of Thailand. Despite hints of the Kui being present in the material objects visible throughout the town, for example, with the statue of the first mayor of Surin—a Kui man, in the Kui faces used on the Round-Up posters, and via the statues depicting the Kui on one of their sacred elephant hunts, there is no explicit mention of the Kui anywhere. It would be entirely possible to view all these ghostly appearances and hints of a hidden culture without any recognition or knowledge of the Kui—at least for someone unfamiliar with Surin. Even the Kui depicted in the statues of the capture of the white elephant—displayed on a grassy knoll to the side of the main roundabout in

Figure 6.5: Statue depicting the capture of the white elephant by the Kui chiefs (photograph by author).

the Surin provincial capital—are painted with pale pinkish skin, one man even painted entirely in white (Fig. 6.5). This is a stark contrast to the Kui themselves, who, according to Dr Sanong, identify as having darker skin than the ethnic Tai. The description of the Kui in the local museum also highlights their "dark skin" (in unspoken contrast with the stereotype of lighter skin tones associated with the Central Thais). Therefore, the Kui are hidden by these statues that tell the historical tale of the founding of Surin, without any of the actual background of the main characters. In doing so, this history and heritage have been made more relatable by removing the attribution to a specific group and physical appearance. The positioning of the hunters depicted in this scene is also incorrect, further suggesting that the Kui were not consulted when this was made. "They show them holding the rope wrong, and we would have had two people per elephant. It's not complete", says Phra Khru Dr Samuhan (see Fig. 6.5 of the statues in question, compared with Fig. 6.6 of a similar statue at the abbot's temple, Wat Pa Ajiang, showing the proper capture form). As the abbot succinctly describes it, the statues are "pretty, but incorrect".

The plaque in front of the sculpture (Fig 6.7) has further aged to the point of illegibility. One can barely make out the title—"อนุสารช้าง สร้างเมืองสุรินทร์" ("In memory of elephants…who built Surin")—which keeps the focus on the creation of the town on the animals. The sign, therefore, places the elephants, not the people, as the central characters in the town's founding history. Even if the sign had, at one point, credited the Kui, the text is no longer legible,

Figure 6.6: Photograph (by author) of a more accurate statue of the mor chang at Wat Pa Ajiang in Surin depicting two men per elephant.

Figure 6.7: Worn plaque next to the sculptures of the elephant capture scene, reading "In memory of elephants… who built Surin" (photograph by author).

which contributes to the pattern of silencing Kui voices and stories in official narratives. Across the road from this statue scene, at a roundabout in the centre of the town, we see Phraya Surin Phakdi, his statue flanked by giant elephant tusks on either side. Nevertheless, there is nothing there to mark him as Kui. In Surin, we see all of the elephants but none of the elephant people. This is, perhaps, an unavoidable outcome of the broader silencing of Kui history in Thai society through the national AHD but is also a consequence of the province's contested founding heritage and the AHD that exists at this local level. Universalising this story benefitted the province because it created a history that any of the groups within Surin could relate to and claim as their own. This unification, however, came at the cost of the erasure of the Kui.

As the elephant became an increasingly rare sight in Surin, the physical animal has been gradually replaced by symbolic representations. As Ribó (2018, p. 47) notes, "It is with this symbolic elephant [...] that most Thais today have an emotional and meaningful relationship". Meanwhile, the real elephants "ineluctably vanish from their few remaining refuges in the hills and forests of the country" (Ribó, 2018, p. 47). The monuments to elephants in Surin province portray a very specific image of the animal—one that the Thai imaginary has culturally constructed. The elephant is a cultural animal imbued with more-than-animal values and symbolism. In her research in the context of extinction, Jørgensen (2017, p. 197) questions whether such human-made monuments to animals suggest "a weakening of human exceptionalism and move toward a post-human perspective". The way the elephant monuments in Surin are presented, however, suggests the very opposite; the elephants we see depicted in Surin are never the "wild" elephants in their "natural state." Instead, we are shown the elephants as they are viewed and valued—in relationship to people. It is this relationship that gives the elephants value and makes them important enough to be memorialised in this way in the first place. Moreover, these "monuments fix the human-animal relationship in space and time, which may lock the remembering into particular forms that prove relevant for future viewers" (Jørgensen, 2017, p. 185). Surin's representations of elephants, therefore, establish the elephant as an animal (or more-than-animal) that has always been socialised in this way and which has always existed in this cultural context—in the human realm. Crucially, though, it is not simply their relationship with *people* that gives them value, but *Thai* people. This is why the Kui represented alongside these animals have been generalised into a more ambiguous and universally relatable form.

This complex interplay of value structures and hegemonic narratives present in the relationship between ethnic minority communities like the Kui

and their elephants—the visible versus invisible, majority versus minority, and normative compliance versus resistance—highlights a flaw in dominant academic characterisations of the AHD as a black and white delimitation of the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Such a framing ignores the reality of communities like the Kui, who exist both within and outside of the AHD at the same time. They are simultaneously representative of the majority *and* minority; they are visible *and* invisible, compliant, *and* resistant.

Layers of Heritage in Surin

> *Surin Province has become more known and interesting almost exclusively due to the elephant. You could say that elephants are the symbol of Surin. Therefore, Surin Province owes a huge depth of gratitude to the Thai-Kui people and the elephants.*
>
> – Chuen (1990, p. 156)

In their exploration of the politics of Khmer language revitalisation in the northeast of Thailand, Vail and Pantakod (2013, p. 154) note that the Khmer balance pride in their language and heritage with their identities as Thai citizens and perceived loyalty to a state that promotes a monolithic culture. A need to adhere to the values of Thai nationalism makes pride in cultural difference a difficult thing to do, particularly when the state has historically viewed difference as a contradiction to Thainess. While the Kui are not faced with the additional political pressures of having their culture originate from another extant and potentially competing nation-state (like the Khmer with Cambodia), they are still faced with this lingering tension between their cultural and national identities.

The unofficial provincial slogan, a line that is repeated throughout provincial cultural ceremonies and events and written in promotional materials—including those in the two weeks surrounding the Surin Elephant Round-Up—is that Surin is: "the land of the Kui, Khmer and Lao living together in harmony"[8] ('ถิ่น ชาวกวย ชาวเขมร และ ชาวลาว ที่อยู่ร่วมกันอย่างผสมกลมกลืน'). The official slogan, meanwhile, which references the key cultural products of the province, is สุรินทร์ถิ่นช้างใหญ่ ผ้าไหมงาม ประคำสวย ร่ำรวยปราสาท ผักกาดหวาน ข้าวสารหอม งามพร้อมวัฒนธรรม ("Surin, land of big elephants, fine silk, beautiful rosary, Khmer ruins, sweet radishes, fragrant rice, splendid culture").[9] It is

8 The order in which these groups are listed and the exact wording would sometimes change.

9 There are many variations on this slogan in English. I've opted for the translation used in เส้นทางอารยธรรม มรดกล้ำค่าสุรินทร์ [Tracking down the glorious paths of Surin civilization] published by the Surin provincial government in 2013.

undoubtedly true that without the Kui, Khmer, and Lao cultures, Surin as we know it would not exist. As Chuen (1990, p. 17) notes, "Although Mother Surin has her own cultural identity, it is only a subculture, comprised of collective cultures, or national culture". While the push for the equitable balance between these groups in the province could be seen as an attempt to redress deep-rooted cultural hierarchies between the Kui, Khmer, and Lao, it has potentially also contributed to misrecognition by imposing equal recognition regardless of the reality.

In his *Report on Racial Equality in the Arts at the Canada Council*, Creighton-Kelly (1991, p. 5) wrote that "[b]ecause multiculturalism uses the rhetoric of inclusion it cannot properly address the politics of exclusion". In other words, saying that everyone is equal neglects to recognise the reality of discrimination that many different people face. Attempts by the provincial authorities to balance the multiple communities and traditions represented within Surin—demonstrated by the inclusion of Kui, Khmer, and Lao representation in the Surin Round-Up and its surrounding activities, as well as the three local museums dedicated to each group in the province—has, at times, resulted in the inauthentic attributions of cultural influence to avoid being accused of representing one culture over another. Perhaps the best illustration of this will be presented in a later discussion on a new tradition—the Surin Elephant Round-Up. This forced cultural inclusion has, however, been done to the detriment of the Kui, who sit at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy and whose endangered traditions perhaps need greater—not equal or divided—attention. As already touched upon in the previous pages, this strategy also pits minority groups against one another as they vie for limited attention, resources, and recognition. As one of my interlocutors, a Khmer man leading a Khmer cultural association told me, the local cultural council "have money but they only give it to one group of people" (Cheymongkol, interview, 2019). This has ultimately resulted in animosity between groups and competing, exclusionary claims to heritage.

The winners and losers of this fight for recognition are not always the same. For example, even though the Kui have had their culture appropriated—a loss—the Surin government has equally pushed Kui elephant heritage and Kui elephant villages for tourism—a financial win for the community in many ways. The Khmer, however, assert that they, too, had elephant heritage, but this is not being acknowledged. Ultimately, the complex relationality of heritage and power, whether Kui, Khmer, or Lao, is eventually repackaged as Surin heritage, and, therefore, made Thai. The Khmer perception of the Kui as the perpetrator—taking credit for a shared elephant heritage—and themselves as victims, is an example of the success of the Thai state's policy

to divide and conquer—creating ethnic divisions and fostering resentment. This has resulted in a focus on local competition over heritage narratives.

At the same time that Surin is pushing the image of the province as the "land of the Khmer, Lao, and Kui", at the national level and in practical terms, these Indigenous and ethnic minority cultures are not afforded any formal protections. This highlights a critical difference between the national and provincial AHDs. To explain this phenomenon, Chuen (1990, p. 156) writes that "national politics benefits from homogenisation, but local politicians benefit from exploiting the regional cultural diversity". Although there has been a growing push for the recognition of cultural diversity and Indigenous rights within Thailand, these movements have, for the most part, been grassroots. At the state level, as has previously been mentioned, the language used in legislation acknowledges the cultural rights of the "local community" (2007 Constitution), rather than specific ethnic groups. The embracing of cultural diversity at the provincial level is allowed under specific limitations. It is also still very much in line with the national view on Thai culture—one that embraces cultural difference so long as it benefits tourism and image and up to the point that it is perceived as a threat to national security, territorial integrity, or the state-determined view of morality. In this way, Surin's use of minority cultures selects only the most marketable aspects to promote. The prominent use of Khmer and Kui culture in forming Surin's provincial identity certainly offers a large degree of visibility to these cultural elements. The use of this heritage in the creation of the provincial culture in this way, however, does not serve to *elevate* these groups but rather to "subsume" them under the national discourse (Denes, 2009, p. 6). In having these separate scales of managing diverse cultures and heritage, the state can balance the tensions between upholding assimilation policies and suppression of difference on the one hand whilst continuing to promote different cultures and traditions for tourism on the other.

The allocation of responsibility for the management of diverse cultural heritage to the provinces (while the national level maintains responsibility for that heritage which is seen as more universally Thai) has resulted in the "underdevelopment of concepts of cultural rights" among the non-hill-tribe minority groups that have fallen between the margins of Thai categories of identification (Sirijit, 2013, p. 180); the Kui are an example of such a group. The cultures of these communities within this localism discourse are often portrayed as "rural or agrarian" at the national level, with cultural loss attributed to "modernisation", and therefore seen as a positive, rather than a negative consequence of assimilation with the Thai dominant culture (Sirijit, 2013, p. 180). This cultural loss is accordingly not

thought to require remedying. As has been demonstrated, the Thai valorisation and management of culture have mainly been aimed at promoting economic development and regional image rather than fostering a genuine awareness of the cultural rights of the diverse communities living within the country's borders. Any meaningful resources for protecting vulnerable heritage are, therefore, largely inaccessible at the level of the provincial government. Popular heritage is also put at risk of being overdeveloped and "heritagised"—turned into a caricature of itself in the name of tourism.

(In)Visibility and the Politics of (Mis)Recognition

Visibility, and more specifically, recognition, plays an essential role in creating a community's sense of self within a given national society (Taylor, 1994). Recognition also equates to a greater allocation of resources, rights, and well-being (e.g., Fraser, 2000; Honneth, 2008). The politics of recognition, a concept emerging from political philosophy, is predicated on the understanding that relationships with others inform identities, which impacts how a given community is perceived (McQueen, 2015). It is often framed through a minority group's struggle to have their specific identity recognised and accepted by the state (Thompson, 2006). This struggle is embedded in the conflict between the Kui and Khmer over rights to historical narratives and culture in Surin, as both seek individual recognition and resources. The sense of competition and the view that resources can only be gained by one group at the expense of the other relates to issues of multivocality within heritage, as both groups fight for a sole and authoritative claim over select aspects of their overlapping histories and heritages. Given the historical assimilation of the Kui and Khmer, disentangling these narratives to ascribe a single owner is nearly impossible.

Heritage plays a central role in the recognition and misrecognition of communities. For the Kui and Khmer, acknowledging their claims to the founding of Surin and to elephant culture is essential to achieving recognition, as these cultural elements will legitimise their heritage and the expression of their identities. The ethnic origin of Phraya Surin grounds the community—Khmer or Kui—temporally and establishes their roots within the region. Elephant heritage, meanwhile, provides financial value to the community, as the state has capitalised on elephant culture. Recognition is also a key feature of the AHD, which determines what cultures are—and are not—recognised as heritage by the state (see Smith, 2020). Fraser (2013, p. 29, own emphasis added) uses the term "misrecognition" to describe those

who are seen as "inferior, excluded, wholly other, *or simply invisible* [...] as less than full partners in social interaction". This idea of misrecognition and the invisibility it entails is, therefore, an essential consideration in the case of the Kui beyond this localised conflict with the Khmer. For the Kui, while their misrecognition is historically grounded, it continues to occur. This can be seen, for example, in the form of their absence from national, formal, and more local histories, in being misnamed, through the lack of acknowledgement of their Indigeneity, and the consequent loss of their heritage through dual processes of cultural appropriation and assimilation. The solution to addressing these harms is to achieve recognition.

Recognition can be achieved by widening the state's boundaries of inclusion to incorporate previously excluded communities, resulting in a person/community being made a full member of society and, therefore, afforded equal access to rights and resources, ultimately achieving social justice. For the Kui, however, as the Thai state continues to take a firm stance denying Indigenous existence—an integral aspect of Kui identity—recognition may not be achievable in full, at least in the shorter term, as they face this wider barrier of Indigenous acknowledgement. Thus, recognition of the Kui is a process that must occur by presenting smaller parts of Kui culture that better fit within the current confines of the state rather than waiting for the state to recognise Kui culture on its own. Accordingly, the Kui have selectively adapted their culture to put forward more acceptable elements through a deliberate and community-level misrepresentation of their identity, somewhat ironically achieving recognition through a misrecognition of sorts and, moreover, doing to themselves what the Thai state once did to them. The power here, however, exists in the Kui community, having agency in this process of misrecognition, even though this agency is dependent and still restricted by limitations imposed by the state.

Morton (2017) describes how this community-driven misrecognition is happening amongst Thailand's Indigenous peoples more broadly, noting how Indigenous peoples perform loyalty to the king (and thereby the nation) whilst also trying to present their distinctiveness. Indigeneity, in this way, must be expressed within the boundaries of nationalist expectations (Morton, 2017). This performance is directed at the nation—to show compatibility with the boundaries of Thainess. It is also, however, directed internally, amongst the wider Thai Indigenous community—to affirm a collective identity, a type of "strategic essentialism" that we also see at the global scale of the Indigenous rights movement (per Escárcega, 2010). Rather than describing it as misrecognition, as I have, this performance of identity is what Morton (2017, p. 687) terms the "cunning of the unrecognised". Through

this process of presenting and enacting a set identity, Morton (2017, p. 687) further argues that Thailand's Indigenous peoples are not only *performing* Indigeneity, but they are *becoming* Indigenous.

With the Kui Ajiang, misrecognition is evident in the seesawing between visibility and invisibility that occurs within Surin itself—with the tension between the promotion of the province as the land of the Khmer, Kui, and Lao and the emphasis on provincial elephant heritage on the one hand, and the erasure of the Kui cultural claims to these elements of heritage on the other. In this instance, we can see how diversity and homogenisation in Thailand are two sides of the same coin. Communities like the Kui, whose culture—through their relationship with elephants—bridges national and minoritised practices, threaten this model.

Today, however, the Thai state's attitudes towards cultural diversity have shifted, as the value of cultural diversity—primarily in terms of tourism—is now recognised and (partly) supported by the state. Therefore, what was once safe—invisibility—is now more damaging than what was once dangerous—cultural distinctiveness. To be invisible/misrecognised restricts access to resources, which can now be gained through emphasising the Kui's unique culture. This is why the resurgence in Kui cultural pride and the assertion of Kui heritage and identity is taking place today, as can be seen in the creation of the Kui Association of Thailand and the declaration and celebration of the Kui Day of the World. The Surin Elephant Round-Up and the Elephant Village/Elephant World Project, which I will discuss in a later chapter, are two other avenues of selective misrecognition, which have given the Kui increased visibility and access to resources on the one hand whilst continuing to further their invisibility on the other.

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Abbreviations

AHD	authorised heritage discourse
ICH	intangible cultural heritage

7 The Last Elephant Catchers: Cultural Endangerment and the Loss of Knowledge

Abstract

The Kui's exclusion from the Thai AHD contributed to the end of elephant catching and the endangerment of Kui elephant heritage, primarily the role of the mor chang (the elephant catchers), the knowledge of making the Pakam rope (the lasso used to capture elephants), and the phasa phi pa or "forest spirit language" (spoken only by the mor chang while in the forest capturing elephants). In response to this threat of endangerment, the Kui have adapted (or intend to adapt) the traditions of the mor chang and the Pakam rope-making process. The phasa phi pa, however, faces total loss, as the community is either unable or unwilling to find a place for it within contemporary Kui society.

Keywords

AHD; heritage; adaptation; authenticity; mor chang; language

Nijhuis (2017, n.p.) defines an "endling" as "the last person, animal, or other individual in a lineage". This term, first introduced in a 1996 letter to *Nature* by Robert Webster and Bruce Erickson (Jørgensen, 2017), is an apt frame for this chapter, which explores three types of so-called endlings: the last generation of Kui who caught elephants from the wild; the last of the wild elephants themselves; and the last of the intangible heritage related to this act of capturing elephants. In the Anthropocene, the enmeshing of people and nature has meant that human-led acts—particularly those of violence—have consequences that reverberate across the non-human and more-than-human worlds (Navaro et al., 2021). It follows that actions impacting nature also reverberate across our human worlds. In the case of the Kui, these endlings, or their perception as such, have set off a chain reaction that

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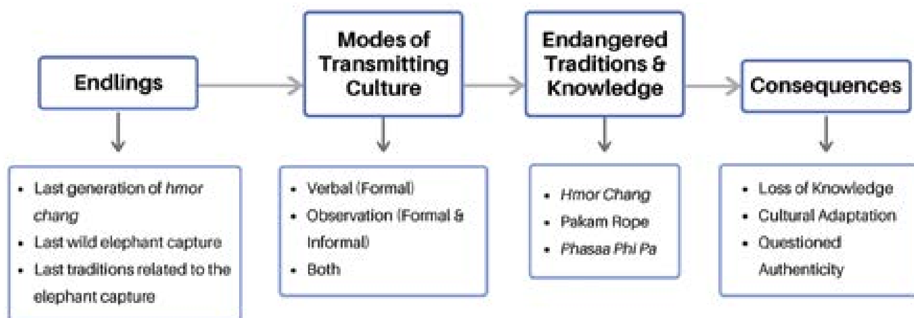

Figure 7.1: Diagram of the consequences of endlings that will be explored in this chapter.

has affected modes of transmitting culture, leading to the endangerment of traditions and traditional knowledge. This endangerment, in turn, produces issues of loss, adaptation and authenticity (see Fig. 7.1). I came across three Kui elephant traditions that form a group of endlings—practices that are currently endangered and at risk of being lost altogether. These traditions are: the mor chang—those who, up until sometime in the 1960s–70s, would venture into the forest to capture elephants; the Pakam rope—used to lasso the wild elephants; and finally, the phasa phi pa, or the "forest spirit language"—a secret language spoken only by the mor chang and only in the context of an elephant capture.

The Kui elephant-tracking path customarily took the mor chang over the border between Thailand and Cambodia. This route, however, was interrupted as a result of increasing political tensions between the two countries. The border region has been in dispute since the demarcation of Cambodian/Thai boundaries during the colonial period, with the French occupation of Cambodia. The main point of contention that has continued to date concerns ownership of the Preah Vihear temple. The temple ceased to sit within Thailand's borders when, as part of the 1904 and 1907 Franco-Siamese Treaties, a new boundary line was drawn between Thailand and Cambodia (Sothirak, 2013, p. 88).

Despite these redrawn boundary lines placing Preah Vihear under the control of Cambodia, Thailand continued to vie for the temple's ownership, occupying this area during the Second World War in 1940 and again in 1954 following the withdrawal of the French from Cambodia (Silverman, 2011). The most significant moments of contention for the Kui, however, came in 1958 and 1961, when a series of escalating conflicts between the two countries resulted in Thailand closing its border with Cambodia altogether (Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 1997; St John, 1998). The decision to close the Thai/Cambodian border (the second time, permanently) had such a significant

impact on the Kui's ability to capture elephants, that some sources appear to have erroneously conflated these dates with a legislative ban on the practice (e.g., Raksapol, 1995; Schliesinger, 2010).[1]

Although it did not halt the practice altogether, the border conflict between the two countries considerably disrupted the Kui elephant catchers (Santikarn, 2024). Raksapol (1995, p. 112) notes that the events from 1958 to 1961 "directly affected the [Kui] at Ban Taklang village as they were no longer able to enter the forest to capture elephants". One mor chang, Pao Salangam, recalls being 30 "or more" years old when he went on his last hunt, which would have been sometime near 1957 and cites the closing of the "checkpoint" as a reason he stopped (Assadang, 2011, p. 97). Noraset (2013) observes that from around 1957, stricter inspection by Cambodian authorities along the border made it more difficult (but not impossible) for the Kui mor chang to cross, mentioning a fine of 80 baht (less than £2) per elephant caught. One mor chang I spoke with, Noon, stated that "[m]y generation didn't catch elephants", adding that while wild elephants were still being caught when he was 14, he was not allowed to join the hunts until he was around 16 or 17 years old and by then it was too late. According to his timeline, elephant catching was, therefore, still possible in 1964 and stopped sometime around 1966–7. In other interviews, when I asked for the date of the last elephant capture, I was given responses ranging from 1960 to 1965. Therefore, while the border conflict made elephant catching more difficult and caused some mor chang to stop, it was not the direct cause of the end of this practice, and the exact date of the last Kui elephant capture remains uncertain.

The route into Cambodia was also not the only elephant catching path the mor chang would take. Chuen (1990), for example, notes that, although the Kui much preferred to hunt in Cambodia, when this route was inaccessible they also sometimes went to Loei—a province in the north of Thailand, some 400 kilometres away from Surin, on the border with Laos. Loei, however, was only a second preference. This was for several reasons; for example, whereas the Cambodian officials allowed the Kui to capture as many elephants as they wanted for a single permit price of 20 baht (the equivalent to roughly 268 baht today, or £6.33), the Loei Provincial Governor restricted the Kui to only three elephants at a time (Chuen, 1990). Moreover, the negotiations for

1 Other sources reference a ban on elephant catching in 1957 (e.g., Warren and Amranad, 1998; Komatra, 2001; Kuhn, 2011; Valera, 2016; Karnjana, 2019); however, there was no Thai legislation at the time banning this practice. The idea of the 1957 ban appears to originate from a 1972 master's thesis by Rote Sodesiri.

these permits were difficult, with the Kui often having to resort to bribes, which also made acquiring these permits more expensive (Chuen, 1990). Aside from this political difficulty, the mountainous terrain and thick forest of Loei were also not ideal conditions for finding and capturing the more sparsely populated elephants, and the journey to this province was also twice as far as a journey to the Cambodian mountain range (Chuen, 1990). Because of this, Chuen (1990, p. 154) states that after the closure of the Cambodian border, elephant catching ultimately ended because of the "inconvenience" of hunting in Loei. Whether or not this is entirely the case, the existence of elephant-catching routes within Thailand itself, alongside a lack of a formal ban on wild elephant captures in the country until 1992 (through the Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act), indicate that more local factors—outside of the Thai-Cambodian border issues—must also have been present to prompt the end of the practice.

Within Thailand, concern for the natural environment situated within the wider AED also played a significant role in the decline in elephant captures. A stable Cambodia was not achieved until 1997, and by this point, environmental factors now prevented the Kui from returning to their elephant-catching tradition. Most of the forested areas in Surin were converted for agricultural use and eucalyptus plantations, further removing the elephants' natural habitat, as the remaining forested area in Thailand even by 1979 was considered insufficient to maintain its wild elephant population (Lohanan, 2002, p. 233; Storer, 1981, p. 1). Later international protections placed on elephants, such as their inclusion in CITES in 1975 (which Thailand ratified in 1983), and their classification as endangered on the IUCN's Red List in 1986, further rendered a return to elephant catching impossible for the Kui.

Territorialisation also comes into play here. The 1980s saw a shift in Thai forest policy towards a more traditional Western-based approach of fortress conservation—removing people from the environment through the designation of national parks and protected areas (Leblond, 2019). When asked why elephant catching stopped, many of the Kui people I interviewed attributed this to the "closing of the forest." This descriptor, "closing the forest" (ปิดป่า), is often used in reference to the 1989 logging ban, which ended all logging concessions nationwide. It has its origins in the minister of the interior at the time, Maj. Gen. Sanan Kajonprasas's proclamation to "close the forests or suspend logging in concession forests", in announcing the new policy (MGR Online, 2013). Nonetheless, elephant captures began to decline in the 1950s/60s, and while the exact date of the last capture is unknown, it is very unlikely to have been practiced regularly by 1989.

Therefore, the Kui's use of this phrase, "closing the forest" seems to describe government legislation or policy restricting an individual's access to the forest more generally—for example, national forest protection policies. One key traditional ceremony of the mor chang before entering the forest to capture elephants is the ritual of "opening the forest" wherein the mor chang ask spirits for permission to enter their space. The government's actions to nationalise the forests resulted in a permanent "closing of the forests", which overrode the Kui's relationship with their natural environment and the spirits occupying this realm. As a result of the state's declaration that the forests were closed, this tradition of requesting permission to enter from the forest was no longer an option, as it was now the government, and not the natural spirits, that took over ownership of these spaces. Gilbert (2006, p. 39) writes that "because Indigenous peoples' cultures are deeply rooted in the natural world, the notion of cultural heritage for Indigenous peoples is connected to the notion of territoriality". Therefore, while securing the environment against degradation and deforestation that marked the previous decades, these protectionist government policies also had the consequence of severing many traditional connections to these forest areas.

In 1930, Francis Giles predicted that following the recent introduction of railways and roads in the region, the Kui men in the northeast of Thailand would "change their methods of earning a livelihood and the profession of elephant hunting will become a thing of the past" (Giles, 1929, p. 214). He concluded that "[t]he new generation will know nothing of how their forefathers voluntarily faced the dangers of the hunt" (Giles, 1929, p. 214). Certainly, elephant owning is not a lucrative career path, and elephant owners face considerable financial pressures. Two provincial droughts, in particular, helped to drive the shift away from the elephant-keeping tradition in the region. The first drought in 1982 forced several villagers to relocate (Sommai, 1998). A later drought in 1993 again prompted villagers to leave with their elephants in search of a living elsewhere, be it overseas or begging on the streets of Bangkok (Sommai, 1998). Many families who decided to move were forced to sell their elephants to ease the financial burden and because their new homes may not have been suitable for keeping these large animals (Sommai, 1998).

These families never resumed the practice of elephant keeping and the mor chang who were put in this position consequently did not pass on their traditional knowledge and career to their children. Dr Sanong, my first introduction to the Kui community in Thailand, experienced this first hand. His father was a mor chang who owned 50 elephants before the drought. After it hit, however, Dr Sanong recounts that the entire community left in search

of other opportunities, and his father sold all of their elephants. Dr Sanong never had the opportunity to learn his family's elephant traditions, as his father no longer saw any reason to pass this knowledge on. The financial pressures of elephant ownership, combined with the changing prestige of the mor chang in Thai society, and a desire amongst the younger generations of Kui to pursue careers outside of farming—typically requiring a relocation away from the elephant villages and towards one of the larger cities—also contributed to a loss in the uptake of the Kui elephant tradition.

There is no definite date for the end of Kui elephant catching. Rather, the tradition gradually declined, with each mor chang having his own date in mind for his or his family's last capture. It was not a ban, but rather a culmination of factors that ultimately resulted in an end of the live capture of elephants from the wild, and which eventually spurred the endangerment of several other related traditions within the Kui community of Thailand. The loss of this practice changed the process of transmitting this knowledge and heritage and has also led to the adaptation of several traditions under the pressures of modern Thai society.

The Mor Chang

The role of the mor chang underwent several changes even before the end of wild elephant captures. In particular, rather than being a full-time career—with mor chang making a living exclusively off capturing and trading/selling elephants—it became a seasonal practice, with mor chang supplementing this lifestyle by farming. Today, it has become an entirely ceremonial position. Rote (1972, p. 227) traces this shift from full- to part-time elephant catching to the movement of the Kui from Laos into Thailand. Rote (1972) mainly attributed this change to cultural exchange between the Kui, Thai, Lao, and Khmer in the region (as discussed in the previous chapter), resulting in a decline in the Kui tradition, alongside a growing population of Kui people who could no longer be sustained by elephants alone, thus needing to seek alternative employment. The large-scale adoption of wet-rice farming, in particular, also speaks to either a desire or need for assimilation, as this farming practice is most typically associated with the ethnic Thais. The role of the mor chang transformed even more drastically after elephant catching became impossible. More recent cultural changes to the role of the mor chang include adaptations to the mor chang hierarchy, the perception of the authenticity and use of the role of the mor chang entirely, and adaptations to the process of elephant catching.

There are several ranks of mor chang. In interviews, I was told there were between three to nine levels. The current group of mor chang in Surin, however, span only three ranks, from the lowest level of Ja to the middle rank of Sadiang and up to the highest current rank of Saddum (although this too varies depending on who is asked). Historically, the highest rank would have been the Khru Pa Yai (the "head teacher of the forest"), typically seen as one step up from Saddum. The last of this rank, however, has passed away, and this level now remains empty. To move up the rankings, mor chang need to catch a certain number of elephants. While the Ja are only newly initiated mor chang and, therefore, need not have caught any elephants, a Sadiang must have caught five or more, a Saddum must have caught 15 or more, and the Khru Pa Yai needs to have caught 20 or more elephants (Assadang, 2011). In 1929, Luang Adul Saraphan (cited in Assadang, 2011, p. 102) of Surin's revenue department interviewed the mor chang in the province. He (Assadang, 2011, p. 102) noted that should a Khru Pa Yai die with no one to fill his place, the other mor chang would need to relocate to a village where there was a Khru Pa Yai if they wanted to continue to catch elephants. If they could not find a replacement, or should the Khru Pa Yai stop catching elephants, the other mor chang would also have to stop.

With the practice of wild elephant captures now outlawed, the role of the Khru Pa Yai in this sense is less important. The Kui today can function without a Khru Pa Yai in a way they were unable to in the past, as no one now needs to seek permission to capture elephants. Furthermore, as there are no mor chang remaining who have caught 20 or more wild elephants, there are no more contenders for the Khru Pa Yai position, at least not in Surin. Instead, the senior mor chang have taken on the role of Khru Pa Yai in ceremonies, even though they retain their lower ranking officially. Boonma Saendee was described to me by the other mor chang I interviewed as the highest-ranking member in Surin. In my interview with him, Boonma similarly described himself as being of the "highest rank". I was informed by Sunthorn, another mor chang, however, that Boonma is technically at the level below Khru Pa Yai—Saddum, but he is still considered to be of a higher status than others at that level due because of his age and experience. Boonma is "looking after the role of the Khru Pa Yai because he is the only one left who caught real wild elephants". According to Sunthorn, after Boonma dies, there "won't be any more 'real' Khru Pa Yai, but people will take on the role" regardless. It is also up to Boonma to choose his successor. When I spoke to Boonma, however, he said that while he picked and trained the current mor chang, he did not know what would happen once he could no longer do that. This tension between the younger generation wanting to

bend the rules to allow their traditions to continue and the older generation, who seem to have a fatalistic acceptance of letting the tradition end if that seems like its natural course, is also apparent in the Pakam rope example, which I will discuss later.

The older generation is not entirely inflexible, however, and has also made changes and concessions to these elephant traditions. Those, like Boonma, who had been able to capture wild elephants before the practice ended, have gained a new level of importance in Kui society. The mor chang who came after them look to this older group for guidance—regardless of their actual expertise beyond this limited experience. Boonma himself stopped catching elephants when he was only 15 years old because his father, who was also a mor chang, thought it was too risky; as a result, he instead focused on training elephants (Karnjana, 2014). Boonma, therefore, probably only had a few years of experience capturing elephants before he stopped and has not engaged in the practice for almost 80 years. Despite this, Boonma remains the mor chang most clearly endowed with the moral authority of his office in Surin, as the younger Kui turn to him to lead ceremonies. He has also taken on the role of the Khru Pa Yai in teaching the younger mor chang about their culture and dictating proper behaviour within this position. This sense of authority accorded to the older generation of mor chang—granting them the power and legitimacy to control Kui heritage—is another embodiment of the AHD. In this case, however, it is an AHD that emerges from within the community itself.

The importance given to those who did experience the wild elephant capture (even if unsuccessful) arises because they are seen through a framework of authenticity, which is also an important concept to understand regarding attitudes towards adaptations of the mor chang role. As Sunthorn told me, the real mor chang were those who caught real wild elephants. The mor chang today face a dilemma: they cannot progress through the ranks unless they catch wild elephants, but to do so is no longer legal. Two mor chang I spoke with, Saipha Salangam and Sunthorn, pointed to pasa (ปะซะ) as a way around this. Pasa is a ceremony that involves the removal of a wild spirit from an elephant. In the past, this was typically performed on the elephants captured from the wild. Rote (1972, p. 176) describes its purpose as "to release the captured wild elephants from the spirits of the forest". Today, however, it is performed on young elephants born in domesticity, as the Kui believe all elephants are born with a wild spirit attached. Since the baby elephants have this wild spirit, the mor chang can enact a wild elephant capture using these wild babies as substitutes. To do so, they release the young elephants into the forested area surrounding Wat Pa Ajiang temple and then round

them back up again. As Saipha Salangam observed, "we need to adjust today, to use baby elephants. But we still perform old customs to preserve them when the older generation dies". These modern-day captures, however, are rare, as baby elephants are born so infrequently, thereby making the process of advancing through the ranks very slow. Moreover, while the capture of elephants is still performed, the long periods spent in the forest on the hunt are not part of this re-enactment. This time spent in the forest was when the mor chang had to learn to speak a secret language called phasa phi pa.

My initial interviews revealed that moving up the official rankings was not a priority for many mor chang today. The apparent lack of interest in attaining a high ranking can perhaps be explained culturally. Thailand is a country built around respect for elders, and this aspect of culture has also influenced the role of the mor chang. Sunthorn admitted that "[t]he next generation don't do much because people want older mor chang [to perform ceremonies]. I'm worried young people don't know how to do it". Regardless of rank, people prefer older-looking mor chang to perform ceremonies for them. While in Surin, I had the opportunity to observe three offering ceremonies to the Pakam rope—one at the Kui Day of the World celebrations, one at the local elephant zoo's Thai National Elephant Day celebrations, and the other at the Ban Taklang village Thai National Elephant Day celebrations (Fig. 7.2). Of the six mor chang leading the offerings (two at each location), four were between 80 and 96 years old, with at least one older mor chang taking charge of each ceremony. One mor chang, Hern Jongjainan, went on two elephant hunts, both unsuccessful, before it finally became impossible to continue. As such, when I spoke with him in 2019, he was still of the lowest rank—Ja. Despite this, he still led the Pakam offering ritual at Ban Taklang (Fig. 7.2). The only people I interviewed who were above this lowest rank of Ja were those who successfully captured wild elephants: Boonma and Da Oh, the latter of whom sadly passed away in 2022 at the age of 100. Therefore, even if the younger generation were to attain higher rankings through adaptations to the elephant-capturing tradition eventually, the preference would still be given to those who look older and thereby have the appearance of having more knowledge, power, and authority, regardless of whether this appearance matches the reality.

In later trips to Surin, I asked some of the mor chang whether they thought the levels were still important, particularly as no one interviewed before that point seemed to be in any rush to move up the rankings. Dui replied that "going up the ranks is still important, it's by age and experience catching elephants. Now we release baby elephants to catch". Sunthorn told me something similar: "the levels are still important, but now we just look

Figure 7.2: A mor chang performing a ceremony giving offerings to the Pakam rope at Ban Taklang for the Thai National Elephant Day, predicting the fortune for the year using a wishbone from a chicken that was presented as an offering (photograph by author).

after the culture; we use baby elephants from our village that are still wild and catch them". Nonetheless, the preference for older mor chang to take on positions of authority in ceremonies provides less incentive for mor chang to change their official ranking, as this system appears to have not been entirely replaced but at least combined with a more informal system based on age and culturally informed perceptions of status and authenticity. This reliance on age, alongside a preference for those who captured wild elephants, has resulted in many of the younger mor chang feeling as though they have no authority, ownership, or expertise over their own culture, as they continue to follow the direction of the older mor chang who themselves have very limited experience.

As a consequence of this perceived lack of authority, adaptations the younger mor chang make to their traditions are viewed as inauthentic by those within the community. One key question raised is whether it is possible to be a real mor chang without capturing elephants from the wild. I spoke to a mix of younger and older mor chang about their perceptions on whether or not they consider themselves to be real mor chang. For Boonma, one of

the only mor chang left who managed to catch a wild elephant, the ability to catch elephants in the forest was crucial to being a mor chang. He told me that "There are no more 'real' mor chang—you cannot be a real mor chang unless you catch elephants". Although Sunthorn, one of the younger mor chang echoed this sentiment, stating that "The people who went into the forest [to catch elephants] are the 'real' mor chang", most of the younger mor chang I spoke with disagreed. Dui, implied that this was a point that was raised often: "People ask—if you can't catch elephants how can you still be a mor chang? It's in my blood. It's the same as monks even though Buddha passed away, how can you still be a monk? I am a mor chang in my person, a full mor chang because I do all of the activities and practise the ancient ways of my teacher". Apinan, another young hmor chang, agreed—"Now you can't catch elephants, but I look after elephants, I am a real mor chang". Noon, who missed the last elephant capture by only a handful of years, confirmed: "We're no different from the old mor chang".

This discord between the old and new mor chang is also part of the politics of recognition. In this instance, the dissonance of the politics of recognition is situated within a single community but marked by an intergenerational divide, as the rights to self-identification as a mor chang are brought into question by the older generation. This has, however, not stopped the younger mor chang from pursuing their rights to this position and culture. The new generation of mor chang—those who never had the opportunity to participate in a traditional wild elephant capture—are unwilling to let their traditions end with the last generation. Therefore, they have prioritised the sustainability of the tradition over its perceived authenticity. Rather than trying to advance through these ranks, for example, the younger mor chang focus on carrying on the traditional role and associated knowledge for future generations. This shift in values was necessitated out of a sense of urgency as the number of mor chang who were alive in time to participate in elephant hunts (even though some of them were never successful in capturing an elephant) is now down to only a handful of men, all in their late 80s and 90s. As Sunthorn says, "real or not is not important. We're following traditions and keeping them alive".

These feelings of inauthenticity—felt internally by some of the younger generation and imposed externally by the older mor chang—have produced a disconnect between the younger Kui and their heritage. Sunthorn, for example, told me that "we need to ask those who really caught elephants in the wild for permission to carry on the culture". This statement reflects a more general sentiment among some of the younger mor chang that this tradition does not feel like it is truly theirs. Instead, they see it as something

for which they must ask permission to use. Rather than being the rightful owners of these traditions, the new mor chang see themselves as guardians of a culture belonging to those who had lived this experience of a wild elephant capture. The new generation must pass on these memories to the next generations of Kui to maintain an unbroken connection to the time of the wild elephant captures. This sentiment of custodianship, rather than full ownership of their culture, has, in turn, reinforced the younger generation's feelings of inauthenticity, as they do not feel they have the right to adapt this heritage. Even for those outside of the community, these newer mor chang are not always viewed as authentic. For example, when Mew Salangam—who officially held the position of Senior mor Saddum but was held in the same esteem as Boonma—passed away in 2019, news articles covering his funeral described him as being of "the last generation of mor chang" (e.g., Korat Daily News, 2019; Matichon Online, 2019; ONB News, 2019; Thai Post, 2019). This implies that even for those not Kui, the end of elephant catching was also considered the end of the real mor chang. These external perceptions also influence the community's internal perceptions of (in)authenticity.

Rote Sodesiri, at the time a master's student at the University of Western Australia, observed the aftermath of the death of a Khru Pa Yai during his fieldwork in Surin. He (1972, p. 254) noted anxiety amongst the group of mor chang in the community because even though, at the time he was writing, there were still those eligible to be promoted to the role, there was still a fear that some "might not be able to recall the magical words correctly because they had not been used for a long time". Almost half a century later, this generation of eligible mor chang has been lost altogether, and the knowledge of magical words is even more precarious. Boonma, for example, told me that "those who have never caught an elephant are scared because they don't have the experience [of catching a real wild elephant]". They do not feel able to lead ceremonies or practise sacred activities of the mor chang involving spirits, as this can be dangerous for those without proper knowledge.

According to Boonma, even though the modern mor chang perform (re)enactments of the elephant capture, many believe this is not equivalent to the original hunts and, therefore, still feel lacking in experience. Boonma also emphasised that he learned from "a teacher who caught wild elephants and rose through the ranks". This is similar to a sentiment expressed by another mor chang, Dui, who said, "I practice the ancient ways of my teacher". This lineage of inheriting knowledge from someone with the experience of catching wild elephants reinforces the legitimacy and authenticity of the mor chang. While Boonma is still around to teach the younger mor chang for now,

what happens when this is no longer possible? This line of "I am authentic because I learned from someone who caught elephants from the wild" will end.

For the mor chang I interviewed, inheritance has been an important feature of continuing Kui traditional roles. The younger mor chang in Surin feel a strong duty to inherit the tradition or risk it being forgotten altogether. Those I spoke with all had a family connection to keeping elephants and described a process of almost fatalistic inheritance. For example, when asked why he became a mor chang, Hern Jongjainam said "It just happened. My family were mor chang, going back to my ancestors, my children and grandchildren are too". Nonetheless, family connection to the role is not enough motivation, as taking on the position of the mor chang is a big responsibility. While Hern felt becoming a mor chang was inevitable, I also spoke with some Kui men who deliberately avoided becoming mor chang even though it was a tradition that ran in their families. Instead, they opted to become mahouts to preserve their family's elephant culture without the added responsibilities of the mor chang, which requires them to live by a particular set of moral codes—much like a monk. Many mor chang spoke about how the decision to take on this role was imbued with a sense of importance in sustaining this aspect of Kui culture. Saipha told me that he became a mor chang to teach the next generation "the ways of the Kui" and to look after their culture—"if we don't take care of the knowledge, it will be lost. The next generation won't know anything". Apinan Salangam echoed this sentiment, saying that he became a mor chang "to care for the tradition between people and elephants". He also expressed fear that these traditions might disappear because "if people don't care, [the traditions] will be lost". When I asked Sunthorn if he was worried about elephants disappearing, he said he was more worried that the newer generation of Kui "won't care or understand our culture" and that it was his job as a mor chang to "care for Kui culture". The mor chang position is also tied to sustaining Kui religious beliefs surrounding the Pakam spirit, as they conduct blessing ceremonies to Pakam and have the secret knowledge needed to make the revered Pakam rope. Dui Salangam, for example, states that even though they can no longer capture wild elephants, it is still important to be a mor chang because "if people don't know, we can't do anything with the Pakam anymore".

The Pakam Rope

The end of elephant catching had a crucial impact on the use of the Pakam rope and the traditional knowledge of its production. The Pakam rope

Figure 7.3: Pakam ropes inside a Pakam shrine at Wat Pa Ajiang temple, Surin province (photograph by author).

Figure 7.4: Statue of the Pakam spirit at Elephant Kingdom, Surin province (photograph by author).

(เชือกปะกำ) (Fig. 7.3), sometimes also referred to in Thai as the Pakam string (เส้นปะกำ) or leather (หนังปะกำ), is made of three buffalo hides, each cut into 2–3-inch-wide strips anywhere between 30–50 metres long and braided together. It is the rope of the Pakam spirit (พระครู ปะกำ, Phra Khru Pakam)

(Fig. 7.4). The majority of the Kui self-identify as Buddhist; however, Phra Khru Pakam is the most prominent religious figure in elephant-owning Kui society. This religious syncretism is something I unpack in the next chapter. The Pakam rope is, consequently, one of the most important cultural objects for this group of Kui.

Some sources (e.g., Rote, 1972; Assadang, 2011; Banpot, 2011) describe the Pakam rope as either containing or embodying the Pakam spirit itself. This is, however, contentious. When asked whether this was the case, one mor chang stated, "Phra Khru Pakam is a deity, the rope is a tool". The abbot at Wat Pa Ajiang described the Pakam rope as a "symbol of Phra Khru Pakam". These ropes, however, do typically contain ancestral spirits of the mor chang for whom it was made. This is done through a process called praju Pakam—a ritual inviting spirits into the rope, enacted as part of the rope-making process. Because of this, the rope was described to me as similar to "the ashes of family members". This act of praju transforms the leather from a simple tool—a rope, into Pakam.

These spirits, alongside the Pakam rope's association (at minimum) as a tool of Phra Khru Pakam, makes it a very potent object. The rope's power is particularly important for the elephant catchers because, in Phra Khru Dr Samuhan's words, "all power available to the Kui can be accessed through the rope" and the spirits attached to it. When discussing the rope's importance, Boonma recounted a "miracle" that he observed as a young mor chang when he placed the Pakam rope on a tree full of fire ants, causing the ants to disappear. Another example was relayed by Phra Khru Dr Samuhan, who told me that if a Pakam rope is ever stolen, "it will be willingly returned" because of "inexplicable spirit intervention". He said this has happened even with ropes that were sent out of the country, which is why the Kui continue to believe in the rope's power.

Historically, the Pakam rope was used by the mor chang as a lasso to capture elephants from the wild. These hunts, the use of the lasso, and even the process of making the rope all entail a complex spiritual background requiring the performance of specific actions by the mor chang. When not being used, the rope is kept in a special north-facing house/shrine next to the home, called the ศาล ปะกำ or Pakam shrine.[2] Many of the Pakam shrines

2 I later discovered that this practice, alongside other beliefs surrounding the Pakam rope, is specific to the Kui Ajiang in Surin. Phratchayaphat, a Kui Ajiang man from Si Sa Ket who works at the province's Kui Museum, informed me that the Kui Ajiang in his community at Prang Ku store their Pakam rope in a rice granary (ฉาง ข้าว) and allow all blood relatives (including women) to touch the rope. Meanwhile, the community in Pai Bung keeps theirs in the house. This, he says, is how they've always done it in his village, suggesting that the Pakam shrine that we see

Figure 7.5: Pakam rope house/shrine from a Kui home in Surin. The rope is placed at the top of the shrine, with a howdah made from wood and reeds sitting in the middle. Also visible are floral garland offerings to the Pakam spirit (photograph by author).

in Surin have the rope placed alongside other objects used in the process of the elephant capture or related to elephant traditions, such as howdahs (chairs placed on the elephant's back for a passenger to sit on) or chains (Fig 7.5). Two of the firmest rules relating to proper interaction with the rope are that women are not allowed to touch the rope or enter these shrines and that the rope must not be placed on the ground (outside of an elephant capture).

Since the last elephant capture, the Pakam rope has only maintained its symbolic role for offerings and protection. It is not removed from the shrine, except for the elephant capture (re)enactments. As Dui informed me, "the rope isn't used to catch elephants anymore, so we keep it and

used in neighbouring Surin might be an example of past Hindu religious influence. Along the same lines, he also stated that the Kui Ajiang community in Si Sa Ket has maintained their animist beliefs and older traditions. In contrast, the traditions in Surin have incorporated Buddhist elements as well, which is where the restriction on women touching the Pakam rope might arise from (we see this Buddhist influence on Kui culture in Surin quite clearly with the example of Wat Pa Ajiang in the next chapter). While the Kui Ajiang in Si Sa Ket also caught elephants, this tradition ended much earlier than in Surin, with Phratchayaphat estimating that they have not caught elephants or had hmor chang for some 200 years. The difference is that, in Si Sa Ket, the Kui caught elephants to pay suai to the capital in exchange for having to send human labour. When this tax-paying practice ended, so did their capture of elephants. Meanwhile, the Kui in Surin caught elephants not only as tax but also to keep for themselves, which is why their elephant tradition was maintained.

Figure 7.6: Mor chang making a Pakam rope in the Wat Pa Ajiang temple grounds on the morning of Thai National Elephant Day, 2020 (photograph by author).

look after it". The physical ropes will remain and are already passed down through families. What is more concerning for the Kui is the potential loss of the knowledge of the rope-making process itself. As Boonma explained, "The ropes won't disappear; it doesn't matter if new ones aren't made". The rope-making knowledge, however, is unwritten and, therefore, at greater risk of being lost.

Before the end of elephant captures, a new rope would be made for each mor chang embarking on his first hunt. Now, these old ropes are passed down through generations, holding more value to the Kui than modern reproductions. Despite this, rope-making ceremonies also continue to take place on special occasions (Fig. 7.6), such as the Surin Elephant Round-Up, and more recently as part of Kui celebrations on Thai National Elephant Day—which, in 2019 was celebrated as the Kui Day of the World by the Kui Association of Thailand.[3] These modern-day productions of the rope are

3 Having both Thai National Elephant Day and the Kui Day of the World on the same date proved to be somewhat challenging logistically. From 2022, the Kui Association decided to change the date of the celebration to April 29 because of convenience. They have yet to settle on a permanent date for the occasion and are currently deciding between two dates of significance to the Kui in the lunar calendar.

organised specifically to continue the practice in the absence of the original context. As long as these opportunities remain, and the mor chang continue to conduct ceremonial offerings and blessings to the rope, the knowledge related to its construction, meaning, and worship will be sustained. These newer ropes, however, do not hold the same symbolic potency as the ones made and used for elephant catching in the past.

I walked into my first Kui Day of the World celebration in 2019, held at Wat Pa Ajiang temple, with two main goals in mind: 1) to observe and document the rope-making ceremony that I was told would take place, and 2) to use this opportunity to interview the mor chang, but most importantly to interview Boonma Saendee.[4] Up to this point, Boonma had proved rather elusive. I asked one of my primary contacts in the Kui community if he could facilitate an introduction but was met with vague responses. He had interviewed Boonma himself only recently, and perhaps, as an outsider and newcomer to the community, I was undeserving of such an honour. So, when I heard Boonma would lead the rope-making ceremony at the Kui Day of the World event, I knew this was potentially my one chance to secure the elusive interview.

When I arrived, I was told the rope-making ceremony had been rescheduled to later in the morning. I was then informed it had been moved to the afternoon. Eventually, upon inquiring again, I was told that the rope-making ceremony had been cancelled altogether. Somewhat reluctantly, the person in charge of the event admitted that the mor chang could not make the rope as the organisers had provided them with the wrong materials. The rope is made from the hides of three water buffalo, which the organisers had duly procured. Crucially, though, these hides must be from male and female buffalos, which is something the organisers had not realised and, therefore, had not accounted for.

This small oversight speaks to an important phenomenon I observed during my time with the Kui. As I mentioned, those at the head of the movement(s) to revive Kui culture were those who had lost it for a time and were looking to reclaim it. One man's father, for example, was a mor chang who did not pass this knowledge down to his son. Another man was trying to reconnect with his only newly discovered Kui heritage. These same

4 The change of date of the Kui Day of the World to April 29 also came with a change in venue. I attended the event in 2024, which was held in Sikhoraphum district in Surin. The 2022 and 2023 events were also held in Surin province, but one in Samrong Thap, and the other around 4km from Sikhoraphum centre. By no longer holding the event in Wat Pa Ajiang, the focus of activities was also far less elephant centred. There were no hmor chang attending or leading rituals, and no Pakam rope.

people were responsible for organising events like the Kui Day of the World. This enthusiasm, however, was coupled with gaps in knowledge—e.g., of the materials needed to make the Pakam rope. Such gaps are a natural consequence of this rupture in transmitting traditional knowledge. Meanwhile, those who had not experienced this disruption and who continued to play a leading role in Kui elephant culture and its traditions—like the mor chang—were also least concerned about these projects to affirm Kui identity and were not actively leading these cultural movements, despite holding important cultural positions in Kui society. This is because the mor chang who had continued their family traditions had not experienced this cultural depletion. They saw no reason to revive something that, for them, had never disappeared. Only now are the Kui beginning to feel the threat of this cultural loss.

When I eventually left Wat Pa Ajiang, deciding to call it a day, having interviewed as many people as I could now that the rope would not be made, my interpreter, Chai, knowing I was disappointed to miss the ceremony, said, "I know you wanted to interview this man today, and this was your best chance to do it. So why don't we drive around and see if we can find him?" Although it sounded like a somewhat hopeless effort, I figured it couldn't hurt, so we started our journey in search of Boonma. The first stop we came to on our way back to the provincial capital was Ban Taklang—the elephant village, less than a five-minute drive from the temple. As we pulled into the parking lot, planning to ask if anyone inside knew where we might be able to find Boonma, I saw him. He was sitting in a small Thai-style open pavilion (sala/ศาลา), wearing a light pink shirt and aviator sunglasses, and chewing on betel nut, which he would occasionally spit into the plastic cup that he kept next to him.

After paying the entry fee (some 50 baht, or just over 1 GBP), I nervously approached him, going over what I would say in my head. In the end, I went with the classic—"Hello, my name is Alisa. Can I interview you?" For someone who is something of a celebrity, at least in the Kui world, Boonma acted surprised. "Me? How do you know who I am?"

"I read about you in the newspaper", I replied.

"Really?" He asked.

"Yes, you're famous!" I told him.

Although he did not seem to believe me, he eventually said yes, and I got my interview with him after all, without any of the pretence I had expected. As an outsider, I think I fell into the trap of romanticising Kui culture and figures like Boonma, searching for some deeper meaning behind why he keeps elephants—perhaps it had something to do with the special

relationship the Kui have between people and elephants, I thought, finding myself engaging in postcolonial exoticism. But I was quickly grounded when I eventually asked Boonma why he keeps elephants. He responded, "Some men collect cars and Ferraris, I collect elephants".[5]

In addition to collecting elephants, Boonma Saendee is the head ropemaker. Although these celebrations of Kui culture have ensured that rope making continues, the formal transmission of this sacred rope-making knowledge—from the older generation (i.e., Boonma) to the new one—has not occurred. Therefore, if the older generation of Kui is sometimes described as the last generation of elephant catchers, Boonma might be called their last ropemaker. Because he has not shared his knowledge of ropemaking, Boonma is currently the only mor chang with the sacred knowledge of this process. At least, this is what he told me. Boonma revealed that he could only pass on his knowledge to someone of equal rank, and, as we know, no such person currently exists. What, then, happens when Boonma can no longer make the rope? At first, he simply said—"I don't know", but he later answered, "It depends. I can't do anything about it if the knowledge is lost; it all depends [แล้วแต่]". The issue of inadequacy and lack of spiritual preparation resulting from an inability to catch real wild elephants also emerges here. Boonma, for example, remarked that "I'd like my children to learn [how to make the rope] but they don't dare do it because they aren't high ranking enough. The process is very sacred and uses spirits, so they don't feel special enough to be able to do it". The mor chang need the experience of catching enough wild elephants to prepare themselves spiritually for this potentially dangerous process—experience they can no longer gain since catching wild elephants is not currently legal in Thailand.

Subsequent interviews with lower-ranked mor chang, however, revealed a different picture, highlighting generational differences in perspectives on adapting tradition to ensure cultural survival. Although Boonma insisted he was the only person who knew how to make the Pakam rope and suggested that the tradition would die with him, all of the younger mor chang I spoke with disagreed. When I asked Sunthorn if he knew how to make the rope, he said, "I learn how to do it every day. I help [Boonma] make it". And if Boonma cannot make it anymore? "[Boonma] will designate someone else

5 I had a similar anecdote recounted to me following a talk on my research that I gave at the Siam Society in Bangkok in early 2024. A man came up to me after my presentation and told me about how he had attended one of the early Surin Elephant Round-Ups in the 1970s. He had asked one of the mahouts performing in the show where he came from, expecting to receive an—in his words—"exotic" answer. The mahout instead told him: "you know the gas station on the highway between Bangkok and Ayutthaya? I live right next to it!"

to do it”. He also stated that another mor chang, Dui, “can make the rope but no one dares to do it while Boonma is still alive”. Dui confirmed this, saying, “I have to be able to do it after Boonma stops because I am his student. I’m letting the teacher do it for now, and I am learning”. Mor chang Apinan also said “I can do it once Boonma stops. We’ve learnt it all already”. Similarly, Saipha commented: “I know how to make the rope. This generation is the one making the rope, Boonma performs the sacred ceremony”. Saipha is referring to the fact that Boonma, in his nineties now, is too old to perform the physically demanding rope-braiding process. Instead, he has six of the younger mor chang assist him. Following the near-miss of the 2019 Kui Day of the World, I eventually witnessed a rope-making ceremony in the grounds of Wat Pa Ajiang to commemorate Thailand’s National Elephant Day in 2020. The ceremony, however, took place hours ahead of schedule and by the time I reached the temple, the rope had already been mostly braided, and the ever-elusive Boonma was nowhere in sight.

One of the Kui men I spoke with described these younger mor chang as Boonma’s “apprentices”, but this notion that he was training apprentices was refuted by Boonma, who insisted that he had not passed on his knowledge to anyone. When asked whether he could still make the Pakam rope despite being of a lower rank, Dui responded, “[n]ow we don’t have anyone high ranking, so we need the lower levels to do it”. The other lower-ranking mor chang echoed this sentiment of being willing to adapt traditions to sustain them. Whereas Boonma has come to a sad acceptance of the idea that to abide by traditional rules (and ensure the safety of the ropemaker), the knowledge of ropemaking would die with him, the younger generation is less willing to let this go. This notion of adaptability is also seen with the role of the mor chang in general, and associated concepts of authenticity.

Boonma’s insistence, however, that no one but him has complete knowledge of ropemaking raises a salient question: is something lost when culture is not passed on in the traditional manner? The younger mor chang have watched Boonma make the rope and perform the praju ritual—speaking the secret words of power—and they are now the ones who continue to perform the physical act of ropemaking while Boonma oversees. According to Boonma, however, this process is situated within the spiritual realm, and it is unclear whether the younger mor chang have learned this particular aspect of ropemaking. Are they, therefore, missing some integral form of esoteric knowledge of ropemaking that Boonma has yet to (and likely never will) disclose? Suppose they imitate Boonma’s secret words (which they have probably overheard and memorised through assisting him over the years) but do not understand their significance or spiritual importance. Will these

words still have the same function and power? These are questions we may never be able to answer. This difference in how the knowledge was (or, in this case, was not) transmitted will result in a fundamental change in this tradition, but in a way that will probably go unnoticed.

In this way, the end of elephant catching has considerably impacted this aspect of Kui heritage. As with the role of the modern mor chang, there is also debate whether the final products of these modern ropemaking ceremonies can be considered entirely authentic. I was told, for example, that the ropes made for ceremonial purposes only are not real, as the last step of the process wherein the ancestral spirits are invited into the rope—the praju ritual—is not performed. When talking to Supatra, a woman who sells these ropes, however, I was told that at least one of the new ropes was real "because it has had the spirits put inside by the mor chang and the rope has been placed in the Pakam shrine". This was clarified through the explanation that although the traditional process of inviting the spirits is enacted, as the ropes are not made for a specific person (let alone a specific Kui person), there would be no such ancestral spirits waiting or able to enter. Although these newly made ropes might be considered real in this sense of being made with a complete process, there is still a distinction made between these ropes and the older ones that had been taken into the forest by a mor chang in search of wild elephants. While the new ropes made for show during ceremonies are for sale, the old ropes typically are not, as they are considered too sacred. The older ropes are also kept in a separate part of the Pakam shrine.

The rules of proper treatment of the Pakam rope, however, are not always followed when it comes to the sale and use of cut segments of the rope for amulets (Fig. 7.7). Cutting the Pakam rope does have precedent in more modern Kui tradition. For example, when a son moves away from his home (where the family's ancestral Pakam rope is kept), he might take a cutting of the rope with him to continue to worship Pakam. This is another adaptation necessitated by the end of elephant catching, as now one authentic rope of a single mor chang ancestor must be shared amongst multiple households in the family. The sale of clippings of the Pakam rope as amulets for non-Kui, however, does not have any basis in Kui tradition. Instead, it emerges out of a more general belief in the supernatural and desire for protective amulets accompanying the widespread animism in modern Thai society. There did not seem to be a consensus amongst the Kui that I interviewed as to whether this practice was allowed and what the proper treatment of the Pakam rope should be in this regard. Moreover, many of those selling these Pakam amulets were not Kui themselves.

Figure 7.7: Pakam rope amulets for sale, nestled amongst amulets/ votive tablets featuring images of Lord Buddha (photograph by author).

A Thai woman selling amulets made from the Pakam rope told me that she used an old rope from Chiang Mai, "from outside of Surin", and that the rope was cut to keep evil spirits away. She said that both Thai people and tourists buy the amulets and that it is not an issue for women to touch the rope, contradicting the Kui belief. Another woman selling the Pakam amulets told me they cut the old Pakam ropes "for respect". A different vendor I spoke to, Mr Amphon, said he was Lao "but married to a 'Suay'". He told me that women could touch the *new* ropes and the amulets as they were not made for the mor chang, but to be sold: "It's different, they're made the same way but for a different purpose". There were, however, also Kui people selling the Pakam amulets. I spoke to one such Kui man at Wat Pa Ajiang, who told me that the ropes he sold do not need to be in a shrine, as that practice is meant for "the old ropes", which can no longer be used. His

amulets were cut from new ropes made as demonstrations for people to see at his homestay project—the principle of making amulets only from new ropes seems to be the standard for Kui vendors, but not for those outside of the culture. Mao, a Kui mahout and head of his village, stated, "in the past, they used to cut the rope [to make into amulets] but now the Khru Pa says you cannot cut it, you need to keep it in the shrine. If you cut it, you need to perform a ceremony, but now we're told it's better not to [cut it]". This is another example of the older Kui's authority over their heritage. Mao did, however, share a similar sentiment to another Kui mahout I spoke to, stating that Thai people can buy the rope if they want to; however, he cautioned that while some buy the rope and treat it with respect and good things happen, "bad people" with the Pakam rope will be "punished". He did add that "you wouldn't do [cut] a real rope". This distinction further contributes to outlining the different perceptions of authenticity within the Kui community relating to new and old ropes.

In the past, elephants roamed more widely and were kept by more Kui Ajiang. As modern pressures forced families to sell their elephants and abandon the traditional roles of the mahout or mor chang, the Pakam rope has also lost its significance to these groups. In many cases, this loss of belief has resulted in families getting rid of their Pakam ropes or selling them—as the old ropes, in particular, can be quite valuable, selling for tens of thousands of baht. This process is probably how many old ropes found their way into the hands of the amulet sellers. Saipha Salangam said, "there used to be elephants in Buriram, Sisaket, everywhere. Now, there are none, so people still have the rope, but the new generation doesn't understand it; they've forgotten. They don't know how to treat the rope properly".

Funeral books are something of a Thai cultural phenomenon. They are volumes on the deceased's life (or lifework) that are compiled and printed to be handed out to guests attending the funeral. I read a couple of funeral books related to the Kui during my research—one was a book by a researcher who had spent time researching the Kui language. Another was for the funeral of mor chang Chai Chidchob, who was born in Surin. According to his son, he identified as ethnic Thai with a Kui background (personal communication, 2024). This choice of identification not only speaks again to the ambiguities of the Kui identity but also affirms local perceptions of an ethnic hierarchy, whereby the Kui Ajiang are acknowledged as being elephant catchers and keepers, but those with more power and influence—those who manage more elephants—are further up. In addition to being a mor chang, Chai was perhaps better known for his career in Thai politics, serving as the president of the National Assembly of Thailand and speaker of the

House of Representatives between 2008 and 2011. Chai's book contained a section written by his son Newin (who similarly identifies as an ethnic Thai with Kui ancestry), who followed his father into politics, serving as a member of parliament for Buriram province and minister to the Office of the Prime Minister from 2005–6.

This career choice is interesting to consider, as association with elements of supernaturalism—be it astrology, numerology, divination, or so-called black magic—has been a part of Thai politics throughout history, with Siani (2023) pointing to Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram as an example of a political actor who consulted with diviners. This supernaturalism continues to punctuate political movements on all sides of the spectrum, from pro-regime to protestors (Siani, 2023). As Jackson (2016) observes, "elite participation in supernatural ritual is becoming an increasingly visible and politically significant dimension of the symbolism and exercise of power in early twenty-first-century Thailand". This association with the supernatural can bolster a politician's perceived power. It could further explain Newin's continuation of the Pakam ritual, which he discusses in his father's funeral book. Interestingly, Pasuk and Baker (2008) discuss Newin's spiritual power and the role this played in supporting former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Rather than the association with Pakam, however, it was the association of Newin's with a Khmer background—and the perception of Cambodia as being "a source of great spiritual power" and Khmers having "access to powerful techniques" that was leveraged (Pasuk and Baker 2008, p. 4). When asked about his ethnic background, however, Newin stated that he does not consider himself Khmer (personal communication, 2024). This association is perhaps another conflation of Kui and Khmer identity. In any case, performing rituals like worship of the Pakam, associated with spirit cult and animism, might be a way of maintaining an image of spiritual potency to further his political ambitions. Perhaps this connection to Pakam and elephant catching also aided his father's political aspirations.

Newin's words in the book provide an interesting insight into what happens when traditions are passed on, but the belief underpinning them has not. For example, Newin (2020, p. 37) describes how on the fourth of April every year, the family celebrates Pakam by lighting incense and paying their respects at the Pakam shrine, stating that "It's a superstition we abide by, we held on to this belief until some people thought I was a witch doctor". He (2020, p. 37) clarifies that although he does not believe in Pakam, "We preserve some things even if we don't believe in it, but we don't disparage it. It reflects what my father believed", crediting this practice as an inheritance from his father and "the root" of his family. At the end, he affirms that,

despite not believing in it and the prejudice associated with it, this annual celebration of Pakam "will be passed on to the next generation". This is because it is the act of the tradition and its grounding in deep time that give it importance to Newin, rather than personal belief. Nonetheless, while this practice will be sustained to an extent, subsequent generations will inherit only the performative aspect of lighting incense at the Pakam shrine while not understanding the underlying spiritual system behind these actions. Newin's (2020) statement also highlights how these animist religious practices may be seen as taboo or backward by the wider Thai society and may be why families stop practising Pakam worship.

Newin's comments in his father's funeral book also speak to the important symbolic role of the Pakam rope in the absence of other elements of Kui elephant culture (e.g., the elephants themselves). I was told by a family who sells Pakam ropes that new Pakam ropes are made and sold for ekalak (เอกลักษณ์). This translates roughly to "a unique, positive symbol, or identity". According to Supatra, a Kui woman who commissions and sells these new Pakam ropes, they are typically bought by people whose families no longer have any elephants for them "to keep to show what a Pakam rope is". The rope, therefore, serves as a way of maintaining this one aspect of the Kui elephant-keeping tradition in families for whom everything else has been lost. Saipha's comment about how people today have forgotten how to treat the rope, however, alongside Newin's (2020) account of his own relationship to this belief in Pakam, demonstrates how ownership of the Pakam rope alone is not enough to sustain the tradition.

The continued presence of elephants and the mor chang are also needed to preserve the beliefs relating to Pakam. I met Woraporn at one of the celebrations at Wat Pa Ajiang in Surin. She is a Kui woman from Ban Takhian, a village on the border with Cambodia, roughly two hours from Ban Taklang. Woraporn noted that "we don't have the Pakam rope any more because there are no more elephants. A long time ago, we used to have elephants and the Pakam rope". This highlights the connection between the continued presence of elephants in the village and care for the Pakam traditions—loss of elephants led to loss of the Pakam rope. Nonetheless, she also said that "I don't care that we don't have elephants any more" because they are too expensive to look after, but she is glad to have "elephant villages" like Ban Taklang, where she can visit and still experience this aspect of Kui tradition that her family have long since lost. Somphon, who lives in one such elephant village in Surin said that, while his family never had elephants themselves, "Kui and elephants have been together since ancient times. I don't feel like I don't have elephants; we live together". In this way, perhaps a sense of loss

for the elephant heritage is not felt as intensely by these Kui, as it is still possible to go to the Wat Pa Ajiang temple or have neighbours who own elephants and, therefore, witness these traditions continuing to be preserved by others. But this also highlights the precarious nature of this elephant heritage, which is heavily reliant on the national AED. Specifically, the continuation of this tradition hinges on the Thai government continuing to permit the domestic elephant trade.

Phasa Phi Pa: The Forest Spirit Language

The phasa phi pa (ภาษาผีป่า) or “forest spirit language” (sometimes also translated as the “forest ghost language”), and also called the “forest language” (phasa pa; ภาษาป่า) or “Pakam language” (phasa Pakam; ภาษาปะกำ), is a special language spoken by Kui mor chang only when in the forest, while looking to catch elephants. It is a language of substitution, which combines elements from Kui, Khmer, Lao, Thai, Pali, and Sanskrit, all mixed together—taking certain words from these different languages and giving them new meanings (Chakrapong et al., 2010). Different communities will have their own versions of this spirit language. For example, one book (Phraya Phetphisaisrisawat, 2014, pp. 334–42) records variations between nine separate provinces in Thailand. The essential and unchanging feature, however, is that this was the only language spoken for the entire duration of the time spent on the hunt (Pittaya, 2002). To speak any other language would bring misfortune to the group of mor chang, such as an unsuccessful hunt or even injury to the person who misspoke (Phraya Ratchasena, 1949).

Knowledge of this forest spirit language is the final aspect of Kui culture affected by the end of wild elephant capture that I will explore in this book. As Kui mor chang no longer enter the forest to engage in elephant catching, there is also no longer a context in which this language can be spoken. Moreover, there is no context for this language to be transmitted. One prominent feature of the phasa phi pa is that it is not formally taught or learnt. Instead, the young mor chang—those of the lowest rank—learn the language through observation and immersion while apprentices on hunting trips (Nikhom, 1990). As speaking any language other than the phasa phi pa during this time is forbidden and risks harming the success of the hunt and the safety of the mor chang themselves, the apprentices cannot speak at all during their time in the forest until they have mastered this language. To fully participate in the wild elephant capture, Kui men must know how to speak the phasa phi pa. Consequently, this language

was one of the first skills related to elephant catching that the young mor chang would learn (Nikhom, 1990).

The mor chang I interviewed who told me they could speak the forest spirit language were all from the older generation who, at one point, had used this language regularly (although Boonma, like with the rope, told me that today, he is "the only one who can speak [the phasa phi pa]". In Boonma's words, "people don't speak the ghost language anymore, even mor chang now, because they've never been to the forest to catch elephants", once more pointing towards how the knowledge of this language is inextricably linked to the process of the elephant hunt and the space of the wild forest. Boonma also ties lack of knowledge of the phasa phi pa to a sense of inauthenticity, stating that the younger mor chang have "only inherited the [mor chang] tradition, but they haven't caught elephants, they don't speak the forest language, the ghost language".

Apinan, one of the younger mor chang, commented, "I know some of the forest spirit language, but I'm not allowed to read the texts because I'm still young; it's bad luck". His point raises the issue of gatekeeping mor chang knowledge. The texts Apinan referred to belong to the temple, Wat Pa Ajiang. They contain written records of the phasa phi pa—documented in Thai either by academics or mor chang themselves but access to these books is restricted by the monks in charge. In the past, this knowledge would have been transmitted from higher-ranked mor chang to the new initiates at the earliest stages of their training. Now that the practice of elephant hunting can no longer take place and this transmission of knowledge no longer occurs, the temple has taken over the documentation and storing of this knowledge and also holds control over who can access it. This has meant that the new generation of mor chang now have restricted access to this information on their own heritage. In this way, the monks and the Kui temple are part of an additional AHD emerging at the community level—one that exists alongside the AHD of the older mor chang as well as the overarching provincial and national discourses.

Even *with* access to these records, in the absence of months of immersion in the forest to learn and practise the language, it has become an almost impossible skill to acquire. Some of the younger mor chang mentioned that their fathers had written down the language in personal journals and that these books are now their sole source of language learning. Access to these texts, however, has yet to equate with the uptake of the language. Saipha Salangam, for example, remarked, "I don't really remember it because I never use it. I have a book; my father wrote it all down. In the past, they would remember it because they had to use it". Similarly, Sunthorn said that while

he has his father's book, "there's no place to speak the language", and he can only really remember the word used in place of "elephant"—thewada/ เทวดา (which is also the word for "angel" in Thai). Thewada was the most remembered word for those of the younger generation that I spoke with. Sunthorn told me that "only those who are academic want to learn [the language]. Really, all mor chang need to know it, but not all of them do. They only know a few important words" (e.g., "elephant"). As the generations go on, this language is slowly being lost. Loon comes from a generation just in between the new mor chang and the original mor chang, "somewhere in the middle". He commented, "my generation knows a little, but the younger generation knows nothing". Dui, another mor chang, told me that he thinks "the younger generation isn't interested in learning the language". From speaking with the mor chang, it seems as though the forest spirit language no longer has a role in contemporary life and as such, the young mor chang community does not feel the loss of this language as keenly. For the older generation, who do feel this impending loss, it is through a framework of helplessness, much as how Boonma feels about the knowledge of ropemaking—"it's sad, but what can you do about it". This perception of an unshakeable course toward loss was echoed by Loon, who said that "[the phasa phi pa] is slowly disappearing. I don't like it, but what can you do".

The documentation of the phasa phi pa is also an inherently flawed process, as it was never meant to be written down or learnt from reading in the first place. Chakrapong et al. (2010, p. 132) note that the phasa phi pa spoken from 1917 to 1961 was well documented by researchers working between 1969 and 1993, with a total of 364 substituted words and their meanings recorded. One shortfall of this research, however, is that these words were all written in Thai (Chakrapong et al., 2010, p. 132). Although the transcription attempted to mimic Kui tones, these sounds are not so easily translatable. For example, where Thai has five standard tones, Kui has six. As a result, the pronunciation recorded in Thai is unlikely always to match many of the actual words directly. Dr Sanong, who has developed a written script for the Kui language to address such issues, observed that the meaning of Kui words is lost when they are written in Thai. This new alphabet has, however, come too late to record the now functionally extinct phasa phi pa. This emphasises the even more pressing need for oral inheritance in a language with no written script.

Kraus (1992, p. 12) warns that "[l]ose a language and you lose knowledge that that language was invented to express". In the case of the Kui and the phasa phi pa, the end of the search for and capture of wild elephants brought about this loss of language. Where other traditions that were

similarly endangered by the end of this elephant-catching practice have been preserved and adapted, the forest spirit language has not found a way of retaining meaning and currency in this new world. The Kui seem less focused on conserving this aspect of their culture. Priority is instead given to the traditions that can be continued in a different context and with slight modification—as seen with the simulated elephant capture using baby elephants and the continuation of rope making despite a lack of a formal transmission of that knowledge. After all, what use is a language spoken only in the forest and only when hunting for elephants when neither of these contexts exists anymore? Although the capture of wild elephants has been adapted using newborn elephants with "wild spirits", the extended hunt itself no longer takes place over weeks or months spent in the deep forest. Most of the forest in Thailand, let alone Surin, is also now gone. In 1957, 80% of Thailand was forested; by 1992, this number had decreased to 20%, although today, coverage remains around 30% (Lohanan, 2002, n.p.). This means little to the Kui. The few remaining forested spaces are closed to them. There is nowhere left for a language reserved for the pa.

As the natural environment has changed, so has the culture tied to this land. Despite the elephant's status as an endangered species, the Kui never actually lost their elephants. There was a dramatic shift in the demographic composition of the animal from wild to domesticated and a need for a cognitive shift that expanded what was considered wild in this new context. But the physical elephants themselves always remained. What the Kui did lose, however, is the forests. More specifically, they lost the "wild"—the pa. While a new version of the elephant capture takes place today, the space in which it is enacted is not considered a forest by the mor chang. The phrase that emerged during the interviews, of elephant catching ending because the government closed the forest, further implies that these spaces were never reopened. While other aspects of the mor chang tradition have managed to find a way to adapt, it seems that the forest spirit language no longer has a place.

The sentiment of there being no appropriate place to speak the language was echoed in my interviews with the mor chang. I was told, "There is no chance to speak the language now. We can only speak it in the forest" (Dui); "There is no place to speak it now" (Loon); and "You learn when in the forest, catching an elephant, you can't learn in the house" (Boonma). It is important to note the language used here. As discussed previously, pa means both forest and wild. It therefore describes a specific type of environment—one untouched by human intervention. So, when the Kui say there are no more forests, they are saying there is no more pa—i.e., there are

no remaining wild spaces untouched by people. This is one of the hallmarks of our Anthropocene. When the government legislated Thailand's forests, these spaces were closed to the Kui and ceased to be wild. They became thammachat—spaces of a cultured and safe nature to be enjoyed by the elite. How can you speak the phasa phi pa—a language, literally "of the forest", intimately tied to a particular environment—when that environment no longer exists? This, however, raises another question: whether, in the absence of this environment, the language has any purpose or relevance at all?

This change in the composition of the natural landscape may have resulted in a loss of understanding of the phasa phi pa's significance, especially by the younger mor chang, who were never reliant on using this language for their safety. Dui told me that the younger generation finds the phasa phi pa difficult to learn and "they don't know why they need to know it". Pao Salangam, a Khru Pa Yai interviewed in 2010 (Chakrapong et al., 2010), said that those who made offerings to the Pakam god spoke the ghost language and captured elephants from the wild will be protected by the spirit of Pakam forever. When the Kui mor chang of the past entered the forest, belief in spirits and proper conduct was necessary to ensure their safety, livelihoods, and, most importantly, survival. To this older generation, then, the phasa phi pa is essential.

Today, this belief does not hinge on life-or-death matters. Instead, traditions are performed out of respect for past practices. This perception of the phasa phi pa's importance also appears to be tied with reverence for the spirit world. Although the mor chang today continue to make offerings to Pakam and perform ceremonies surrounding the Pakam rope, this has become more a performance—a repetition of gestures—than a true belief. In the case of the Pakam rope, attempts to carry on the knowledge of making the rope seem to have focused more on the materiality of the practice rather than on its spiritual aspect. As the phasa phi pa is one grounded entirely in this spiritual realm, with no material knowledge attached, perhaps this contributed to a lack of interest and uptake in learning and preserving this language.

The imposition of the AED through nature conservation measures significantly impacted Kui elephant heritage, with some aspects of this heritage proving more adaptable than others. Again, however, comes a question of value—was the forest spirit language not adapted because the Kui could not find a place for it in a world without elephant captures, or did they not find it necessary enough to save? Are the more spiritual aspects of Kui culture no longer as valuable as those material, visible (and also marketable) parts? In this way, these aspects of the Kui cultural renaissance are similar to a

phenomena Keesing (1989, p. 31) noted in a study of contemporary uses of culture in the Pacific Islands and criticisms of local uses of invented tradition, in particular, the observation that "their ancestral cultures are symbols rather than experienced realities". The younger generation harnesses these symbols to give "socio-cultural and political flesh and bones to essentialist and reified identities" (Briggs, 1996, p. 437).

The younger Kui—the inheritors of these traditions—have lost their connection to certain parts of their culture and the sense of importance and power of these practices. In the case of the "ghost language", the value of seeking protection from the wild spirits of the forest no longer exists in a world where there are no wild forests with spirits to seek protection from. This is on top of the added difficulties of trying to learn the phasa phi pa today. Why go to the trouble of learning a language you can never speak? Why learn a language you might never need? And why learn a spirit language if you might not even believe in these spirits at all? It is the traditions that have more symbolic (and political) potency in the modern world and that are tied to something tangible that have survived—the mor chang in their ceremonial capacity and the production of the Pakam rope, which will continue to be made despite the beliefs of the older generation to the contrary.

Blurred Boundaries: Elephants and the Elephant People

When it comes to the Kui, and to the mor chang, in particular, the boundaries between people and elephants are blurred. This unique relationship reinforces how integral elephants are to the Kui identity and, therefore, how precarious Kui culture is—reliant on the Thai AED remaining favourable towards the domestic elephant trade. The Kui have a story about a mor chang who was the highest-ranked elephant catcher, thereby claiming the title of Phra Mor Thao. This is the version of this story as it was told to me by the abbot of Wat Pa Ajiang temple in Surin, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan:

> Thao was the best mor chang in his village, but one day, he broke the rules and took his wife and son, named 'Kong', into the forest with him to hunt an elephant. He wanted his son to be the best mor chang, just like him, and thought that his skill would keep his son safe. On the hunt, however, his son remembered his past life where he was a baby elephant that Thao caught. The baby elephant then died because he missed his mother too much. When Thao and his family came across signs of a wild elephant,

Figure 7.8: A mor chang holds the khaen hnung, with three strands of the Pakam rope—stripped with a utility knife and hammered flat—resembling remains of Thao's wife's hand after she was mauled by the tiger (photograph by author).

> Thao left his wife at their campsite and went after the elephant with his son. When they caught up to it, however, his son recognised the elephant as his mother from his past life and jumped onto her back. Together, they fled into the forest. Thao chased after the elephant and his son until dark but was unsuccessful. He returned to the camp to look for his wife, but when morning hit, he saw blood everywhere and discovered that she had been eaten by a tiger, leaving only a few of her fingers behind. He tied the remains of his wife's hand to his Pakam rope and brought it back to his village. Today, all elephants are called 'Kong' after Thao's son, and at the end of each Pakam rope is a section called the แขนหนัง/khaen hnung or 'leather arm', which resembles the hand of Thao's wife (see Fig. 7.8).

The story of Phra Mor Thao provides an insight into how the Kui view themselves in relation to elephants—as interconnected. Kong is the son of the best mor chang to have lived. In this way, he comes from a lineage of men who dominate the wild elephants, but he also once was an elephant himself. He then lost his sense of human identity in the forest, and, today, all captured wild elephants are called by his name. The Kui elephant owners I spoke with during my time in Surin similarly use a language of kinship to describe their relationship with their animals; older elephants are referred to

as grandparents, while younger elephants are likened to siblings or children. In this way, and as illustrated by this tale of Phra Mor Thao, there is no clear distinction between mor chang and elephant and no obvious hierarchy of power. This relationship, however, is not a one-way exchange. This reinforces the liminal position the Kui Ajiang occupy between nature and culture, as the connection between the elephant and the human brings the elephant further into the cultural realm and the human further into the natural realm.

Before any elephant capture, the mor chang perform a ritual of "opening the forest"—requesting permission to allow the hunters to enter. During this process, Kong is invoked as "the owner or master of all wild elephants" (Cuasay, 2002, p. 157). As the mor chang enter the forest, they also enter a period known as kao kam, wherein they "renounce all worldly affairs" for the duration of the hunt as they enter the spirit realm (Rote, 1972, p. 165). The pa is the realm of nature and the mor chang become part of the forest and its attached spirits. During this period, the men followed a strict code of conduct, which included speaking only the phasa phi pa. At the end of the hunt, another ritual is performed to bring the mor chang back to the material world (Rote, 1972, p. 177). While the elephant can be viewed as a liminal being in Thai society—not quite an animal, yet not fully human either—the elephant that occupies a central role in Thai culture is the *civilised* elephant, often decked in gold-threaded fabric and jewelled headdresses, or the godly elephant, such as the three-headed Erawan. The relationship between the everyday Thai and these particular elephants is one that elevates the elephant to the realm of culture and humankind, without compromising Thai civility. On the other hand, the elephants that the Kui have traditionally associated most closely with have been the wild elephants, who live in the spirit realm. This relationship is one that has drawn the mor chang closer to the world of nature and wilderness.

These wild elephants and their forest realm are no longer known to the Kui today. Apart from babies before the pasa ritual, the Kui interact only with elephants who have already had their wild spirits removed. When forests are no longer accessible and hunting no longer taking place, what happens to the Kui connection with the spirit world and their elephants on this deeper level? The Kui no longer have the opportunity to experience this in-between state of kao kam and consequently engage in a more conventional relationship with the environment—from the perspective of the material world looking in. The Kui have continued to have a close physical connection with their elephants, as well as a perception of familial relationship, as the animals come from lineages that are passed down within families from Kui father to son (and, in some instances, to daughter). As we see with the phasa phi pa, however, this is once more a difference between the physical

aspect of the heritage and the layers of spiritual belief behind it. The intimate relationship with nature that only arises through the period of entering the spiritual world is lost. The opportunity and need are no longer there, and so a disconnect emerges between practice and belief.

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Abbreviations

AHD	authorised heritage discourse
AED	authorised environmental discourse

8 New Spaces for the Enactment of Kui Culture: Heritagisation and (Re)Invented Traditions

Abstract
This chapter explores the relationship between the AHD and heritagisation at three sites: the Surin Elephant Round-Up, Ban Taklang/Elephant World, and Wat Pa Ajiang. Heritagisation is presented through these examples as a means of reclaiming agency or further compromising agency, as it is controlled by different actors (external or internal to the community) and for different audiences. While all three sites involve aspects of Kui elephant heritage, the Kui only have direct agency in the heritagisation of Wat Pa Ajiang, although this is also directed by an AHD led by monks. The Kui are not the primary audiences of the Round-Up or Elephant World, where Kui heritage is presented as the heritage of the province and nation.

Keywords
festivals; AHD; elephants; Indigeneity; agency; Buddhism

"Heritagisation" is a term coined by Archaeologist Kevin Walsh (1992, p. 4), who describes it as a process of reducing "real places to tourist space, constructed by the selective quotation of images of many different pasts which more often than not contribute to the destruction of actual places". While not labelled as "heritagisation", ideas underlying this notion—relating to the deliberate construction of heritage—emerged as early as 1987, in Robert Hewison's (1987, p. 9) warnings against the manufacture of heritage as "a commodity which nobody seems able to define, but which everybody is eager to sell". I view heritagisation as "a mode of cultural production in the present with recourse to the past" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995, p. 370). Put simply, heritagisation in its broadest and most basic sense entails a contemporary repackaging of elements of the past as "Heritage." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

Santikarn, Alisa. *Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025
DOI: 10.5117/9789048561995_CH08

(2004, p. 61) distinguishes between "heritage"—the product of heritagisation, and "pre-heritage"—that exists before this transformation. This distinction may also be expressed through heritage (uncapitalised)—as pre-existing versus Heritage (capitalised)—the transformed product. Accordingly, heritage—or, more specifically, places officially designated and perceived as Heritage—does not exist a priori but rather results from the heritagisation process. The official Heritage that emerges is socially produced through human intervention in a given place; in other words, Heritage is the product of those doing the heritagising.

Heritagisation is connected to the AHD, as both deal with a so-called official construction of Heritage. AHDs can also direct heritagisation. This can be seen, for example, in the Surin government's adoption of both ancient Khmer ruins and elephants as provincial heritage. The heritagisation process has simultaneously reduced this provincial heritage to these two elements and made them more universally relatable—undermining the Khmer and Kui exclusive associations with these symbols by widening perceptions of ownership. This supports the national AHD by elevating elements appropriated as Thai culture over minoritised culture and promoting symbolism related to monarchy. As a result of its connection to the AHD, heritagisation has most often been discussed as a top-down process performed by those in power and at the level of the government or large organisations such as UNESCO. Salemink (2016, p. 314), for example, argues that heritagisation is "an appropriation of the past and thus an attempt to control the future by certain elites", as the practice involves severing the tie between heritage and local communities in place of "a formally ritualised connection" between the heritage and the nation-state instead. Heritagisation can, however, also be enacted by the community itself. Furthermore, rather than a top-down "attempt to control the future" (Salemink, 2016, p. 314), heritagisation may arise as people try to make a living in the present. Alternatively, it might be seen as a localised attempt by communities to control their own futures within a system that disempowers them to ensure the survival of their culture as best they can. As societal values and norms have shifted, making one's heritage more marketable through the heritagisation process could, in some cases, be seen as a form of safeguarding or an act to ensure cultural resilience.

The Coranderrk Aboriginal Station was established on Wurundjeri land in Australia in 1863 as a reserve for Aboriginal peoples from south-central Victoria. The Wurundjeri people were denied rights to their language and heritage while at the station. Nonetheless, Beruk (also known as William Barak), a Wurundjeri man who initially helped petition for the establishment of Coranderrk, was able to subvert these restrictions. He did so through

tourism. The station became an attraction to settlers, and members of the Aboriginal community at Coranderrk sold various souvenirs—tools, pieces of art, etc.—to the visitors. This allowed the Wurundjeri people to transmit cultural knowledge and continue to practice certain aspects of their heritage within this broader guise of commercialisation (*beruk,* 2024). Item 10 in UNESCO's Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage cites "commodification" as a potential threat to heritage. Importantly, however, it caveats that communities should determine what constitutes a threat. UNESCO's (2009) "Draft operational directives on raising awareness about intangible cultural heritage" notes that commercialisation can have benefits such as raising awareness on the importance of heritage, generating income, contributing to social cohesion, and the transmission of knowledge, although it also warns of threats that may arise through this process. Commodification and heritagisation are not inherently harmful. In the case of the Wurundjeri people at Coranderrk, appealing to tourism was a means of cultural survival within a restrictive colonial system. A similar parallel could be drawn to the Kui Ajiang and their use of their elephant traditions.

Heritagisation can occur "at all scales, from the global to the local" (Carter et al., 2020), involving individuals and communities alongside governments and organisations. The creation of Heritage is subjective and directed by the values of those responsible for the heritagisation. Consequently, certain aspects of a given heritage may be emphasised to benefit a specific audience and achieve a particular agenda. The three sites of heritagisation that I will present in this chapter are instigated by different actors and target different audiences. AHDs that emerge at all scales direct the values that arise through the heritagisation process. When heritagisation occurs at the state level, these added values may play into the national AHD and marginalise community voices by circumscribing their claims to this heritage in favour of a dominant cultural narrative. Provincial-level heritagisation may also produce narratives that do not neatly align with the national AHD. These authorising discourses also direct heritagisation when it is a community-level process, as power is relative, and imbalances and AHDs exist at all levels. The relationship between heritagisation and a given AHD depends on both the instigator of the heritagisation and the intended audience.

The Surin Elephant Round-Up: External Heritagisation

I went into my observation of the 2019 Surin Elephant Round-Up with several preconceptions that arose from two initial fieldwork visits focused

almost exclusively on interviews with the Kui community, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, painted a one-sided perspective on issues relating to Kui heritage. Given both historical and contemporary examples of the Thai state's attitudes towards minority groups and considering the adoption of the Surin Round-Up as a national festival, I approached my first Round-Up expecting to find instances of the silencing and appropriation of Kui culture. Based on interviews conducted during previous fieldwork with the Kui, I had also approached the Round-Up as an example of appropriated Kui heritage. What emerged, however, was a far more complex image of a multivocal elephant heritage—of the Kui, Lao, and Khmer—all situated under the broader umbrella of Thai.

Origins: The Helicopter Story

Two dates are often presented for the first Surin Elephant Round-Up: 1955 and 1960. The 1955 date is printed along the bottom of a black and white picture of this first Round-Up that can be bought from vendors selling elephant-related items—such as ivory bracelets, elephant hair rings, and elephant oil amulets—at events like the Round-Up and the National Elephant Day festivities. This picture portrays a herd of elephants and their mahouts gathered in a field. Somewhere near the front row of this picture is Chai Chidchob, the mor chang whose funeral book I discussed earlier. The caption at the bottom of the photo reads: "The First Elephant Roundup in 1955, in Surin, Thailand", with an image credit to the Elephant Village Foundation Fund.

Most other sources, however, cite the year of the first Round-Up as 1960. An official I spoke with from the Surin Provincial Administrative Organisation responsible for organising the Round-Up, Santhad Saenthong, explained that while 1960 was the year of the first "official" Round-Up, the 1955 date comes from "a different gathering of elephants" in the area. According to Santhad, in 1955, the villagers of Tha Tum District heard that there would be a helicopter landing in a nearby field, and since they had never seen one before, they all gathered to watch it. Tha Tum had (and still has) many elephant-owning families, so they all took their primary vehicles—the elephants—to the landing site. Some three hundred elephants and their mahouts gathered that day to witness this spectacle of the helicopters. Little did they know, to the community outside of Surin, these men and their elephants would become the spectacle in turn. Inspired by photographs and news coverage of this event, the head of Tha Tum district decided to hold an official elephant show in 1960 at the old local airport. The publicity from this event resulted in interest from foreign and domestic tourists alike, capturing the attention of the Tourist

Organisation[1]—a branch of the Thai government newly founded in March of that same year. The Tourism Organisation proposed to the Ministry of the Interior that the Surin Festival be made into a large-scale event for the province and should be marketed to promote tourism in Thailand. This second (1961) Round-Up's success led to the Tourism Organisation putting the event forward as an annual national festival—a resolution passed by the cabinet in 1962. Whereas only a few hundred people attended the 1960 Round-Up, according to Santhad Saenthong, the head of the Round-Up Organisation, today the Surin Elephant Round-Up attracts up to 10,000 spectators over the festival's two days of stadium performances.

The government at the time of these early Round-Ups—led by Sarit Thanarat—had a cultural agenda of neo-traditionalist revival and was working to showcase Thailand's "stable and timeless identity" by creating new national heritage repackaged as ancient tradition (Phillips, 2016, p. 146). The Surin Round-Up formed part of this heritage construction and was used as an example to highlight the nation's authenticity, perfectly juxtaposing to the increasing influx of Western cultural influence, which the government viewed as a threat to Thainess Phillips, 2016, p. 146). Undergoing the process of folklorisation described earlier, the Round-Up was, therefore, marketed equally to the urban Thais—for whom this was simultaneously nostalgic *and* a novelty—and foreigners attracted by the exoticism of the elephant performance.

The focus of Thailand's official heritage on the three pillars of nation, religion, and monarchy has meant that more local traditions and expressions of culture are not usually celebrated outside of individual communities. Occasionally, however, selected local traditions have been appropriated as national and are celebrated widely. This nationalisation process changes the heritage narrative by erasing prior, individualistic claims to the heritage in favour of a broader, unifying Thai story. This, to an extent, has happened with the Surin Elephant Round-Up. I use the qualifier because, although partly based on the idea of the Kui tradition of the elephant capture and inspired by the initial and unplanned Kui gathering of elephants in 1955, the Surin Round-Up itself is an example of an invented tradition (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) with no direct parallel in Kui culture at the time. Therefore, the question is whether the Kui could be erased from a tradition that was never fully theirs.

Even the term "Round-Up" does not accurately describe the traditional Kui method of capturing elephants. The Kui would typically ride into the forest in small groups on elephantback, tracking and lassoing wild elephants using domesticated elephants called "decoys" (chang dor) as part of a method

1 As of 1979, this organisation has been known as the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

known as phon chang (Assadang et al., 2012). While very successful attempts could result in a few elephants being captured, most trips were either unsuccessful or concluded with only one to two elephants being caught, with an annual capture rate of around 20–25 animals (Schliesinger, 2010). Instead, "Round-Up" better describes the royal tradition of elephant captures, using the kraal method, wherein hundreds of wild elephants at a time would be herded into an enclosure (the kraal). Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the first Surin Elephant Round-Up officially sponsored by the Tourist Organisation of Thailand occurred in the same year that the "last royally sponsored elephant round-up" in the ancient Ayutthaya capital took place (Cohen, 2008, p. 151). These royal elephant roundups held immense political and symbolic importance. As a central part of Thai cultural diplomacy, these roundups were performed for members of the upper class, dignitaries, and monarchs for centuries. The 1962 royal roundup, for example, was held by King Rama IX for King Frederik IX of Denmark's visit. The Surin Elephant Round-Up was a local festival repackaged and repositioned as the ideal replacement for losing the royal/national tradition. In this repackaging, the relative intimacy of the Kui tradition is eschewed in favour of the larger spectacle. This can be seen, for example, with Act 1 of the Round-Up performance—the "Kui scene", which is much more like the royal kraals, featuring elephants in their hundreds, stampeding around the stadium space to the audience's delight.

The first government-sponsored Round-Up of 1962 also took place the same year that the International Court of Justice made its ruling on the hotly disputed Preah Vihear temple—part of the reason for the border closure that contributed to the end of the Kui elephant captures in the first place. The court concluded that the temple belonged to Cambodia, and not Thailand. Cuasay (2002, p. 44) interviewed Phichai Noywat, one of the organisers of the early Surin Round-Ups, who admitted that the new spectacle of the Round-Up "somewhat compensated [...] for the loss of one cultural treasure by creating a new source of cultural prestige". After all, as Herzfeld (2021, p. 138) notes, "the spectacular has long been a favoured instrument of cultural management" in Thailand. The government investment in presenting the Surin Round-Up as a national event should, therefore, also be viewed in light of this loss of the Preah Vihear temple, which lies less than a four-hour drive from Surin's provincial capital. We might, then, consider the government's investment in the Round-Up as an attempt to avert attention away from the humiliation of losing the temple to Cambodia by replacing that important heritage symbol with another newly minted heritage icon in the same area. One year later, in 1963, the (white) elephant was designated as the national animal of Thailand, adding a layer of nationalistic pride and symbolism to the Round-Up performance.

Although it was never a Kui tradition before its recent invention, the Surin Round-Up is still important for the Kui who participate in it. As most mahouts/elephant owners in Surin are Kui, they also form the majority of elephantback performers in the Round-Up. When asked for a date for the last elephant capture in Surin, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan told me that no wild elephants were caught "since the Round-Up started". Therefore, besides being a national substitute for the royal elephant kraal and the Preah Vihear temple at the community level, the Surin Round-Up could also be viewed as a replacement for the Kui's loss of wild elephant captures. The performances of the Kui mahouts in this arena allow for the preservation and performance of their traditions—albeit in an altered form—that can no longer be practiced in their original manner. As Phra Khru Uptham-worakul states, "Kui people have to adjust themselves to contemporary needs and showcase new abilities". The Kui are, therefore, making the most of the restrictions now imposed upon their traditions—forced away from more authentic expressions of their culture as these practices are no longer legal.

The publicity, alongside the regional and national importance given to the festival, further help spread awareness of the Kui amongst the wider Thai and international publics. While the Kui were historically hidden by the state, they now play a central role in a nationally recognised festival. Yet to achieve this recognition, Kui culture has undergone strategic commercialisation as part of the Round-Up's heritagisation (Yoko, 2006). Phra Khru Dr Samuhan succinctly puts it: the Round-Up is "good for business, bad for culture". While the Round-Up does have its drawbacks, it is ultimately beneficial to the Kui, as its primary function for Kui heritage is not as a space for authenticity or cultural preservation. Instead, the Round-Up's primary function for the Kui is to promote their visibility and offer an additional employment opportunity for the mahouts in the region.

Claims to the Round-Up

Although some have levelled criticism of the Round-Up as a "dismal circus with elephants playing silly games" (Freeman, 2004, p. 71), the Round-Up has combined elements of culture with entertainment from its official inception as a tourism event in 1960. This circus element is, therefore, an integral part of the Round-Up tradition. The Round-Up predominantly features the same elements as when it was first conceived. When I attended in 2019, the programme involved four scenes: "Kuy Ajiang, People who Domesticate Elephants", "The Elephant Army of Patay Saman", "The Talents of Elephants", and "The Elephant Duel".

Figure 8.1: Kui mor chang reenacting the capture of wild elephants in Scene 1 of the 2019 Surin Round-Up (photograph by author).

Scene 1: Kuy Ajiang, People who Domesticate Elephants. This scene displays Kui elephant culture and is set in a traditional Kui village. The announcers describe people and elephants living together "like siblings", as the people have special knowledge of capturing and training wild elephants. Kui religion is presented as a mixture of Brahmin, Buddhist, and Animist beliefs. The Pakam rope and Pakam spirit are then introduced, as villagers give offerings to the rope in its shrine before heading out to capture elephants. The "mor chang",[2] dressed in traditional Kui clothing, then climb onto their elephants' backs and re-enact the lassoing of wild elephants, played by younger elephants (Fig. 8.1).

Scene 2: The Elephant Army of Pra Tay Saman. This is a historical scene from 1781, where Pra Tay Saman—the name of Surin province at the time—amassed an army of war elephants to support the Royal Siamese soldiers and quash an uprising in neighbouring Cambodia. The symbolism of Siam's domination over the Khmer/Cambodians in this scene clarifies the hierarchy of the relationship between the two nations—made even more notable given the festival's history following the Thai loss of the Preah Vihear temple to Cambodia. It also demonstrates the continued perception of Thai superiority over the Khmer, despite Surin adopting and embracing

2 Not all actors in this scene are mor chang in real life, many are just mahouts.

several aspects of Khmer culture in its provincial identity. The inclusion of this scene in the province's most important festival, therefore, draws a clear line between the Khmer culture that has become Thai—and is thereby seen as acceptable—and Khmer culture associated with Cambodia.

Scene 3: The Talents of Elephants. Although only one of four scenes, this part of the Round-Up makes up roughly half of the show's runtime. It involves elephants performing several tricks, including throwing darts, racing against one another, hula hooping, dancing to music, painting, competing in a tug of war, and playing a game of football as per tradition set by the first Round-Ups.

Scene 4: The Elephant Duel. Closing the Round-Up performances was a battle scene featuring an elephant duel between King Naresuan of Si Ayutthaya and the Burmese Crown Prince in 1592 (Fig. 8.2). The battle is a significant period of history for Thailand, and King Naresuan is greatly revered for his actions on this day. Consequently, this victory over the foreign invaders is an example of one of Thai history's analogies and rewritings of the nation's later colonial encounter and humiliation by the West. Like Scene 2 in the showcase, this enactment is highly symbolic. Both events show the people of Surin coming together with their war elephants against foreign aggressors, unifying the diverse communities within Surin and fostering a

Figure 8.2: Elephant duel from Scene 4 of the 2019 Round-Up (photograph by author).

sense of community and nationalism. While these scenes are provincially relevant, Thai audience members from outside of Surin will also interpret them as tales of Thai triumph, as the elephants and royal family are potent symbols of the nation.

If we view this festival as a tradition effectively invented in 1960, based loosely on the Kui culture of elephant catching in the region, and later adopted into the state heritage discourse as a national festival, who does it belong to? I first approached this festival as a Kui tradition that had been appropriated. The more nuanced image of the shared heritage of the Round-Up in Surin emerged only after observing this festival in person and speaking with the mahouts participating in it. These mahouts were a mixture of Kui, Thai, Khmer, and Lao—representative of the major ethnic groups comprising the population of Surin more broadly—although the majority of the Round-Up's mahout performers were still Kui. Table 8.1 shows responses from six mahouts who performed at the Round-Up, two people involved in its organisation, and the Head of the Surin National Museum, who were asked whether or not they thought that the Surin Elephant Round-Up was a Kui festival. There was a range of responses:

On (Thai mahout)	"Now it's not just for the Kui, that was in the past. I've done every Round-Up. I've watched it since I was a kid. The Round-Up has been an annual festival since ancient times. It helps the province. It's the way of the people of Surin since ancient times. It's important for the nation".
Khom (Thai organiser at the Round-Up)	"It's a national festival, not just for the Kui or Surin. People in Surin see it as a national event".
Mao (Kui mahout)	"It's been a Kui tradition since it started in 1955".
Prasit (Lao mahout)	"I've done the Round-Up every year, for longer than I can remember. It's not a Kui tradition, it's for the province. We need to help each other out. There's no difference: Kui, Lao, we have the same knowledge. Elephants can be anywhere".
SRLM1 (Lao mahout)	"Lao people catch elephants like the Kui. We have a different language, but everything else is the same".
SRKM1 (Kui/Khmer mahout)	"The Round-Up is probably a mix of Kui, Khmer, and Lao. We all have elephants".
SRKM2 (Kui mahout)	"Since the beginning, my ancestors had elephants. My dad told me they caught elephants from the wild for work. We didn't have a show like this. They closed the border, and we couldn't catch elephants anymore, so people thought we should do an elephant festival. The elephants were already here, and we would get tourists to come. It's a Surin tradition".

Arunee Sae-Iout (Head of Surin National Museum)	"You need to first understand what Kui and Thai mean. The Thai state is made of many groups—one of those is the Kui. During the colonial period, to stop the French and English, they made all of the groups Thai. [The Round-Up] is Thai heritage *and* Kui heritage. The Kui live in Surin, so it became Surin heritage".
Santhad Saenthong (Head of Round-Up Organisation)	"[The Round-Up] is the way of the Kui who look after elephants. We added information on the importance of the Kui, Lao, and Khmer people and added activities. We're telling the story of Thailand. The elephant is the animal of Thailand and the King".

Table 8.1: Interviewee responses when asked about the origins of the Surin Round-Up. All interviews were conducted in 2019.

The abbot at Wat Pa Ajiang told me many years ago, Chaiyaphum, another province in Northeast Thailand, wanted an elephant festival like the one in Surin. There are no Kui in that province. One night, the elephants at the new Chaiyaphum festival had their tusks stolen. The abbot, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan, remarked that "no one would dare [do this] except the Kui", suggesting that the Kui Ajiang took the tusks to stop their tradition from being stolen. He stated that the "tradition should remain in Surin". Although the abbot acknowledges that the Round-Up is a "new tradition built for tourists", the Kui involvement in the festival—given their history with elephants—is still considered crucial to the Round-Up. This story of the failed Chaiyaphum Round-Up highlights how, despite the inclusion of the Lao, Khmer, and Thai, and the Round-Up's relatively recent history, the Kui still view this festival as part of their culture.

The importance of the Kui to the Round-Up is encapsulated in the festival's first scene, which focuses on Kui culture and the origins of their elephant-catching tradition. What arose through my interviews with the Round-Up performers, however, was that the claim to Surin's elephant heritage by other minority groups, such as the Lao and Khmer, has been overlooked by the festival organisers (and perhaps even by the Kui Ajiang themselves). One Lao mahout performing in the 2019 Round-Up stated, "Lao people can catch elephants like the Kui" and have many overlapping elephant-related traditions. Yet, the local government has attributed this practice to the Kui alone. Another performer commented that the Lao, Kui, and Khmer "all have elephants" and have historical ties to these elephants. This is further complicated by the fluidity of identity within this region. Traditions may have been passed down, but the ethnic self-identities of the inheritors may have changed. For example, On, a mahout who identified as Thai, said that his grandfather used to capture elephants in Cambodia, describing a tradition that the Lao mahout had told me was almost uniquely Kui. It would be unfair, however, to say that the Round-Up ignores the Khmer and Lao.

These communities are continuously promoted alongside the Kui during the Round-Up through the repeated description of Surin province: "a land of the Khmer, Lao, and Kui living together in harmony", linking this festival to the heritage of all three communities. Khmer and Lao culture also receive their own segments in the parade preceding the Round-Up, and there are information booths on the culture of all three groups at the sound and light shows held in the evenings during the festival period.

The Surin Round-Up has taken Kui traditions and incorporated them with entirely new elements, producing a provincial and national heritage celebration. While some members of the Kui community see the festival as partly theirs, for others, the heritagisation of their elephant culture has removed any Kui claim to Round-Up. Dr Sanong for example, told me that the Surin Elephant Round-Up "never existed" as a tradition in the Kui community before 1960; therefore, it is a "tourist invention". Phra Khru Upthamworakul similarly described the event as a "new tradition built for tourists" while saying it was "never a Kui tradition" to begin with. The festival puts interpretations of Kui heritage on display in an AHD context. As discussed, Denes (2015, p. 9) describes the folklorisation of Khmer traditions in the Northeast of Thailand as a way of "demonstrating loyalty" to the Thai nation—marking the Khmer as familiar rather than a potentially dangerous other. The Round-Up similarly feeds into a post-Cold War process of performing "good" culture that helps diffuse negative perceptions of the region and its cultures, portraying them instead as active players in the national AHD. Yoko (2006, p. 289) describes this as the "management of diversity" through the domestication of difference. The non-Kui Ajiang additions to the Round-Up, in the form of symbolically loaded performances of national history, parades, and circus tricks, portray Surin's minority heritage as entertainment—commercialising and repackaging this culture for mass consumption. In doing so, these minority groups and their heritage are depoliticised.

The Kui Ajiang have no say in the higher-level organisation of the Round-Up as this is managed by the Surin provincial government. Instead, according to Sompoch, a Kui man I spoke with at the Round-Up, the Kui "just provide the elephants". The organisers are, therefore, the ones in control of how the aspects of Kui heritage are presented. This is influenced by both the provincial and national AHDs. One example of how Kui culture has been misrepresented and misrecognised can be seen in archival footage of an early Round-Up in 1965 by the international news agency Reuters. The film shows the mor chang making the traditional offering of a pig's head and whiskey to the Pakam rope. The text description provided alongside this

clip keeps the Kui nameless, instead calling them the more generic term: "elephant hunters", who "gather to perform traditional rites. The men use a pig's head and other ingredients to invoke the attention and protection of the spirits in the hunt that lies ahead". Another piece of archival footage shot by Reuters two years later, at the 1967 Round-Up, depicts Kui mor chang waiting behind a Pakam Shrine, with a Pakam Rope placed in the centre. It is a very similar scene to the one performed as part of the first act of the 2019 Round-Up. The narration in the clip, however, describes how "an altar was placed on the field [...] tribesmen sought the blessing of Lord Buddha before the start of the event" (Reuters, 1967). This description similarly avoids naming the Kui outright, turning them instead into not only an invisible community but *primitive* "tribesmen". The 1967 narration also erroneously attributes their offerings to Pakam as worship of Buddha—linking the Kui to the religion of the nation-state. The exoticism and reduction of Kui culture that emerges from this Western perception of the Kui are similar to Thai mischaracterisations of the community, which see the Kui as lacking culture because of their heritage's close entanglement with nature. These depictions feed into the misrecognition of the Kui and are particularly damaging as they frame how Kui heritage is portrayed to the wider world.

Although the Kui Ajiang and their unique religious practices are explicitly acknowledged in the contemporary version of the Round-Up and appear to play a central role in the event, there are still some instances where the Kui remain hidden. This was most apparent in the Round-Up's opening parade. As mentioned, separate sections of this parade were dedicated to the Khmer and the Lao, identifiable by banners preceding each group, which read "Khmer Culture" and "Lao Culture", respectively. The section of the parade that was led by Kui mahouts in traditional attire on elephant back, wielding lassos, followed by Kui villagers and the mor chang in their ceremonial dress, carrying the Pakam shrine—all very typical Kui cultural elements—was identified only by the banner, "The Origins of Elephant Catching in Surin". The Kui in this portion of the parade are highly visible but only identifiable as Kui by those who can recognise the visual cues. For anyone unfamiliar, this banner hides Kui culture behind the provincial identity, transforming Kui heritage into Surin heritage.

The continued conflation of the Kui's elephant heritage with Surin's provincial identity has also meant that most people in the province would not be able to recognise these elements as belonging to the Kui. The Surin Round-Up illustrates this tension of Kui (in)visibility in the province—seen but unknown. Having grown up in Surin, Dr Komatra Chuengsatiansup wrote his PhD thesis on the Kui. When I met with him, he recounted seeing

a group of people every year who were only visible during the show and would then disappear, saying he grew up not knowing who these people were, knowing the name “Kui” and nothing else. This absorption of Kui culture under the broader banner of provincial elephant culture is also apparent in the Surin National Museum, whose wing dedicated to the Kui is labelled “Surin, Elephant Land”. The use of elephant-related traditions as central to Surin’s provincial cultural identity has widened claims to this heritage. Instead of being understood as Kui, this elephant heritage is put forward in public settings as part of a more encompassing Thai and provincial culture—subsumed under these two AHDs. The Kui voice is often silenced within these frameworks in favour of instead elevating both the provincial and national narratives. Kui culture is placed in a paradoxical space—visible and simultaneously unrecognisable.

Therefore, while inspired by the Kui and heavily reliant upon their participation as performers, the Round-Up is an example of external heritagisation, demonstrating the use of Kui culture by the provincial and national governments. This ties back to the issue of identity politics, where acknowledgement of the Kui in certain instances may be perceived as a threat to the provincial message of harmony between the three primary cultures in the region: Kui, Lao, and Khmer (all of which also ultimately fall under the umbrella of Thai). As Komatra (1998, p. 259) observed over two decades ago, “the emphasis in terms of budget allocation and scheduling of the [Surin Round-Up] has made the exhibition of the Kui elephant hunting practice a less prominent element of the show”. While the circus-like tricks performed by the elephants have been a crowd-pleaser in the Round-Up since its inception, the decline in emphasis on the elephant-catching montage has accompanied greater prominence of the royal scenes featuring historical battle re-enactments. Considering that the Surin Round-Up was partly pursued as a replacement for the royally sponsored roundups, this focus on royal historical scenes makes sense. The purpose of these historical royal kraals was also to provide a spectacle, and the focus would have been on the grandeur of the animals themselves, numbering in the hundreds, rather than the culture and skills of the individual mahouts (regardless of their ethnicity). This prioritisation and elision of the mahout in favour of the elephant, therefore, has historical grounding and further aligns with the national AHD and its focus on promoting Thai royal culture and the domination of other nations.

In line with the wider national cultural policy that deliberately see-saws between excluding and showcasing cultural diversity, Kui culture is caught between being hidden away or aggressively marketed, depending on the perceived benefit to the state. While the provincial administration has occasionally

chosen to mask the Kui behind the designation of Surin culture, at other times the very distinctive use of the Kui and their culture has been perceived as being in the province's best interest. This is illustrated by Scene 1 of the Round-Up, which has the Kui in its title and describes their culture during the performance. In this scene, the traditional dress worn by the Kui performers also visibly sets them apart from more familiar aspects of Thai culture.

The decrease in time spent on the Kui scenes has, on balance, come alongside an increase in visible Kui symbolism. For example, emphasising traditional and ceremonial Kui dress is only a more recent inclusion. Footage from the second official Round-Up in 1961 shows mahouts wearing a range of tops, from sleeveless vests to button-up shirts. This only recent costume change also raises a question of what is considered authentic within the context of this festival, as we have images of Kui men in the very early Round-Ups performing in this more Western clothing style. Archival footage of the early Round-Ups suggests that from at least 1964 up until 2005, the performers in the re-enactment of the elephant capture, for the most part, wore dark blue collarless shirts in a style known as mo hom (หม้อห้อม), typically worn in the north and northeast of Thailand, and often associated with mahouts and farmers.[3] From 2005 onwards, however, it seems the decision was made to emphasise the unique culture and dress of the Kui rather than hiding it behind this more generically Thai mahout outfit.

The more traditional portrayal of the Kui has played a prominent role in the festival's marketing, as the government has capitalised on this portrayal of cultural difference as a selling point. This dualistic nature of the festival, balancing Kui cultural expression on the one hand and the presentation of a broader provincial and national heritage image on the other, can be seen in comparing the different motifs used in two specific promotional posters I saw advertising the 2019 Round-Up. I cannot reproduce the images here because of copyright restrictions, but I will do my best to describe them and the contrasting depictions they provided of the same event. In the first image, the centre of the poster is dominated by the epic battle scene from the much-loved story of King Naresuan's elephantback duel, depicted against the backdrop of smoke and flames. The elephants wear howdahs and are costumed, much like their armoured riders. At the very bottom of this first poster—and significantly smaller—is a group of men dressed in traditional Kui clothing on elephant back. The second poster was also produced to market the Round-Up, but it looks very different from the first. One main difference in this second composition is that the Kui are foregrounded

3 This is with the exception of 1972, where more modern pink or light blue shirts were worn.

through the presentation of four boys in Kui traditional attire, sitting on the backs of unadorned elephants. Rather than the dramatic smoke and fire of the first image, they are standing in a river surrounded by greenery. Unlike the first poster, this second scene emphasises the relationship of the mahouts and their elephants to the natural environment.

Both images are interpretations of history and depict the different forms of repackaging that Kui elephant heritage has undergone as part of the Round-Up's heritagisation. Like with the Kui portion of the Round-Up parade, it should also be noted that despite the visual cues, many people would not necessarily associate the bottom image—or the men on elephants framing the bottom of the first poster—with the Kui. The Kui are not named and are only identifiable by their dress, which is not commonly recognised. Thus, the portrayal of this more natural, intimate moment between people and elephants in the second poster remains just that—between *people* and elephants, not the Kui and elephants. This curates a sense of nostalgia that all Thai people could be drawn to regardless of background. Elephants are, after all, the symbols of the nation—and, by extension, all Thai people. This elephant heritage is, therefore, seen as belonging to all Thais.

From Ban Taklang to the Elephant Village to Elephant World: Mixed Heritagisation

"Elephants may be an indicator of nature, environment, climate, fertility, and cultural inheritance".
– Excerpt from description of Elephant World Project by Bangkok Project Studio

Ban Taklang provides another example of the heritagisation of Kui culture. It is, however, a process that has not been solely external or internal but rather a mixture of both, as it began as a Kui village that was then slowly reformulated into a tourism site with the help of the local government. Some of the older villagers I spoke with informed me that the Kui settled in Taklang village "no less than 100 years ago". Later, in 1987, Ban Taklang received its first of many name changes, as it was declared the "Elephant Village" by the Surin Provincial Government (Sommai, 1998, p. 113). This label has slowly come to replace the original name of Ban Taklang, with Elephant Village now used on road signs (e.g., Fig. 8.3). Removing the village's traditional name in place of one that is more marketable is a clear example of heritagisation. It also clearly states what product is being offered up as heritage—elephants, not the Kui.

Figure 8.3: Road sign pointing towards the "Elephant Village" (photograph by author).

Pittaya Homkrailas (2002) described Ban Taklang in the book *Ta Klang: The Elephant Valley of the Mool River Basin,* published almost two decades ago in partnership with the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Its contrast with the reality of the village today is somewhat jarring. Ban Taklang is often held up as *the* Kui village, a model example of the lives and culture of the so-called elephant people, hence the name Elephant Village. But while the Ban Taklang of Pittaya's book features a strong continuation of cultural traditions—Kui dressed in traditional clothing living in wooden houses with free-roaming elephants underneath and in a place where Kui agency is still visible, the Elephant Village in its current form is unquestionably a tourist attraction, not a place where people live.

The Elephant Village signs direct visitors to a concrete car park lined with vendors of various items, from T-shirts emblazoned with images of elephants to elephant products like ivory earrings and elephant tail rings. The hungry tourist can also treat themselves to a snack of ice cream or pizza. Several information boards in front of the entrance present Ban Taklang as "the model village for village development and [the] promotion [of] natural resource conservancy and local customs and cultures". While the English sections of the text panels refer to the Kui as such (sometimes spelt "Gui"), the Thai sections either use the term "Suay" or do not refer to the Kui at all. One panel, for example, discusses the relationship between "people and elephants" in Thai, whereas the English text specifically refers to "Gui and elephants". This difference shows how culture is adapted to fit the consumer's wants.

The English-speaking tourist may want to experience the cultural diversity offered, and therefore the Kui (or Gui) are foregrounded. At the same time, for the Thai speaker, attributing this elephant heritage to a minority group could disrupt their connection to Thai elephant culture and the national animal. Therefore, like in the case of the Round-Up, the descriptions are left vague enough to allow the Thai reader to claim this heritage as their own and to see themselves (or their ancestors) in the descriptions and site. Komatra (1998, p. 267) offers another explanation for this avoidance of naming the Kui: "in the Thai cultural imagination, the Kui had never been (and could not be) the real owners of elephants" because where elephants are seen as powerful and iconic, the Kui are seen as lowly and primitive. The image of a Kui person dominating such an animal, therefore, not only subverts this perspective entirely but also reduces the elephant and its symbolism. This same rationale can be applied to the selective visibility of the Kui during the Round-Up.

Visitors pay an entrance fee at Ban Taklang's gates. When I visited, foreigners would be set back 100 baht, while Thai tourists could get in for half the price. Immediately inside is a queue of saddled elephants and their mahouts, waiting for tourists to pay for a ride around the site (these rides cost 200 for foreign tourists and, like with the entrance tickets, are half that price for Thais). A concrete path leads further inside to the central attraction of the elephant village—an arena lined with sand, surrounded by metal bleachers and fenced in with chicken wire, with a green tarp over the top. This is where the twice-daily elephant show is held. The signs at the entrance to the village promote this show as a spectacle of Kui elephant traditions and culture. In reality, however, the Kui are never mentioned in the show, despite there being a running commentary from a *very* talkative emcee. In contrast to the Surin Elephant Round-Up, the Ban Taklang elephant show does not contain any performances related to Kui culture or history, and instead models itself primarily on Scene 3 from the Round–Up—focused on the performance of various tricks and acrobatic feats (e.g., hula hooping, dancing, football, dart throwing, painting, etc.).

The final thing a visitor to the Elephant Village can do is to look inside their museum. As you walk through the door, a large elephant skeleton in the middle of the room draws the eye. Around the walls are text panels with information on the Kui, their customs, and history. These sit alongside panels detailing the history of elephants in Thailand and their significance to Thai people. The exhibit also contains important Kui cultural items related to the tradition of elephant catching. This includes, for example, a Pakam rope. Seeing the museum and the information provided on the text panels is somewhat jarring when comparing what is written and how it is presented to

the rest of the Elephant Village, where the Kui seem quite invisible (despite making up most of the workforce at the site). In contrast to the text panels outside the entrance to Ban Taklang, the Thai text within the museum refers to the Kui as such, rather than "Suay". This is because, where external groups, including the local government, produced the panels outside, the museum itself was a community-based project—an example of the Kui's involvement in the heritagisation of this site. While the panels in the museum are informative, during my many visits to Ban Taklang between 2018 and 2020, I never ran into anyone else inside the museum (Santikarn, 2024). Most visitors—predominantly Thai—came only for the elephant show and rides before leaving. For these tourists, it would be possible to visit what is the largest Kui village in Thailand without ever hearing or reading the word "Kui" at all. The focus on the performance of these tricks during the elephant show also speaks to the interests of the tourists who come to this site. This is another way in which the Kui are both visible—with their village forming a central tourist attraction in Surin, whilst simultaneously invisible— with direct references to this group and their culture either absent or easily missed.

Becoming the "Largest Elephant Village in the World"

The heritage sites in this chapter are presented chronologically, beginning with the Surin Round-Up in the 1960s. The provincial government's branding of Surin as an elephant capital—sparked by the Round-Up—prompted the heritagisation of Ban Taklang as a means of capitalising on elephant heritage. The site's heritagisation began in earnest with the renaming of the village from Ban Taklang to the Elephant Village in 1987. Since then, the village has undergone further transformations.

The creation of the Elephant Village was followed by an initiative launched by the Surin provincial government with the dual aim of solving the problem of street-roaming elephants in major Thai cities while also creating a lure for tourism to Surin. Following the ban on commercial logging in 1989, thousands of mahouts and their elephants were left without work. Many of these mahouts resorted to taking their elephants to Bangkok to beg,[4] resulting in the introduction of a new term, ช้างเร่ร่อน (chang reron), to describe these "homeless" elephants. A newspaper report from 1996 noted that of the ช้างเร่ร่อน found in large cities, 90% were originally from Surin (เจ้าจำปีจัดตั้งหมู่บ้านช้างสุรินทร์). That same year, the Elephant Village was again rebranded, this

4 Although elephant tourism is spread across Thailand, not just Bangkok, mahouts from Surin take their elephants to work in other popular tourist destinations including Ayutthaya, Pattaya, and Phuket.

time as "THAI's Jumbo Village" through a partnership with the Thai national airline, which saw the establishment of the Thai Airways Surin Elephant Village Foundation. One of the main remits of this new management was to support the chang reron. The aims of the foundation, as stated in official registration documents, reveal the project's priorities and speak to the values underlying the heritagisation the village underwent during this stage in its history. In Thai Airways' 1997/98 Annual Report (1999, p. 17), the establishment of the Jumbo Village is described as aiming to "help and conserve Thai elephants in a systematic way" and to "rehabilitate natural habitat and maintain ecosystems for elephants in Surin". This emphasises the elephants and nature conservation rather than Kui culture. Almost two decades after this initiative, the problem of unemployed elephants emerged on the streets of Thailand once more—this time as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant dip in tourism from border closures. International news headlines abounded with the story of hundreds of elephants making a pilgrimage back to Surin from their previous places of employment, with some mahouts and their elephants making journeys of up to 500 kilometres.

Following on from the Jumbo Village, the Surin Provincial Administrative Organisation (PAO) launched a much larger-scale initiative in 2006, officially titled "Bring the Elephants Back to their Hometown for the Development of Surin" (nam chang khuen thin phuea phatna Surin ban koet; นำช้างคืนถิ่นเพื่อพัฒนาสุรินทร์บ้านเกิด). This program paid mahouts (most of whom were Kui) to take their elephants back to Surin and live within the borders of Tha Tum District—where Ban Taklang is located. The PAO aimed to make Ban Taklang the "largest elephant village in the world", a project that has continued to this day. According to a contract by the Surin PAO, the mahouts participating in this project receive a monthly stipend from the government of around 12,000 baht per elephant in exchange for living in Tha Tum District and participating in the daily elephant shows and any other activities held at the Elephant Village. Prasit, a mahout I spoke to who lives in Tha Tum, said he receives 10,800 baht (~246 GBP) per month to stay in the district and an additional 500 baht per day to perform in the elephant show. This salary is above minimum wage in Surin, which, in 2022, was around 9,733 baht/month. As of April 2023, however, the Born Free Foundation's website estimates the annual costs of keeping an elephant in captivity to be up to 79,000 GBP, or roughly 280,674 baht per month—over 20 times the government stipend.

From Elephant Village to Elephant World: A Multi-Million Baht Venture

The millennium brought with it the next phase of Ban Taklang's transformation when the year 2000 saw plans drawn up for a multi-million-baht project called Elephant World. Although these plans were presented to the local

government for approval in 2004, in classic fashion, nothing went forward on this project until much later (Santikarn, 2024). The project was meant to start in 2013 and, at the time, had a proposed operating budget of 455 million baht (or enough to pay almost 3,160 mahouts and elephants to live in Tha Tum district for one year). According to the Surin PAO's internal working documents, initial plans included building a museum, creating a farm to grow crops to feed the elephants, and erecting a cultural exhibition ground and viewpoint. Two years later, fifteen years after the initial plans were drawn, work finally began on Elephant World in 2015. The site, which now spans an area of 500 rai (80 hectares), officially opened on 29 July 2020.

Unlike the transformation from Ban Taklang to the Elephant Village and later the THAI Jumbo Village, the change to Elephant World did not involve a reconstruction or renaming of the pre-existing village but was instead an extension, spanning the space between Ban Taklang and the Kui temple of Wat Pa Ajiang (Fig. 8.4). A road leading through the back of Wat Pa Ajiang takes you to the rear entrance to Elephant World, called the Thong Phrai or "Jungle Trekking" gate. The new Elephant World site has three main features: a 28-metre-high brick observation tower that overlooks Wat Pa Ajiang on the one side and Taklang village on the other (Figure 8.5), a stadium for elephant performances (Fig. 8.6), and a central museum complex (Fig. 8.7). The stadium alone, occupying a space of 60 x 120 metres, cost 20.21 million baht (~458,200 GBP) to construct.

Figure 8.4: Map showing the proximity of Wat Pa Ajiang, Elephant World, and Ban Taklang, including features within each site. Reproduced with permission of Kieran Murray.

Figure 8.5: The brick observation tower at Elephant World (photograph by author).

Figure 8.6: The interior of the Elephant World stadium (photograph by author).

Figure 8.7: Entrance to the central museum complex at Elephant World (photograph by Sitthivet Santikarn).

Although not initially apparent in the monumentality of the site, the architectural concept of the project attempted to emphasise the relationship between the Kui and their elephants and to decentre anthropocentrism through the buildings. A statement on the website of the architectural firm behind Elephant World—Bangkok Project Studio (n.d.) describes the intentions behind the architecture of Elephant World and what they term the "[p]hilosophy of the non-human". In this statement, they write that "[t]he Kui village reflects the bond between people, elephants, and forests" and their construction methods "tak[e] into account the elephants, village rules based on the practices of elephant domestication, a common language for humans and elephants, a leadership by [mor chang]", concluding that "[f]or these reasons, the Kui village is an elephant village inside and out".

There are actually quite a few museums onsite. At least two—one on Kui culture and another on white elephants in Thailand (in addition to the original museum at Elephant Village)—were there before the new development. The addition of the brand new Elephant World galleries brings the count up to four museums within the single site.[5] The project's architect, Boonserm

5 When I returned in April 2024, however, not only had all the original buildings in the Elephant Village closed—directing visitors a few hundred meters down the road to the new Elephant World site—but the museum complex at Elephant World was completely empty and under renovation, leaving no museums of Kui culture at all. When speaking to some of the workers they told me that the galleries had been sitting mostly empty, and so those in charge had found a different source of funding to redo the exhibitions.

Figure 8.8: A traditional howdah sitting inside a Pakam shrine from the home of a Kui family in Ban Taklang village (top) and a bench from the cultural courtyard at Elephant World (bottom) (photographs by author).

Premthada, however, stated that "the museum, in my opinion, is not just the building itself, but it is everything—from the buildings, the village that has been here for 300–400 years, the trees, the original landscape—these are the museums" (in BLT Bangkok, 2020, own translation), pointing to the

Kui's inhabitation of the land and the practice of their elephant heritage here, for the past 300–400 years. Boonserm (in BLT Bangkok, 2020) also remarked that he considers this project to be a form of cultural preservation. Elephant World has undoubtedly tried incorporating aspects of Kui Ajiang culture into the design. The benches inside the stadium (which the project designers refer to as the cultural courtyard), for example, are meant to be reminiscent of howdahs (Fig. 8.8), as Boonserm described wanting to draw inspiration from the lives of the Kui and saw these chairs in the Kui homes that he visited as part of his own research (Nada Inthaphunt, 2019).

The introductory panel when entering the site's museum complex contains the following sentence (own emphasis added): "A key chapter of the history [of Surin] concerns *Indigenous people called 'Kuai'* who have been highly capable of rounding up wild elephants, taming them, and taking good care of them as if they were family members". As highlighted, the critical acknowledgement in this snippet of text is the recognition of the Kui not only by that name (not "Suay") but also as *Indigenous*. This is even more impressive an achievement given that Elephant World is a government project, and the resistance of the national government to use of the term Indigenous. The distinction here is that this is occurring at the provincial government level, which in contrast to the national government and AHD, has greater leeway in acknowledging ethnic diversity, as demonstrated in the Round-Up. The provincial-level promotion of Kui culture and the acknowledgement of their Indigeneity at this single regional tourism attraction is permitted as it does not threaten the overall narrative of the nation. The terms "Indigenous" and "Kuai" are used in both the Thai and English text, which marks another difference between this site and the signage at the original Ban Taklang site just next door. The museum complex itself is divided into four galleries or rooms: "From Four Tusks to Two Tusks Room", which discusses the evolution of elephants from prehistory up to the modern elephant; "Royal Elephants, Pet Elephants Room", which describes the different relationships between Thai people and elephants; "Happy Elephants Room", which focuses on the role elephants have played in Surin through festivals and traditions, including the Surin Elephant Round-Up; and finally the "Kuai, the Best Friends Room", which is intended to focus on the unique connection between elephants and the Kui. This last room further compounds the deliberate and explicit inclusion of the Kui in the site's design and implementation. It is a clear difference compared with the language of "Surin, Land of Elephants", which marks the Kui gallery in the Surin National Museum.

Like the old Elephant Village site, however, the museums at Elephant World are not the main attraction or a priority to visitors. The main attraction

of this new development centres on the museum complex's unique architectural design rather than the galleries' content, which is somewhat ironic given the attention to Kui culture that the architects tried to build into the structures. Knowing that the museums are not the primary draw for tourists, focus has also not been on the content of the galleries. They are mostly bare, with minimal information provided and no displays of cultural artefacts. Unable to visit Elephant World before it had formally opened, I asked a friend to photograph the "Kuai, the Best Friends Room" to see the final display. He, however, only photographed the exterior museum architecture, explaining that the galleries were empty apart from one that had images of Elephant World from a photography competition held as part of the opening publicity.

When I did manage to visit again in April 2024, however, not only had all the original buildings in the Elephant Village closed—directing visitors a few hundred meters down the road to the new Elephant World site—but the museum complex at Elephant World was empty and under renovation, leaving no museums of Kui culture at all. When speaking to some of the workers, they told me that the galleries had been sitting mostly empty, so those in charge had found a different funding source to redo the exhibitions. It remains to be seen what these new exhibits will feature and whether this recognition of the Kui's Indigeneity will persist in the redesign.

Despite the apparent good intentions and recognition of the Kui embedded into the design process, at its heart Elephant World remains a tourist attraction run by the local government (although with the participation of the Kui). And, as the name Elephant World suggests, the focus ultimately rests on the elephants, furthering the misrecognition of the Kui community through this singular association with the animal. Boonserm Premthada, the project's lead architect, states that he "tried to focus on elephants" as a change from having previously focused on "designing human-centred architecture", calling his process "Architecture for Elephants" (Yukyung, 2021). While ostensibly inspired by the Kui Ajiang, the architectural design furthers their invisibility by abstracting Kui culture within the architectural form. The statues of the Kui elephant catchers (still not labelled as Kui, even here) that sit near the entrance to the main museum fall victim to some of the same errors of the statues in the Surin city centre identified by Phra Khru Dr Samuhan—depicting pale-skinned single riders, rather than the traditional pair (see Fig. 8.9). One of the supposed mor chang is also missing his Pakam rope.

In 2021, it was announced that Boonserm would be representing Thailand at the 2021 Biennale Architettura in Venice, which has the theme: *How will we*

Figure 8.9: The elephant-catching scene from Elephant World (photograph by author).

live together? Thailand's display, titled "Elephants", featured Boonserm's work influenced by the Kui in Surin and their relationship with elephants. The Kui are the focus of the display and explicitly named (although unsurprisingly described as an ethnic minority rather than Indigenous). While achieving greater visibility and recognition for the Kui, this decision—part of the oscillation between acceptance and denial of ethnic minority heritage—has also brought Kui culture under the national umbrella and AHD, transforming it again into something Thai or even global through the stylistic interpretation of this heritage by the non-Kui architect. In Boonserm's (DesignCity Lab, 2021) own words summing up the project "this is all culture, [a] way of life, of *ours*" (own emphasis added).

The large budget funnelled into the Elephant World project is an investment in local tourism. Such a large investment, however, seems at odds with increasingly critical global attitudes towards the animal tourism industry. At the end of 2019, Ban Taklang's elephant show was the subject of an article by the *Bangkok Post* titled, "Thai Elephants 'Broken' for Lucrative Animal Tourism." The article discussed the force used on young elephants to tame them and teach them tricks to be able to perform in elephant shows, raising questions regarding the ethics of animal tourism. This follows an overarching Western trend that has turned away from animal entertainment,

including elephant rides. Elephant parks in Thailand have followed this movement by steadily rebranding themselves as eco-friendly sanctuaries to maintain interest from international tourists. This downturn in tourism for the elephant shows may benefit the Kui, as the Kui and their culture are gradually replacing the elephants as the more marketable option. This can be seen in the evolution of this single site of Ban Taklang—where the Kui were not even mentioned by Thai Airways in the earlier incarnation of the site, compared with its current form as Elephant World, where the Kui's relationship with elephants is foregrounded and embedded into the site's architecture. The person selling tickets to the site in 2024 told me that they get around 10–20 foreigners visiting each weekend, but all from Asia—mainly from Cambodia and Laos. Most of the tourists are Thai and come for the elephant show, with Elephant World maybe getting one to two Western tourists per week.

Rebranding the new space for elephant shows as the "cultural courtyard" (rather than an arena) could perhaps be seen as a way to shift the perception of the elephant-based performance away from associations with a circus act (and animal cruelty) to being framed instead as a cultural exhibition and expression of Indigenous heritage. When I revisited, however, I was surprised to find that the brand-new, multi-million-baht stadium was not in use, and that the elephant show was instead being held in a much smaller, much less elaborate open-air site very similar to the old arena at the Elephant Village. Asking around, I was told that the new stadium was "too dangerous" for tourists, given the steep stairs and uneven, rocky surfaces. Warning signs to be careful on the steps were posted all around, hinting that there was at least an attempt to use the new cultural courtyard. Nonetheless, it is clear that this design, with "mounds [to] evoke the rolling soil in which elephants romp around", may be visually appealing, but was ultimately deemed to be unfit for purpose (Bangkok Project Studio, 2020). Kui Ajiang visibility at the site is still relatively minimal; however, the heritagisation of Elephant World has seen a considerable shift in terms of the recognition it has attempted to provide the Kui and their heritage, at least in theory. Hewison (1987) and Walsh (1992) both alert to the dangers of the commercialisation of heritage. The reality for the Kui, however, is that their exclusion from the state AHD has left the commodification of their heritage one of the few remaining avenues for cultural preservation. Whether or not Elephant World—still essentially an externally-driven project—is successful in this remains to be seen.

I have argued that the Thai state has overlooked Kui culture and heritage, yet the two examples I've presented so far seemingly contradict this. The

channelling of such vast amounts of money by the provincial government, seen here with the Elephant World project, alongside the adoption of the Surin Elephant Round-Up as not only a provincial but a national festival, speaks to the preservation and management of cultural heritage in Thailand and the heritagisation of Indigenous culture. In both of these cases, the involvement of the local government has relegated the Kui identity to the sidelines. The visibility and popularity of these expressions of heritage have come from encapsulating part of Kui culture into Thai identity. More specifically, of the Kui Ajiang's role as elephant keepers, to the detriment of other aspects of Kui culture and Kui groups without this elephant tradition. Where Indigenous heritage in Thailand *is* visible, it is because it has been heritagised. Where this heritagisation has occurred at the level of the government—provincial or national—it has also been monetised. Indigenous heritage is seen as positive—and included within the national and provincial AHDs—only so long as it benefits those in power. In this instance, the benefits are mainly tourism and marketing. This has produced the contradiction between the threatened traditions of the mor chang role, the Pakam rope-making process, and the phasa phi pa, which are very uniquely and identifiably Kui and have been left to the community to manage, and the public displays of what is heritagised within a Thai heritage discourse presented in this chapter. The next example of Wat Pa Ajiang considers heritagisation that has come entirely from *within* the cultural community itself and where monetisation is not the primary driving force behind this heritagisation process.

Wat Pa Ajiang: Internal Heritagisation

Wat Pa Ajiang is an example of internally-driven heritagisation—whereby the tourism site was built by the source community and not as a result of governmental or external interference. A now-archived page on the Surin PAO's website presents the initial plans for Elephant World, featuring a link to a YouTube video of a parade at Hong Kong's Disneyland. Despite this, the final architectural direction blended the buildings in with the natural environment through heavy use of handmade red brick. Wat Pa Ajiang, in contrast, does not attempt to blend into its natural surroundings, despite being encased in forest on all sides. When turning into Wat Pa Ajiang off the main road, the first thing visitors see is an archway consisting of two giant elephants perched on their hind legs, with their trunks holding up a golden nine-tiered umbrella (Fig. 8.10). Going up the driveway, visitors then

Figure 8.10: The entrance to Wat Pa Ajiang temple (photograph by author).

Figure 8.11: The main temple building at Wat Pa Ajiang (photograph by author).

approach the main temple building, a pinkish-red towering construction dotted with elephant sculptures of various sizes, shapes, and colours—giant white elephant heads in ceremonial garb circling the middle, elephant heads in gold at the top, and grey and brown elephants of different sizes everywhere in between (Fig 8.11). Underneath this building, in a series of manufactured caves, is what was described to me as a museum, displaying statues of important religious figures in Kui society, such as Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu deity, a golden Sothon Buddha sitting in a meditative pose and flanked by giant elephant tusks, and Phra Khru Pakam holding his eponymous rope.

The temple opened in 2007 but construction has never stopped, as the temple continues to expand. Since my first visit to the temple in 2018 up to the time of writing this in 2024, some of the new elements to the grounds included space to house the temple's Pakam ropes and Pakam shrine, a statue of the three-headed elephant, Erawan, a large reclining Buddha statue, and a new temple structure. Most recently, it has also come to house the matching pair to Boonserm's contribution to the 2021 Venice Biennale.[6] In addition to the central, elephant-studded building, the main attraction at the temple complex is the elephant cemetery. According to the sign at the cemetery, it was built by the current abbot of the temple, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan. The sign reads: "In a dream he Had [sic] a vision of his Elephant that had passed away, crying for a proper burial place to rest. This was inspired by and based on Buddhist Scriptures. From the year 1996 to 2009, Elephants' remains were dug up and gathered by Monks, Neophytes and Villagers". Each of the more than one hundred elephant graves is topped with a helmet in the style of those worn by Thai soldiers in the Ayutthaya era—intended to provide eternal shade (Fig 8.12).

Despite first impressions suggesting it is a much more overt spectacle of elephant heritage and Disney kitsch than the neighbouring Elephant World, Wat Pa Ajiang is also less advertised and, therefore, less visited. Commercialisation does not sit at the heart of its design. Unlike Elephant World, it is a site for and by the Kui to display their heritage. Tourism, however, is undoubtedly still a consideration, although a woman I spoke with at the temple said that they tend not to advertise themselves and stay off social media, relying instead on word of mouth. Through this, the temple still sees around one hundred visitors each week—mostly Thai or Cambodian, with daily visits ranging anywhere from 5–20 tourists per day. Posts online present

6 When I visited in April 2024, the abbot did not seem to think Boonserm's building resulted in any increase in tourism.

Figure 8.12: Graves at the elephant cemetery in Wat Pa Ajiang (photograph by author).

the elephant cemetery as part of the Surin elephant-heritage tourist trail. There is also sometimes a small gift shop at the site, selling products made from ivory, elephant bone and hair, as well as T-shirts and scarves made from silk woven and dyed locally. Next to that is a small tourist information box that looks like it has been abandoned. This supports the notion that, despite being less popular than Elephant World or the Surin Elephant Round-Up, the temple is a tourist site. Its proximity to Elephant World, however, has not increased tourism, at least according to the abbot, who also said he

had no interest in ever visiting the new tourist attraction. As Phra Khru Dr Samuhan informed me, the audiences for Elephant World and Wat Pa Ajiang are different—people go to the temple for religious tourism or to see the elephant cemetery, whereas they go to Elephant World for the elephant show. Another woman at the temple told me that very few of the tourists who come to the temple know about the Kui.

In addition to being a temple, Wat Pa Ajiang serves as the main event space for celebrations in the local Kui community, such as the Kui Day of the World[7] and Thai National Elephant Day. The site is, therefore, an important Kui community space, in addition to being a potential tourist attraction. The first Kui Day of the World celebration in Thailand was held in 2019, with the date set to coincide with Thai National Elephant Day on 13 March. That year, there were three separate Thai National Elephant Day celebrations in Surin: at Wat Pa Ajiang, Ban Taklang/Elephant World, and the nearby and similarly named (government-run) zoo—Elephant Kingdom. As Wat Pa Ajiang combined both the Kui and Elephant Day celebrations, the audience was almost exclusively Kui. Their event occurred on 10 March (the Sunday before the National Elephant Day and Kui Day of the World). It was a celebration of Kui elephant heritage, featuring elephant rides, traditional offerings to the Pakam rope headed by the *mor chang*, and monetary and food offerings to the temple monks. Later in the evening, they held a Miss Kui World beauty pageant and a Kui Idol and Kui silk-modelling competition. The night ended with music and dancing.[8]

Elephant Kingdom and Elephant World held their celebration on 13 March—the actual National Elephant Day. Both events were held simultaneously, speaking to a lack of communication between the sites and the separation of their management and audiences. Luckily, the two sites were close enough that I managed to drive between the two events on the day

7 At least the date celebrated by the Kui Ajiang in Surin.

8 In 2024, with the Kui Day of the World held over 27–29 April in Sikhoraphum district, Surin, the organisers hired nine elephants to come from Tha Tum District (where Wat Pa Ajiang is) to join a cultural parade on the second day of the three-day programme. The elephants then stayed on for various group photos. This shift in focus away from elephants allowed for the platforming of other aspects of Kui culture—outside of that of the Kui Ajiang more specifically. While the programme still included events like the Miss Kui World beauty pageant, a silk showcase, and Kui music, there was more of a focus on dance and language as well, with the creation of a Kui dictionary the central topic of discussion for the meetings that were scheduled during the day. The Kui Ajiang at Wat Pa Ajiang, however, continue to celebrate on 13 March, and did not attend the events from 27– 29 April 2024. One woman I spoke to at Wat Pa Ajaing said that their ancestors have been celebrating Pakam on 13 March for hundreds of years, "from the beginning of Surin", and that the new Kui Day of the World date is "for the other Kui, here we focus on elephants".

to catch most of what was happening. This was also the first year Elephant Kingdom celebrated National Elephant Day, but there was no apparent marketing or advertisement for the event. I found out about each event only after speaking with the mor chang. The Elephant Kingdom celebration similarly featured offerings to Pakam. This was performed in front of a giant statue of Pakam on-site, rather than to a Pakam rope and shrine, but was also led by two mor chang. Other activities included a traditional Thai dance performance and an "elephant buffet"—a long table laden with various fruit and vegetable offerings for the elephants performing at the event to enjoy. Elephant World's offerings to Pakam were made to the rope/shrine on-site by two mor chang. Very few people attended this part of the day.

The main difference between Elephant World's event and those at the other two sites was that Elephant World was attended by local politicians who used the day as a photo opportunity, featuring multiple press photographers and videographers. This event also involved Buddhist monks, who performed chants to open the day. The monks added a Thai religious element to the Kui celebration and their ceremony was held concurrently with the Pakam offerings, suggesting it was conducted for the non-Kui attendees. Next, there was an elephant show in the then-unfinished arena, which mimicked the scenes from the Round-Up—split into cultural scenes of dancers, the white elephant with Lord Indra on its back, the Kui villagers and a simulated Round-Up, followed by the more circus-like events of elephants playing darts, polo, dancing, and posing for photos. This was all finished with another elephant buffet. While Elephant World's morning offerings to Pakam at the shrine on-site were observed by only a small group of people, the arena for the elephant show was filled with students from local schools. This was undoubtedly the more high-profile event; however, attendees were all local. Therefore, the two main events were at Elephant World—for people of Surin more generally, and Wat Pa Ajiang—primarily for the Kui.

With both the Surin Round-Up and Elephant World, outside help was involved in memorialising Kui culture (or aspects of it) through heritagisation. The heritagisation of Wat Pa Ajiang emerges from within the Kui community itself—making it distinctive from the two other sites. This heritage is, however, not controlled by the mor chang—the bearers of this elephant knowledge.

The temple sits at a point of intersection—both inside and outside Kui culture; the monks at Wat Pa Ajiang are Buddhist, representing the minority culture and the dominant cultural influence—one of the three conditional pillars of Thainess. They are also Kui, with ties to this elephant culture but they are not mor chang who are more directly involved in the

elephant heritage itself. I observed this balancing act of Buddhist versus Kui culture at the National Elephant Day celebrations at Wat Pa Ajiang in March the following year (2020). Although Kui Day of the World—to be hosted by members of the Cambodian Kui community in Preah Vihear province—was ultimately cancelled because of COVID-19, the National Elephant Day celebration still went ahead as a separate event. The first day was an intensely private affair, featuring only a handful of Kui who came to observe the mor chang make a Pakam rope and witness the relocation of the temple's rope into its newly finished shrine. The second day was the more public event, composed of local Kui alongside people from the surrounding villages. Unlike the previous year, this second day featured an even mix of Buddhist and Kui activities. There was a notable split in the audience for the various events, often held simultaneously. For example, while the Kui gathered to observe the offerings to Pakam (led by the senior mor chang), which took place in the new Pakam shrine building, the non-Kui locals sat in a gazebo placed only a few feet from the entrance to the shrine to observe Buddhist monks conducting their own ceremony. A similar choice was presented earlier on of whether to watch offerings to the elephants or instead observe the construction of Buddhist amulets. Attending both the Kui and Buddhist portions of the day was impossible. This division—not only in the identities of the attendees but deliberately built into the structure of the day—speaks to the dual nature of the temple as both Buddhist and animist, Thai and Kui. Rather than being a spectacle for tourism or politics—as was the case with the Elephant Day celebrations at Ban Taklang and Elephant Kingdom the previous year, the audience at the 2020 celebrations at Wat Pa Ajiang temple remained local, with those living in the district receiving direct invitations to attend. Although the Kui Day of the World was not explicitly incorporated into the Elephant Day event in 2020, the day's focus was still a celebration of culture—both Kui and Thai.

Wat Pa Ajiang plays a central and more insular role within Kui Ajiang culture. The temple provides the arena not only for these Kui celebrations, but it is also within the temple grounds that the modern elephant captures take place, where the Pakam rope is made, and where the knowledge of disappearing Kui heritage is documented and preserved. Wat Pa Ajiang is the one example in this chapter where the process of heritagisation has been directed by the community itself and where, on occasion, the performance of this heritage is *by* the community *to* the community. As discussed, much of the remaining mor chang culture is centred on performance and action, more than spirituality, but that does not lessen its impact on the Kui community.

At the temple, the Kui enact these parts of their culture to preserve this knowledge for the next generation—not for tourism, at least for now.

The Buddhist Temple as a Centre for Knowledge Preservation

Although Buddhism forms one of the three pillars of Thainess, and according to the 2010 national census, 93% of the Thai population are Theravada Buddhists, there is still some debate among scholars regarding the Thai religion and how best to describe it. Most agree that it comprises multiple parts—a nuance not reflected in the census data. This is partly because the state controls the census to uphold the image of Thai people as Buddhist—another legacy of the colonial period. Jackson (2022) observes how Western colonial influence—particularly concerning notions of the "civilised"—pushed the Siamese elite to emphasise Theravada Buddhism as the national religion. At the same time, other religious practice continued in private, allowing Buddhism to exist alongside other forms of belief. Because of this public/private religious interplay, what is now considered to be Buddhism in Thailand is not neatly bound by conventional perceptions of Buddhist practice, resulting in the use of subcategories to define various practices as popular, village, magical, urban, or practical Buddhism (Pattana, 2005).[9] A better way to view religion in Thailand is as a pastiche incorporating various religious influences from Buddhism, animism, Hinduism, and Brahmanism, amongst others (see, for example, Pattana, 2005 and 2012; McDaniel, 2013; and Jackson, 2020 and 2022), with Islam being the second-largest religion in the country. Many royal rites and ceremonies are presided over by Brahmin priests, and it is, in fact, this Brahmin influence that has underpinned the religious/spiritual significance of elephants in Thai society. Therefore, your typical Thai Buddhist may make offerings to the spirit house outside their home, participate in Brahmin national ceremonies, leave offerings to the shrines of Hindu gods and goddesses, and make merit with Buddhist monks.

This same religious complexity applies to the Kui—belief in Pakam does not negate identification as Buddhist, but this multiplicity of belief is not without tension. The relationship between the Kui animist beliefs centred around the Pakam spirit and the Thai national religion of Buddhism is one of conflict and coexistence, paralleling the broader identity struggle the Kui face between being Thai—a category defined by exclusion—and

9 Tambiah (1970) explores the nuances and complexities of Buddhism in Thailand and its relationship to spirit cults and local ritual in his *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*. Terweil (1976) similarly unpacks the interplay between Buddhism, animism, and vernacular/folk religion.

more-than-Thai (i.e., being Kui as well). This conflict between Buddhist and Pakam beliefs is illustrated with the example of the chanak, a necklace worn by Kui mor chang. The purpose of this necklace is twofold: firstly, it protects the mor chang as they enter the dangerous realm of the forest; secondly, it serves in place of the amulets of Buddha that many of the mor chang wear. As Apinan Salangam told me, “When carrying the Pakam spirit, you cannot wear a Buddha image”.

Despite these tensions, there is also a lot of overlap between Buddhism and Kui traditions. Rote (1975, p. 38) alludes to this duality of Kui belief when describing the expected conduct of mor chang while on an elephant hunt. He (1975, p. 38) writes that, while in the forest, the mor chang “observed the Buddhist precepts and rules of conduct as strictly as though he were a monk, and if any one of these was transgressed, he might fail to capture an elephant”. Wat Pa Ajiang—a Kui Buddhist temple—is a tangible expression of the Kui’s religious complexity and the coexistence between Pakam and Buddhist worship. This mixture of religions that typifies Thailand’s religious scene—ostensibly Buddhist. but upon closer inspection a far more complex patchwork—is paralleled in the national culture, which is ostensibly homogenous and Thai, but in reality multicultural.[10] Within this patchwork are instances where folk or minority heritage has undergone a process of heritagisation for mass consumption—becoming hybridised and repackaged into something more familiar and thereby less threatening in order to be accepted according to the unspoken rules of Thainess. At the same time, pieces of the original culture remain separate and intact.

Wat Pa Ajiang sits at an interesting point of intersection, as the Kui traditions it is working to preserve are part of a culture threatened by assimilation. Yet, the temple itself represents one of the main symbols of this assimilation and is an institution of the dominant Thai cultural regime. Nonetheless, while the prevalence of Buddhism has increased, the role of Buddhism as a tool of the state has seen a reduction in power. In 1902, the Sangha Act centralised the hierarchy of the Buddhist monastic order, the sangha, around Bangkok, politicising and restructuring the monkhood in the image of the civil government. The sangha became “an extension of the Thai state and

10 Both Pattana (2005) and Jackson (2022) caution against the characterisation of Thailand’s religious scene as “syncretic”. For Jackson (2022), this term implies a merging of religious practices into a single, uniform identity, and although Thai religion consists of multiple entities, they remain distinct. Pattana (2005) suggests the postcolonial framework of “hybridity” as an alternative to syncretism, but Jackson (2022) argues that this term still implies a cohesion of sorts that is not necessarily accurate. For a lack of a better, less disputed term, I have opted to go with “patchwork” to describe this set of joined yet separate elements of both national religion and culture.

largely lost touch with local communities" (Dubus, 2017, p. 7). A series of more recent scandals within the upper levels of the sangha have furthered the disillusionment of the Thai people with the monastic hierarchy. While the more prominent leaders within this order are distanced from most people's everyday lives, local monks, for the most part, have managed to maintain support within their communities and continue to be seen as a moral authority deserving of respect and deference. By extension, Buddhism (in whatever form) continues to play an important role at the local level. As Rote (1972) points out, one reason for this is that there are often familial ties between the villagers and the monks in the local temples, from novices up to the highest level of the temple abbot. This continues to be the case with the temples and villages I visited while in Surin. As a consequence of this more personal and local connection—alongside distance from the sangha in Bangkok—local temples can also be less rigid in their definitions of Buddhism, adapting, as is the case of Wat Pa Ajiang, to local needs and beliefs. These temples ultimately sit outside the national AHD's scope and are more influenced by community and local-level discourses.

Deference to the Kui monks—and the temple abbots in particular—as the arbiters of knowledge of the Kui was a recurrent theme that emerged throughout my time in Surin and conversations with the Kui community. One thing that became apparent was that the temple—and, in particular, the abbot of the temple—came to replace or have equal footing with the mor chang as the authority on Kui culture. Saipha Salangam, for example, initially expressed hesitancy when I approached him for an interview, telling me that he did not know the "real story". Although I explained my interest in his opinion and personal experience as a mor chang (of which he is undoubtedly the authority), at the end of the interview he told me to talk to the head of the temple, as the abbot was the one with "all the knowledge". Saipha also informed me that the head of the temple reads the dissertations written by students from local universities who come to research the Kui Ajiang to make sure they are saying the "correct things". At numerous other points during fieldwork, this phrase, "Go ask the abbot; he will know", was repeated.

As I highlighted, the loss of wild elephants and wild spaces left certain Kui traditions with no means of being transmitted to the next generation, endangering this heritage. A significant consequence of the rupture in transmission is that the keeping of mor chang knowledge, and consequently the preservation of this tradition, has gone from being passed down organically between generations to now being stored as protected knowledge within the Buddhist temple—Wat Pa Ajiang. So how and why did the temple become

the central authority on the Kui and the mor chang? The answer to this comes in two parts: firstly, the role of the temple in documenting knowledge in Thai society more generally, and, secondly, the specific work and agenda of the abbot of Wat Pa Ajiang, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan.

Temples in Thailand have historically been used as spaces for the documentation and transmission of knowledge. This role also encompasses conserving Thai culture and tradition, as temples should be seen as "not only a religious hub but a cultural hub" (Phrakrusangkharak and Boonsom, 2018, p. 846). Kreps (2014) has described how Buddhist monasteries in Thailand began collecting before the introduction of modern museums into the country, acting as prototypes to the museum institutions we see in the country today. This role of documentation and preservation has continued into the present, seen with more formalised monastery museums (e.g., Kreps, 2014; Paritta, 2022), but also, more informally, within local temples. Therefore, rather than being something new and specific to this particular example of the Kui, preserving cultural knowledge is something Buddhist temples in Thailand have done for a long time. Phrakrusangkharak and Boonsom (2018, p. 847) note that the preservation of Thai culture by the temple has become a more pressing need "as foreign culture and global trends play an even larger part in Thai society, diluting the once embedded traditional values".

This rhetoric and fear of foreign influence over Thai culture is the same ideology that shaped the Thai AHD and the national assimilationist cultural policies. Local museums, however, tend to focus more on local than national Thai culture (Jirawan et al., 2018), with many emerging in response to threats to community heritage. Of the 1,600 museums in Thailand listed on the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre's database, roughly 40% are categorised under "local wisdom". This community-level focus extends to local temples. In this way, with Wat Pa Ajiang as a *Kui* temple, the focus is on promoting and preserving Kui culture. The temple has also assumed this role out of necessity. As Suchart Kananon, the head of cultural wisdom at the Ministry of Culture, said in his interview with me in 2020, when culture conflicts with the law, as is the case with Kui elephant hunting, "[the government] give(s) the responsibility of recording and storing information to [the community], for example, the temple". The temple's abbot, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan, also has a vested interest in this documentation process. He is not just Kui and a monk; his family were mor chang, including his father, Da Oh, a member of the last generation of mor chang whom I also spoke with. Phra Khru Dr Samuhan told me he chose to become a monk as he could not become a mor chang after they "closed the forest".

Entering monkhood at Wat Pa Ajiang as an alternative to becoming a mor chang is not uncommon. This is because the monks at Wat Pa Ajiang are actively involved in Kui elephant heritage, and while this is not traditional, it is a way of continuing to engage with this aspect of Kui culture without taking on a role that is perceived by some as inauthentic, no longer relevant, or no longer possible. The documentation of Kui elephant heritage is, therefore, not conducted by the impersonal institution of the Buddhist temple but by the abbot and other Kui monks at the temple, who claim this Kui Ajiang heritage as their own. While this particular temple opened in 2007, Phra Khru Dr Samuhan recalls the monks in the local village, Tha Tum, began collecting and recording Kui culture in 1991, 25 years before Thailand had any formal intangible cultural heritage legislation. When asked why the temple assumed this responsibility, his answer was simple: "because monks have a lot of free time" and preserving this knowledge is a time-consuming task. He also added, because "if Boonma dies, who will tell the stories then? Who will continue the history?"

There is also a museum of Kui culture on-site at Wat Pa Ajiang, but it is largely unused and remains locked until someone asks to enter. Despite signs at the door showing sponsorship by the Ministry of Culture, the Surin provincial government and the Department of Cultural Promotion, the museum is more like a storage room—a collection of various artefacts, from ancient tools uncovered during various excavation works undertaken as part of the site's construction, kerosene lamps and wooden loom materials, to old television sets and typewriters, with very minimal signage. The reason for this collection, according to the woman who showed me around, was simple: "if we don't look after it, we won't have it". This museum typifies the tourist infrastructure at Wat Pa Ajiang—signs of initial external investment but no long-term maintenance. The new Pakam shrine that had been under construction during my previous visit had since been completed—topped with a helmet similar to those marking the elephant graves. Inside, the Pakam ropes had been placed behind glass, with other objects related to elephants and elephant catching also added. One of these ropes, I was told, was the Pakam Luang (ปะกำหลวง) or "Royal Pakam rope"—used by the royal palace in the past and one of only two in Thailand, with the other in the palace in Bangkok. I was also informed that this new building—a "modern shrine"—was meant to double as a museum, with the goal of eventually adding the objects from the old museum to this space.

Even if the monks have their own direct connection to the mor chang tradition, this shift of the tradition being sustained from within the mor chang community itself to being preserved by the temple—while crucial

to the conservation of this knowledge—is not without its consequences. In particular, as mentioned, issues have emerged regarding the access to knowledge preserved at the temple, specifically knowledge related to the phasa phi pa. Although there are dictionaries of sorts in the temple, with the words in this language written down, access to these texts is limited. Mor chang Apinan told me that he was not allowed to read the texts yet because he was "still young" and also stated it would be "bad luck". And yet this language was the first skill an apprentice mor chang would have learned. In recording and storing this knowledge, the temple is also rewriting the rules of this tradition and changing the transmission of Kui culture, taking control of this heritage away from the original bearers—the mor chang. This adaptation of tradition, however, is not perceived as inauthentic, as those instigating the changes hold positions of authority within Kui society and, therefore, direct the community AHD (or, at least, one of them). The repositioning of cultural authority to the monks has also heightened the sense of inauthenticity and inexperience felt by the younger generation of mor chang, who no longer feel ownership over their culture. This ownership is instead perceived as belonging to the temple and the last generation of mor chang.

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Abbreviations

AHD	authorised heritage discourse
PAO	Provincial Administrative Organisation
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

9 Conclusion

Abstract
The elephant-related traditions of the Kui Ajiang have faced challenges from both top-down environmental and cultural heritage policies in the form of the AED and AHD. These restrictions, which have contributed to the precarity of the Kui Ajiang's heritage, have pushed the Kui to adapt their traditions in the name of preservation. The intergenerational conflict over perceptions of authenticity of these adapted traditions that has been demonstrated in this book can be tied to nostalgia—as the old and new generations of Kui hmor chang have different experiences of the world and nature. To conclude, this chapter considers whether these adaptive heritage strategies, though potentially criticised as commodification, instead may be viewed as a form of resilience.

Keywords
Kui Ajiang, memory, authenticity, AHD, AED, heritage

According to fossil records, the ginkgo tree as we know it today has been around for at least 60 million years, with ancestral forms going back almost 170 million years into the middle Jurassic period. Over this long lifespan, trees in the Ginkgoacea family have faced threats of extinction and endangerment until left only with *Ginkgo biloba*, the single species we have today—the last survivor of these almost two hundred million years on our planet—earning it the title of a living fossil, the very last of its kind and a relic of our deep past. It is so old that one of its original pollinators, ancient insects known as Gymnospollisthrips, do not exist in our modern world, although the gingko itself has still survived. The wild ginkgo, however, is thought to be extinct. As our planet went through a cycle of environmental change, entering into an ice age, new plants emerged—characterised by blooming, attractive flowers with new pollinators. The wild ginkgo was left unable to compete with or adapt alongside our modern plants. As the environment changed, the ginkgo's relationship with its Jurassic-era wild pollinators was lost,

Santikarn, Alisa. *Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025
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altering its entire lifecycle. Its presence today was instead ensured by its cultural value, as ginkgoes we have today rely on humans for cultivation, thus adapting its traditional processes to survive this new world. The modern ginkgo exists even in the absence of the Gymnospollisthrips—a creature whose memory survives only in these trees. These ginkgoes, however, are also undeniably changed—unable to sustain themselves on their own—and the distinction between the wild and cultivated ginkgo persists.

Robert MacFarlane describes his journey in search of wildness in Britain in his book *The Wild Places* (2007). While in the forest of the Black Wood of Rannoch, he observes how memory is embodied in the natural landscape and, therefore, how changes to or destruction of the environment impact this memory in turn, writing that "[w]hen woods and trees are destroyed—incidentally, deliberately—imagination and memory go with them" (MacFarlane, 2007, p. 100). Similarly, cultural practices and memories can be embodied in animals, so when we speak of extinction or environmental change, this is not only in the localised bubble of implications on the natural world, but these impacts also resonate within our cultural worlds. As the world changes, so do the people living in it, and so too do their rich cultures and heritages. This is a process that we as humans have been part of since the beginning of our time on this planet. Our understanding of heritage today depends on how we view these changes—as an integral part of the very nature of intangible cultural heritage or as a negative process to be halted, reverted, or slowed. In the case of the latter, how do we then define these benchmarks of authenticity, and whose job is it to define what is and is not authentic and to try to prevent change?

For Indigenous communities like the Kui, whose culture is entwined with nature, the bigger threat to their heritage so far has not been environmental change per se but rather the responses to these changes. In particular, the Kui Ajiang have been impacted by how top-down policies—for both natural and cultural heritage—have been imposed upon the community through the dual exclusionary forces of the AHD and AED. The AHD sanitises and constrains selected aspects of their culture within national culture, while the AED disregards the community's cultural ties to the environment. This dual impact leaves communities with little recourse to protect their traditions, beliefs, and ways of life that conflict with these discourses. The product of this exclusion is cultural endangerment. The loss of wild spaces in Thailand has been one of the most critical issues for the Kui, whose memory and heritage are embedded in landscapes that have changed beyond recognition in the present. As each subsequent generation of Kui is socialised within a different environment, their relationship to their heritage

and nature also changes, producing different perceptions of what is or is not authentic or an essential part of their culture. Changing environments, therefore, also inevitably impact a community's sense of identity. In the case of the Kui, the older generation's perception of authenticity is bound to the environment in which they were raised. When that environment changed, the new generation that was raised in this new world—a world without the pa—ceased to be authentic to the older mor chang.

While the issue of Kui cultural loss initially presents itself as one tied to the elephant alone, it is a much more complex issue linked to the loss of an entire natural space—the wild, alongside the loss of the very concept of wilderness, in a country that no longer holds any area untouched by human influence. The older generation of mor chang grew up in a time where the wild existed. In their teens, they experienced the loss of this wild. They now live in a different world, knowing the wild pa and its spirits cannot be brought back. Wilderness formed a fundamental part of the older generation's identity and consequently impacted their perception of authenticity related to the environment and their heritage. Meanwhile, the younger generation of mor chang was not born into a time where they could experience, and interact with, this wild. This has created an inherent conflict, where the older generation has come to see wilderness as an essential part of their culture and sense of self. This older generation—who occupy positions of authority within the community—dictates one of the community-level AHDs. Modern forms of their traditions that no longer involve this element of wilderness are therefore considered inauthentic within this framework—playacting rather than embodied practice. In contrast, the new generation that was never able to experience the wilderness fully sees it as something that can be substituted or ignored because it has not formed part of who they are. Their interpretation of these traditions, however, is still viewed as inauthentic within the Kui community because of the older generation's influence on the community AHD, which continues to tie authenticity to wilderness and the wild elephant capture.

If the environment cannot be restored to its original state (an often-futile point to locate, as the environment, like culture, is constantly changing), then the traditions tied to it may no longer serve any purpose. In the case of the Kui, the religiosity that has become diluted through the generations was tied not only to the physical act of the elephant capture but, more importantly, to the dangerous spirit realm of the wild forest. The urgency of this belief to protect the lives of the mor chang is no longer felt among the younger generation as they can no longer venture into the forest for months in search of elephants to capture, and the wild forest and its spirits

no longer exist. For the older generation, these traditions had a utilitarian purpose of ensuring their safety, which is not needed today. While the younger generation finds value in continuing these practices to sustain their heritage for the next generation, the older generation sees this as counter to their perception of the life cycle of their traditions, which must come to a natural end rather than be adapted. A revival of these endangered traditions must therefore consider not only the tangible and intangible heritage but also how these cultural elements are environmentally and temporally bound and determined.

As someone working within heritage studies, it can be tempting to fetishise and fixate upon the idea of the loss of heritage—to lament it and seek to prevent it. The desire to preserve heritage, after all, is built into the AHD through institutions like UNESCO and is embedded within the mandates of heritage professionals such as cultural resource managers. Nonetheless, this ignores the reality of heritage—and intangible heritage in particular—as ever-changing in response to various pressures and forces, both external and internal. Intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge are embodied in and inseparable from the people that carry these traditions. They, therefore, cannot be frozen, just in the same way that the natural state of any living thing is not stasis. Loss, change, and reinvention are all essential parts of the life cycles of intangible culture. If the community in question, as the living bearers of these traditions, seek to prevent this loss to conserve their culture, then intervention is appropriate. The mistake is equating all loss as inherently wrong and adaptation as inauthentic.

One thing I know for certain is that Kui culture sits at an important turning point with the looming loss of this so-called last generation of elephant catchers. Already since beginning my work with the Kui, two of the men I spoke with—Phra Khru Upthamworakul, the abbot at a Kui temple in Sisaket, and Da Oh Salangam, a mor chang, have sadly passed away. Kui elephant culture in Surin continues to take leadership from Boonma Saendee, now one of only a handful of men who entered the forest to catch elephants when they themselves were only boys. At the time of writing this book, Boonma is 95 years old and while I have seen him continue to lead ceremonies, sitting cross legged on the floor blowing into a horn, wearing his signature aviator sunglasses, at some point, he will no longer be able to carry out his duties and someone else will need to step in. The question is who?

The various means of cultural preservation pursued by the Kui—through processes of adaptation and heritagisation at multiple scales and by/for different audiences—revealed a lot about the community's understandings

and valorisation of their heritage. What emerged was a focus on preserving and presenting the more tangible aspects of heritage performance instead of the less visible elements of heritage experience and spirituality. This can be explained in two ways. The first relates to a lessening of the importance of the spiritual aspects of Kui heritage in response to changes in both their tradition and the environment. Today, the Kui no longer need to believe in spirits to ensure their survival, particularly as the wild forest—the realm of spirits—no longer exists. The second reason is that some of the adaptations of Kui tradition have been influenced by provincial and national AHDs, which find value in the tangible elephant heritage as a spectacle for those outside of the community to appreciate and observe. With the eventual loss of this last generation, the community-level AHD will change, as the mor chang who previously dictated this discourse will no longer be around. What direction Kui elephant culture will take following this loss, and what new authorising discourses that emerge to fill this gap, remain to be seen.

The Kui have slowly been gaining greater visibility within Thailand—locally, through Elephant World, as well as internationally in Boonserm Premthada's contribution to the Venice Biennale. The Kui Association of Thailand has been part of the Council of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand for the past four years and one of their members was recently elected as the representative for Indigenous communities in the northeast of Thailand. Nevertheless, the fight for rights and recognition of Indigenous peoples in Thailand still has a long way to go—with the biggest barrier remaining the lack of acknowledgement by the government (and subsequent lack of cultural and environmental protections). Within these confines, the Kui have been doing what they can to secure their heritage against the pressures of the AED and AHD. Left with few options within the confines of the state discourses, the acceptance of this adapted and repackaged Kui heritage is essential to ensuring the survival of their culture. While often linked to commodification, what we see in the example of Wat Pa Ajiang—and even in some ways in the examples of the Round-Up and Elephant World—is that heritagisation should not be viewed as a negative or reductive process, nor does it need to serve commercialisation and tourism. Instead, it can emerge as a strategy for cultural survival and resilience and is an extension of the adaptation of heritage in response to threats when working within the confines of a flawed system in need of change. Where would Kui culture be, or what might it look like in the future, with full recognition of the community from the Thai government—embracing rather than hiding their deep history and Indigeneity?

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Abbreviations

AHD	authorised heritage discourse
AED	authorised environmental discourse
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Glossary

Chang reron	Street elephant
Chao bannok	Rural villager
Chao khao	Hill tribe
Chao pa	Jungle people
Chon phao phuen mueang	Indigenous and tribal peoples
Chon phuen mueang	Indigenous
Chumchon thong thin dang doem	Traditional communities
Mor chang	Elephant catcher
Howdah	Chair to carry passengers on elephantback
Khamen pa dong	Forest Khmer
Khon/Chon klum noi	Ethnic minority
Khon klum chattiphan	Ethnic groups
Khru Pa Yai	Head teacher of the forest
Mahout	Elephant handler/owner
Mueang	City (see footnote on pg. 55)
Pa	Forest / Wild
Pakam	Kui god, also lasso (e.g., Pakam rope)
Pasa	Ceremony to remove wild spirit from elephant
Phasa phi pa	Forest spirit language
Praju	Ritual to invite spirits into the Pakam rope
Sangha	Monastic order
Siwilai	Thai interpretation of Western "civilised"
Thammachat	Nature (tamed)
Wattanatham	Culture

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Publications

In 2019, when Mew Salangam passed away at 91, newspapers across Thailand described him as belonging to the “last generation of elephant doctors.” Mew was a member of the Kui Ajiang community in Thailand, an Indigenous group living in the Northeast known for catching elephants. Sometime beginning in the 1950s, this practice gradually came to an end.

Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand examines how the end of elephant catching has affected the heritage and identity of the Kui Ajiang, offering an analysis that calls for close attention to the broader currents of Thai history and the development of Thai environmental and cultural heritage policies. Furthermore, the term Authorised Environmental Discourse (AED) is introduced in tandem with Laurajane Smith’s Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) to portray how heritage embedded in nature and culture reflects impacts of political authority and how a community responds to threats of loss and challenges to the authenticity of its traditions.

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