

Akha as Cheap Labor : Minority and Touristic Stage

Kayoko Ishii

1. Introduction

In the last 30 years, there have been numerous studies on ethnic tourism and its effects on the local communities. It has been well documented that ethnic tourism reforms ethnic culture and reinforces the ethnic identity of minority people when the minority culture becomes a tourist attraction. However, to date, few studies have verified whether such cultural revival and identity reinforcement has a positive effect on the local ethnic classification surrounding the minority people. Many studies have indicated that it has a positive effect, but few of them have empirically investigated this aspect. This study adds to the current literature another dimension of the effect of ethnic tourism on the ethnic minorities. In other words, this study examines whether ethnic tourism positively affects the ethnic minorities, both from the economic and social perspectives. To investigate that point, this paper focuses on the cases of the *Akha* tribal residents of Chiang Mai city.

First, the paper presents an overview of sociological analysis on ethnic tourism in the context. Then, in light of the sub-group theory, the case of *Akha* tribal residents and ethnic tourism in northern Thailand is examined. The case of the *Akha* tribal residents is basically examined using detailed interviews as the main methodology, referring to results of prior researches on the target people. The analysis would be focused on whether ethnic tourism does in fact contribute to the uplift of the *Akha* people in the social and economic dimensions. I conclude that the earning opportunities that the tourism industry offers to the *Akha* residents mainly include job opportunities as cheap labour. Thus, it would be too optimistic to believe that people belonging to ethnic minorities can gain incomes or re-evaluate their identity by working at tourist spots.

2. Sociological Analysis of Ethnic Tourism

Since the early 1980s, some anthropological/sociological researches have focused on the effect of tourism on local communities from several dimensions, including minority status (for example, Adams 2006; Cohen 2001; Picard and Wood 1997). It was van den Berghe and Keyes who focused on the effect of ethnic tourism to the local ethnic relations (Keyes and van den Berghe 1984). Since then, a number of researches have investigated into ethnic tourism and its effect on local communities (Adams 2006; Bruner 2005; Cohen 2001). Many researches utilized empirical data to indicate that notions such as “culture” or “ethnicity” do not belong to any place or any person, and that they were only believed to exist and shared between the host, guest, and tourism mediators (Henry and Bankston III 2001:1037 – 1038; Cohen 2001:59; Collins 2007:83).

Based on this framework, prior researches have indicated the following notions. First, some researches indicated that ethnic tourism brings an opportunity to re-evaluate the cultural values and identity of the ethnic minority (Deutschlander and Miller 2003:41; Esman 1984:465; Nesper 2003:463). Further, this re-evaluation may provide people belonging to ethnic minorities with opportunities to reform the local ethnic power balance between ethnic groups (Adams 1995:151). Second, some prior researches also pointed out that ethnic tourism gives rise to differing views within the minority community (Zeng 2001:101–102), based on the differences in the acceptance of (cultural) changes brought by ethnic tourism. These researches have indicated situations where particular groups within a minority community accept changes brought about by ethnic tourism because they believe it could be beneficial for the members of this group. However, other groups do not accept these changes.

However, few prior researches have empirically investigated whether ethnic minorities really gain profits from ethnic tourism or not. This research focuses on these issues. In other words, this paper examines how much ethnic minority members can receive benefits, in the context of ethnic tourism.

3. *Akha* and Ethnic Tourism in Northern Thailand

Many groups of people have inhabited the mountainous region between South-West China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Many people moved about in the area without any concern for modern borders. They do not share a single common ethnicity. They were diverse people scattered widely over the mountainous area, with variety of language and tradition. However, in the 19th century, the Western notion of national border was introduced into this area, and in the 20th century, the meaning of this national border became significant in the context of international politics. As a result, these villagers living in mountainous regions were included in the marginalized ethnic minority of each country. Since the 1950s, the Thai government has proclaimed that there are mainly 6 groups of hill tribes in Thailand, Hmong, *Akha*, Lisu, Lahu, Yao and Karen⁽¹⁾ (TRI 1995). Most of these were regarded as people who reside in the mountainous area surrounded by China, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, at that time. As the Thai government strengthened its national territorial border in the 1960s, it started to attempt controlling the people residing in the border areas; such people were referred to as the hill tribes (Bhruksasri 1985:2; Mandorff 1967:530–533). Nearly 600,000 persons were recognized as members of hill tribes (TRI 1995). However, they never had such a self-identification until the government started to refer to them using that nomenclature (Furuie 1993:33–34).

In the context of border control, the people that were regarded as the hill tribes became the target of development aid, and large amounts of aid were provided to the villages (Kampe 1996:155–156; McCaskill 1997:26). After several decades of development, the villages were subsumed into the Thai economy (Jatuworaphruek 1997:1; Tapp 1990:167). Many village households were forced to send some family members to work in major cities or even abroad in order to earn sufficient money to buy consumer goods and to send their children to Thai schools. There was an even stronger factor that

compelled mountainous villagers to move to the cities and abroad; it was the expansion of “national park” or “preserved forest” in the mountainous areas (McKinnon 1997:117; Sutthi 1989:107). Villagers could no longer cultivate lands as before and many of them were forced to migrate to the city to survive (McKinnon 1997:197). Many of these people migrated to the city areas both for education and occupation after the 1970s (Toyota 1998:210). As a result, these people started to claim for Thai nationality by protesting for their rights⁽²⁾, since they were facing disadvantages of being not Thai nationals (Rungruangsaphakul 2006:1). Since 1999, some of these people have started to protest for their rights as the hill tribes (ethnic minority) of Thailand (Ishii 2008:54; Furuie 1993:32). In other words, they started to express themselves by political means as the members of hill tribes.

It is not only the *Akha* people who came to reside in the city. Migration from mountainous villages to cities or villages in the plains is observed within every group of the hill tribes. *Hmong* people seem to have migrated to the city area rather early for their business; thereafter, *Lisu*, *Lahu*, and *Yao* people are also migrated to the plains. As for Karen, many of them had earlier resided in the plains. Most of them tend to live in the communities with the same group, and each group tends to engage in a particular job. Among the abovementioned hill tribal people that migrated to the city, there were 1,020 *Akha* people in the inner city of Chiang Mai, according to Bunaysaranay (Bunaysaranay 2004:45). According to investigation conducted by Bunaysaranay in 2004, these included of a wide age range: from children to people over 50 years old, of whom 489 were men and 531 were women. The young generation (those under the age of 20) tend to have some education (most had studied until secondary school); however, most of people over 30 years old had no educational background. Two-thirds of them were Christian and one-third was Buddhist (Bunaysaranay 2004:46). According to my research covering 382 persons of the *Akha* tribe in the inner city of Chiang Mai held in 2008, the ratio of generation and gender were almost common with Bunaysaranay abovementioned investigation by Bunaysaranay (Ishii, forthcoming). As for the occupation, among people aged 15–60 years, except full-time students, 81 percent of them were engaged in tourism-related occupations and 7 percent were engaged in non-tourism-related occupations. The unemployment rate was about 12%, although most of *Akha* were never employed by anyone barring a few exceptions. Many of the *Akha* employed in the tourism industry were working as vendors, barbeque sellers at booth, etc. (Ishii, forthcoming).

4. Methodology and Data

This study is primarily based on the interviews conducted among and observations made about the *Akha* people residing in Chiang Mai city, who are involved in ethnic tourism. Interviews were held in December 2006, February–March 2007, July–August 2007, and February–March 2008 in Chiang Mai. A total of 34 effective cases were reported.

The interviews and observations were carried out at respondents' houses, vending sites, etc. In most of the cases, the language used was Thai, as most of the respondents spoke Thai without any problem in daily life and work. Ethnic identification, age, and gender are defined by self-reports of the respondents. Basically, respondents who self-reported that they reside in the *Akha* community of intercity area of Chiang Mai were regarded as inner city residents of Chiang Mai, although some *Akha*

people tend to frequently migrate between cities and villages every few months. I excluded respondents who reported that they were in Chiang Mai just for a few days to visit their family.

The data was collected through face-to-face interviews. An employee of an NGO, who has worked in the community for 7 years, assisted me in this study as a coordinator. The interview was conducted with the help of a translator, an *Akha* man who has studied at a junior high school and is an *Akha*-Thai bilingual, and who resides in the community. I must admit that the respondents were people who belonged to the same/nearby villages as that of the translator. However, the age, gender, occupation, and social status varied among the respondents; thus, I suppose that the respondents could be regarded as a meaningful sample group for the research on the *Akha* community. The number of males and females in the sample was approximately the same, with female respondents slightly exceeding the male respondents. There were respondents ranging from infants to elderly persons over 60 years old. The number of children and young people in the sample was greater than the older people.

The number of elderly people in the sample was small. The distributions within the sample were quite similar to the distributions of Bunaysaranay's investigation results. In this paper, the ethnic identification of being *Akha* is defined by the self-identification of the respondents. I must admit that there may be some half-*Akha* people (people whose father may be non-*Akha*), especially for the young people among the respondents. However, as long as they live in *Akha* community and they identify themselves as *Akha*, those people are included in the sample. However, non-*Akha* spouses of *Akha* women (1 Thai and 1 French) are excluded from the sample, even if they live in the *Akha* community. This is because these people could have benefitted from their legal statuses or sometimes even by their race.

5. Results

After excluding respondents who are not ethnic *Akha* and those who are not residents of the inner-city community of Chiang Mai, 34 people were interviewed (Their ages ranged from 15 years to 52 years, and they comprised 15 males and 19 females). Based on the interviews, it was found that the occupations held by respondents were limited to (1) hotel cooks, (2) hotel cleaners, (3) souvenir vendors, (4) workers at barbeque stands, (5) day labourers at construction sites, and (6) workers at bars. Among the respondents, 65% percent had Thai nationality, 19% percent had authorized foreign resident card(3), and 16 percent had no formal certification.

Education and Nationality

The educational backgrounds of the respondents are as follows. As for the people under the age of 29, 64 percent had received some education. As for the people older than 30 years, only 4 percent had no experience of Thai national education. Among the older generation, some of them recalled their experiences of attending special schools run by the border patrol police, NGOs, etc. Those courses seem to have been useful in gaining the ability to speak Thai language; however, people who passed out from these schools are regarded as people with no educational experience in Thai cities, because they do not hold a certificate of graduate from primary schools. In other words, early educational programs

offered in the context of community development unfortunately do not have much relevance. The urbanization of the people residing in mountainous regions proceeded much more rapidly than expected. As a result, many *Akha* people over 30 years old today face urban life with almost no relevant educational background.

“School” ? When I was a little boy, there used to be what they call “village schools” in the mountainous villages. These were government-run schools and we studied there for a few weeks or months. I received a formal certificate after finishing the course, but the certification had no meaning after I came to live in the city. Without a graduate certification from a finishing primary school or secondary school, city people regard us as uneducated people. [Response from a 37-year-old man, originally from the Maesai area, when asked him about his educational background]

As for the people over 30 years old, most of them did not have any opportunity to study at schools in cities or towns in the lowlands. It was only since the 1980s that NGOs and some other governmental institutions opened some dormitories for the children in the mountainous villages, to enable them to study at schools in the lowlands, with local Thai children. Prior to these schools, there were village schools but such education was not considered relevant if the children wanted to continue studying in the secondary schools. Thus, it became rather common among mountainous villages to send their children to NGO dormitory or governmental schools with dormitory to attend lowland schools. As for the young generation, they are allowed to enter Thai formal education; however, many of them face difficulties at the time of searching for jobs. As a result, many young *Akha* give up the hope of being employed by Thai or foreign-affiliated company. They just become vendors or day labourers. In the community, there are few highly educated office workers/governmental officials, and many are vendors or day labourers who have passed out from high schools.

Well, government ensures that each one of us attends schools. But finishing schools actually have no meaning if we do not have a nationality. Even after finishing high schools, no employer wants us unless we have a nationality. This is why many youngsters quit schools. When they realize this reality, they lose their motivation. [Response from a 17-year-old man, originally from the Maesai area, when asked about his educational background]

Yes, I have a nationality. I was born in the city. However, I speak the *Akha* language at home. I started to learn Thai language when I entered infant school. Although I speak Thai fluently, I am still considered a non-native speaker. Do you know what I mean? It is always difficult for us *Akha* to find a good job, even after we finish high school. If I and he finished same school by same score, Northern Thai employers hire him and not me because I am an *Akha*. Do you know that? The economy is not performing well these days, so it is difficult even for locals residing in northern Thailand to find a job today. Under such circumstances, how can we expect to find a good job? I understand the feelings of youngsters who drop out of school after a few years. Even

though we passed out of schools, what we can do is exactly the same as what my father did.
[Barbeque vendor, a 22-year-old man from the Maesai area]

Both for the older generation, that had fewer educational opportunities, and the young generation, that had more educational opportunities, it usually seems difficult to gain occupation at Thai/foreign-affiliated companies when they reside in the city. In other words, *Akha* people have “opportunities for education” in the form of “village schools,” non-formal education (educational opportunity for grown-ups who can study at night or on holidays), affirmative action, etc. However, even if they did their best to finish those schools, it is not easy for them to achieve a “better life” than that of their parent's generation. If they do not have a nationality, it is very difficult for them to be employed or to start their own business. Even if they have nationality, there are often biases against ethnic minority and they cannot easily get proper position at work place. They can only cheap labour jobs as day labourers or souvenir vendors, which are abundant. However, thanks to development aids and individual efforts in recent times, there are some *Akha* people who were able secure jobs at higher posts such as officers in government organizations or professors. However, such people are still rare exceptions who are highly capable, hardworking, or fortunate. Hence, it is more appropriate to regard these persons as exceptions. In this paper, we focus on the ordinary *Akha* residents, not the ones with special talents.

Employed or unemployed?

Those employed with hotels as cooks or room service staffs, were formally employed and received monthly salaries although they only receive around THB 4,200–5,000. However, such people were only a lucky handful (Ishii, forthcoming). All these people had the following common features: (1) holding the Thai nationality, (2) holding formal certification of finishing either primary or secondary education. Apart from these hotel workers, the working *Akha* people are not jobless, but they are not employed by anyone, nor do they own any authorized business. They just sell souvenirs, barbeques, or flowers on the pavements or work as day labourers. They are not jobless, but they are neither formally employed nor own any business.

We sell souvenirs every night here. Holidays? How can we rest when we have to feed our children and send them to schools? When I am ill, I just push myself by thinking about my kids.
[A 38 year-old female souvenir vendor with three kids, originally from Chiang Rai area]

We are not sure how long we can work here as day labourers. We must work when we have work. When we cannot find anything to do, we rest. It all depends on how much work is available at construction sites or in the fields. [A 30-year-old male worker at a construction site, originally from the Maesai area]

They are receiving an income, but they are neither formally employed nor do they formally own any business. This means that their income is not stable and once their small businesses are disrupted

for some reason, such as illness or any changes in regulation, they can immediately lose their means of living. For example, local police sometimes conduct raids on flower vendors. Policemen arrest these people on charges of child labour, undocumented migrant, etc. In other words, these people are constantly under the threat of their livelihood.

Ethnic minority as cheap labour

All of the respondents had worked in the tourism industry in a broad sense. However, many respondents' job did not involve any element of *Akha*-ness; they worked as cheap labourer either at construction site, cafes, or restaurants.

For an old *Akha* man like me, are there any other jobs available except that of a day-labourer?

There is no old barbeque vendor in front of beer bars! (which implies that it is job for young men only) [A 47-year-old man originally from the Maesai area]

It is important to note that before considering these people as *Akha*, who boast of a rich culture that is valuable in the tourism context, they must be recognized as an ethnic minority in national economy. Despite the Thai government's efforts to provide educational opportunities and nationality or some kind of residential qualification, they still find it difficult to gain a proper occupational status in the Thai urban society, as seen above. As a result, *Akha* people, especially men over 30 years old tend to be work as day labourers or just depend on the earnings of their wives/children. A few men who are able to find jobs as souvenir merchants can work until they are 50 or 60 years old, but most men over 30 years old cannot find any job in the tourism industry. Street *Akha* benders are only for women and barbeque vendors are only for young men. If the *Akha* men reach the age of 40, they become too old to engage in day labour. They hardly receive income when they are young. In this situation, the number of people dependent on alcohol or drug increases among older men. This situation is even more severe for those without nationality. It is not uncommon for them to work under the minimum wage. Non-payment is also not uncommon among them. Since they are afraid of losing the opportunity of earning a minimum wage or are afraid of being caught by the police as undocumented migrants, they have to accept poor working conditions. In other words, they are exploited because of their weak legal status. Although we know that this problem is not easy for the Thai government to solve, as there is a continuous flow of Myanmar refugees into Thailand even today, we cannot avoid acknowledging that these people are exploited.

Are you aware of the big building being constructed over there? I have worked there for the last 6 weeks. For the first week, I received 90 baht per day at the end of the week. For the second week and the third week, I received nothing. [I told him that I will inform the hotel owner about this] Don't tell this to anyone. This is very common for us. Western owners of the building do not realize this. If the Westerners find out about this, the construction companies will just remove people who are not Thai nationals from their construction site. In that case, we will even lose the

chance to receive a week's pay regardless of how low it is. [A 19 year-old-man, born in the city]

In other words, they are sometimes ethnic minority in the urban society more than being *Akha* cultural descendant in tourism context. Many urban *Akha* residents work as cheap labour because tourism-related jobs that are visible to tourists are often limited to young people or women. There are some particular jobs that can bring more income, such as waitress at a tourist restaurant (average income is about 12,000 baht including tips) or service staff at tourist bars (average income is estimated to be more than 10,000 baht), or sometimes occupations related to sex industries. However, these high income occupations are available only for a few years for an individual. A person can do these jobs no longer than 10 years. Considering these issues, is it appropriate to regard this occupational situation for *Akha* people in the tourism industry as a profitable system for the *Akha* people?

6. Discussion

This study indicates that even though tourism seems like a major source of income for *Akha* people residing in the city, there are 2 aspects to be reconsidered. First, job opportunities within the tourism industry seems to be basically limited to cheap labour. The most popular jobs within the tourism-related industry are souvenir vendor, flower vendor, or barbeque vendor around tourist spots at night. Alternatively, they can choose to be day labourers. As one of the respondents said, "Vendors are job for women or youngsters." There are some elderly men who sell souvenirs at the booth, but it is only allowed for those with formal I.D. cards. If *Akha* men do not have any official I.D. cards, working as barbeque vendors or day labourers is almost the only employment opportunity for them (*Akha* men that do not have ID cards are only left with the opportunity of working as barbeque vendors or day labourers). Since, barbeque vendors are usually in their 20s, this option is available only to young men. As for the option of working as day labourers at construction sites, men over 40 years of age find it rather difficult to secure jobs; even if they are hired, their wages are cheaper than young men (although it depends on what type of labourers the employer needs on a particular day.) As a result, the men aged 40th—50th seem to find it the most difficult to find job in the tourism-related industry.

Second, most of the job opportunities offered to *Akha* people in the tourism-related industries are unstable. Barring a few exceptions, such as hotel employees, most of the job opportunities for *Akha* people are non-formal, unstable jobs, regardless of whether they are souvenir vendors or day labourers. Most souvenir vendors just buy the goods they sell from markets or merchants, modify them a little and sell it to the tourists. If they have fixed booths, they may enter into a contract with land owners, but these are usually monthly contract. As for their income, its never is stable and predictable.

If, the most of the job opportunities offered to *Akha* people in the tourism-related industries are unstable, will they benefit the *Akha* people in long run? Based on the present system, they can gain income via tourism only when they are young. Job opportunities for them are limited to unskilled jobs. Even if young people have finished high schools, they are usually not able to find an occupation that is appropriate for their educational background since they are *Akha*. (Of course, there are some exceptions

but they are few.) As a result, even if *Akha* people can gain a temporary income, it is difficult to expect upward shift in their social or economic status. Even for the next generation, many of the *Akha* parents cannot expect an improvement in the situation under the present circumstances. Of course, a few people with Thai nationality may expect an upward shift for their children, if they can obtain enough money to provide their children with higher education. However, for most of the *Akha* people, job opportunities provided by tourism-related industry are temporary and unstable.

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Endnotes

- (1) The definition sometimes differs depending on the situation.
- (2) We cannot discuss this aspect without mentioning the history of their land use and the governmental policy toward it. However, I will not mention it in this paper due to space constraints. Please refer McKinnon 1997 and Sutthi 1989 for details on this topic.
- (3) See Rungruangsaphakul 2006 and Ishii 2008 for the details of the foreign resident card in the context of the status of hill tribes.

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