

# *Thailand's Khmer as 'Invisible Minority': Language, Ethnicity and Cultural Politics in North-Eastern Thailand*

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*Ethnic Khmer speakers in Thailand number over a million. Yet, despite their large numbers, they are regarded as an 'invisible minority', largely inconspicuous in the nation's arena of cultural politics. Their invisibility has, to some extent, to do with their overall cultural similarity with surrounding ethnic Lao speakers of Thailand's north-eastern 'Isan' region; like Isan Lao, they are syncretic Theravada Buddhists, and their village life revolves around wet rice agriculture. Such similarity contrasts with the conspicuous differences marking other minorities of Thailand, such as the Muslims in the south, or highlanders in the north. But Khmer invisibility is also the result of cultural politics at the national level, and with the specific histories of these nation-states in the modern period. This paper examines the apathy towards Khmer identity in Thailand, both in the historical context of Thai nation-building and in specific language policies and practices.*

**Keywords:** *Northern Khmer, Thailand, ethnicity, nationalism, cultural politics*

## **Northern Khmer Speakers in the Thai State**

Khmer speakers in Thailand inhabit the southern stretch of 'Isan' (north-east Thailand), a high plateau spanning the provinces of Surin, Buriram and Srisaket. In the south of these provinces lie the Dangrek mountains; covered with dense forest, the mountains drop precipitously on their southern escarpment into the Cambodian state. Although rugged, there are passes that in the past facilitated transportation and trade between upland and lowland (Cambodian) Khmers.

Language is the chief way in which Khmer are distinguished from their neighbours, as their language differs radically from both the neighbouring regional language of Lao and the national language, Thai. In many respects, Khmer speakers appear similar to their neighbours, practising Theravada Buddhism and basing their village economies on wet rice agriculture. There are differences in Khmer and Lao/Thai religious beliefs and cultural practices, histories and identities, and perhaps even in physical phenotype, but none of these are as salient in everyday life as language.

There are over a million speakers of Northern Khmer, making it probably the largest non-Tai language spoken within the borders of the Thai state. Suwilai (1996, p. 18) estimated there to be about 1.3 million speakers, and Smalley (1994, pp. 139,

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151), citing the 1989 census, estimated there to be about 1.1 million—a number Smalley (1988) argued is growing, even if the territory in which it is spoken is shrinking. Growth of Northern Khmer has been somewhat unexpected. Keyes (1967, p. 8), for example, predicted the language would disappear:

The number of Khmer speaking people remaining in the Northeast has slowly diminished to the present day (1960) size of not more than a half million out of a total population of nine million. Even the remaining Khmer are bilingual and I would predict that their distinctiveness will also disappear in time.

Smalley is correct when he cites the increase in Khmer speakers. However, I suspect Keyes might also be right and that, despite the increased numbers of speakers over the last 30 years, social conditions are such that Northern Khmer language may indeed fade (Vail, 2006). The growth of Northern Khmer is a result of increased population density in the area—a similar growth was seen in most parts of Thailand over the last 40 years. All in all, Northern Khmer is spoken in some 11 provinces.<sup>1</sup> However the heaviest concentrations of speakers are found in Buriram, Srisaket and especially Surin, which is where I undertook most of my research.

The word for Khmer in Thai, *khamen*, can refer to the Khmer language, ethnicity or even the country of Cambodia. The fluidity of the term, as I explain in this paper, contributes to the ‘invisible’ status of Khmer ethnics. Among Khmer speakers in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, one finds a wide range of names for the different varieties of Khmer language and identity, and the nomenclature can be confusing.<sup>2</sup> For clarity in this paper, I refer to the Khmer people and language in Thailand as Northern Khmer, and the Khmer of Cambodia as Cambodian.

There is a general assumption in the literature, based in part on geography and national politics, that Northern Khmer and Cambodian are sharply different varieties of Khmer. This assumption is widely shared both etically and emically. Smalley (1994, p. 137), for example, remarks that it is not clear how far mutual intelligibility between Northern Khmer and Cambodian extends, if at all, into the Cambodian state, and he suggests they are different languages (see also Jenner, 1974). In the 1880s, French explorer Étienne Aymonier and his Cambodian assistants frequently noted contrasts between Northern Khmer and Cambodian speakers, in both language and customs (Aymonier, 2000 [1895], *passim*). Villagers I interviewed also suggested that in the days before the border was closed, as soon as one descended from the high plateau of Isan

1 Suwilai (1996, pp. 16–18) lists the populations of Khmer speakers in each of the following provinces: Ubon Ratchathani, Srisaket, Surin, Buriram, Nakhon Ratchasima, Sakaew, Prachinburi, Mahasarakham, Roi Et, Chachaoengsao, Chantaburi, Trat, and a small category of ‘other’. Surin has the largest number of speakers (518,527), followed by Buriram (425,604) and Srisaket (284,482). Suwilai (1996, p. 22) cites the variety spoken in Surin as ‘standard Northern Khmer’, reflecting the tendency for linguistics to find or create a central Northern Khmer—an example of what Bakhtin (1981) terms ‘centripetal’ forces on language. In fact, Surin dialect was designated as ‘Standard Northern Khmer’ by a group of linguists in 1988, over the remonstrances of some Cambodian scholars arguing for unity with lowland Cambodian (Thomas, 1990, pp. 103–4).

2 Khmer in Isan call their language, among other things, *khmer leu* (Thai: *khmer sung*, English: high Khmer) and the Khmer of Cambodia, *khmer krom* or, in Thai, *khmer tam* (meaning ‘low Khmer’). Low/high marks a geographical distinction since the southern tier of Isan sits on a high plateau to the north of the Cambodian state. But these terms are relative. Khmer speakers in Phnom Penh refer to themselves as *khmer kandal*; *khmer krom* refers to Khmer speakers living in the Mekong delta in the Vietnamese state, and *khmer leu* refers to non-Khmer speaking highlanders in the Cambodian provinces of Rattanakiri and Monduliri.

down into Cambodia, people were very difficult to understand. One villager I interviewed had worked for US intelligence in Siem Reap during the war. He told how he could blend in well with Cambodians, and quickly learned to understand everything; but he was careful not to speak, as his Northern Khmer accent would be immediately detected. These differences in variety appear to be longstanding. Thel (1985, p. 103) argues that political instability and 'the loss of territorial integrity' after the fall of Angkor, roughly between the 14th and 16th centuries, set the geo-linguistic conditions for Northern Khmer to diverge from the variety spoken in lowland Cambodia.

Bauer (1989), in contrast, suggests that the break might not be as great as is generally assumed, and that other differences of variety could be more salient than that between Northern Khmer and Cambodian. Had political borders been drawn differently in the last 100 years, we might be drawing very different dialect maps. In general, however, Thomas (1990) is probably right when he argues for substantial linguistic differences between the two varieties, and, most importantly for present purposes, it appears Northern Khmer speakers often exploit this difference in variety to distinguish themselves from Cambodia, linguistically, culturally and politically.<sup>3</sup>

If Northern Khmer are linguistically distinct from Cambodians, they are linguistically even more distinct from their neighbours in Thailand. The north-east of Thailand, commonly called Isan, is a vast area populated overwhelmingly by speakers of Lao. Isan regional identity is so completely associated with Lao language and ethnicity that non-Lao speakers are marginal to, even excluded from, the Isan regional discourse. People by and large associate Isan with Lao music, Lao cuisine (marked in particular by glutinous rice rather than jasmine rice), Lao language and, in general, poverty. But because the term 'Lao' also denotes the contiguous nation-state of Laos, the regional name 'Isan' has in many contexts supplanted 'Lao' in Thailand.<sup>4</sup> Those outside the north-east area typically refer to 'Isan' music, 'Isan' cuisine, and 'Isan' language; those inside the region vacillate between using the term 'Isan' and using 'Lao'.

The ethno-linguistic term 'Lao', when uttered by speakers outside of Isan, is often pejorative, suggesting country-bumpkinness and inferiority to central Thais. 'Isan' carries less of this social stigma, although it is not entirely free from it. Khmer speakers also live in Isan, but are often regarded as so ethno-linguistically distinct from the Lao that they cannot be easily categorized with them in these reified cultural terms. On a recent taxi ride in Bangkok, the Lao-Isan driver repeated to me a somewhat common stereotype, 'Khmer aren't real Isan. They're not like us Lao; they are "black-hearted" (*jai dam*) like southerners.' Others, however, do see them as genuine 'Isan' despite the language differences, and subsuming them at large into Isan identity in this way effaces ethnic difference in favour of geographical and economic similitude. In short, like most labels of identity, 'Isan' identity for Northern Khmer speakers is fluid rather than rigid. They may identify with being Isan in some contexts (or may be identified by others in that way), but then may reject it for a Khmer or Thai (national) identity in other contexts. This reflects the bivalent meaning of the term 'identity', a term that marks group identification on the one hand, and a way of asserting difference, on the other.

The chief way in which Northern Khmer self-identified in my interviews was as Thai. In the context of my interviews, that is in the context of being interviewed by

3 Northern Khmer speakers, when describing their relation to Cambodian, can to a certain extent choose whether they want to emphasize mutual intelligibility or unintelligibility, depending on the situation and their aims at the time.

4 For a discussion of the different sentiments regarding 'Lao' and 'Isan' identities, see McCargo and Krisadawan (2004).

someone conspicuously from another country, Khmer villagers insisted on calling themselves Thais, and constantly qualified the meaning of ‘Khmer’ as being simply a regional dialect. No one asserted an Isan identity to me, although it was occasionally mentioned in passing. They would only identify as ‘Khmer’ after several rounds of questions focusing on regional differences such as language; even then I found most people resistant to the use of the term ‘Khmer’; as an identity, it appears to fall within the realm of what Herzfeld (1997) terms the ‘culturally intimate’. Exceptions occurred among the elderly villagers, whose formative experiences were at a time when being Khmer was neither denigrated nor necessarily pitted against being Thai. Some of the very oldest villagers were fiercely ‘Khmer’, although it is difficult to assess what they felt that Khmerness to consist of. ‘Thai’, as most villagers depicted it, was clearly a national designation, and was ethno-linguistically qualified through their claims that, although Khmer speak Thai better and more clearly than even Bangkok Thais, they nevertheless remain stigmatized because of their darker skin. I have more to say on national identification below, but suffice it here to note that in these cases of disavowing Khmer identity to outsiders such as myself, and constituting, in a sense, round Khmer pegs in square Lao-Isan holes, we can begin to see from where the notion of ‘invisible minority’ may emerge.

The questions remain: Why do Khmer insist so often on a Thai identity as opposed to a Khmer identity? How do we account for their disavowal of Khmer identity and denigration of Khmer as a ‘local language’ (despite its rich cultural, literary and linguistic heritage), on the one hand, and the embracing of a Thai national identity, on the other?

### **Thai–Cambodia Relations and the Political Context of Northern Khmer Identity**

In the larger picture, the cultural context of Khmer language in Thailand is a sensitive issue, as Thailand has had such an ambivalent relationship with Khmer/Cambodian culture generally. This ambivalence is a pervasive theme in both Thailand and Cambodia, often becoming manifest in terrible events. In January 2003, for example, mobs of Cambodians burned down the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh in reaction to what they perceived as a cultural slur—a Thai television star, Suvan Kongying, had allegedly suggested that Angkor Wat, the symbolic heart of Cambodia, rightfully belonged to Thailand. Although the actress had in fact not made this claim, indignant Cambodians rioted in Phnom Penh, burned down the Thai embassy and attacked Thai businesses. Because national discourses of ‘Thai’ and ‘Khmer’ are so volatile, some historical background to Thai–Cambodia relations will be useful in understanding contemporary Northern Khmer identity and language practices, as it provides key features of the background in which many attitudes and policies have been shaped.

From the outset it must be recognized that much of Thailand’s royal court life, language and culture is essentially descendent from the Angkor kingdom of the Khmers. Wyatt (1984, p. 63) discusses how the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya ‘had in the thirteenth century been the western provinces of the Angkorian Empire in the region centred on Lopburi’. The end of the Angkor empire proper came at the hands of the Tai kingdom of Ayutthaya. In 1431, King Borommaracha of Ayutthaya sent an army to Angkor and sacked it, taking the royal regalia, and Angkor never recovered. Its rulers fled to the area of what is now Phnom Penh, and Borommaracha installed his son as a vassal ruler, until the city was abandoned soon thereafter (Wyatt, 1984, p. 70).

Taking the royal regalia was significant, as at that period appropriating the trappings of royalty—especially important Buddha images—was the way in which one kingdom essentially took, symbolically and practically, the rights of sovereignty from a defeated kingdom. Subsequent kings of Ayutthaya drew heavily on the extant Khmer political infrastructure, especially the 'Khmerized urban elite' of Lopburi and Ayutthaya who had a great influence on court life (Wyatt, 1984, p. 71). Wilaiwan (2001) has argued persuasively that the Siamese elite of Ayutthaya were bilingual in Khmer and Thai, which helps account for the enormous number of loanwords that have entered Thai from Khmer, as well as the high (royal) register of Thai called *Ratchasap*.

Tangible evidence for Siam's Khmer political ancestry abounds, from the diglossic *Ratchasap* used with royalty, and Siamese court dances based conspicuously on Khmer styles, to the detailed model of Angkor Wat proudly displayed at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. But Thailand's historical descent from the Khmer empire is rarely explicitly admitted in national discourse. Heavy-handed nationalistic propaganda from the 1920s through the 1960s effaced much of Siam/Thailand's historical past and, instead, projected a 'Thainess' back into time immemorial (Chai-anan, 1991; Thongchai, 1994). The tendency in such nationalist discourse has been either to appropriate Khmer culture and cultural artefacts as Thai, or at least to alienate them from their Khmer roots. In 1988, for example, in a high-profile international row, Thailand demanded that the Chicago Art Institute return a lintel that had been pilfered from Phanom Rung temple in Isan's Buriram province. The Thais demanded its return on the grounds that it was a material part of Thai culture, sidestepping (or squashing) the fact that the temple was built by Khmers in what was at the time of its building unequivocally a Khmer domain (Keyes, 1991; Thongchai, 1994, p. 169). Similarly, in the 1960s Thailand went to the World Court in a case against Cambodia for the ownership rights to Preah Vihear in Srisaket Province, another Angkor-period temple. Thailand lost the temple, a bitter defeat that still rankles in Thai–Cambodia relations today.

## The Denial of Khmer Culture

When Khmer culture cannot be directly appropriated as Tai, its true origins are often obscured. Such is the case with manuscripts written in Khmer Mul script, for example, most of which are religious tracts written on palm leaves. In Thailand, this written language is frequently not referred to as Khmer at all, but as Khom, an old Mon word for Khmer (Bauer, 1989, p. 77). I suspect this usage was popularized precisely to obscure Khmer influence by the Fine Arts Department formed during the rule of military dictator Phibulsongkhram in the 1930s. Whether doing so was the actual motivation or not, using a Mon name for Khmer writing alienates these written artefacts from their Khmer heritage. During my fieldwork, I regularly asked Northern Khmer-speaking villagers if they knew what Khom was; most had only a dim or tentative awareness, and many did not know at all. That is, they knew the word Khom, but they did not immediately associate it with Khmer. Those who knew or suspected the script was Khmer were generally older villagers, especially those few who, 'traditionally educated' in local temples, knew how to write Mul script themselves. Still others would recognize a script as Khmer, and not realize it was being designated as Khom. Formal education certainly did not help: a highly educated doctor I met in Buriram province had dug up an ancient inscription in his garden and asked me if I could read it. Looking at it, I told him it was difficult for me to read Khmer, especially old Khmer, to which he responded 'It isn't Khmer, it's Khom.' When I pointed out that

Khom was Khmer, he looked puzzled and asked, ‘Really?’ This is unsurprising given the emphasis in state education on producing national citizens. Northern Khmer speakers in Thailand, have, in other words, been alienated from a part of their cultural heritage through an obfuscatory change of name.

### Anti-Khmer Sentiments

Much of the anti-Khmer sentiment in Thailand arises from two related sources. One, which I alluded to above, stems from Thailand’s drive to create a unique national identity. Nationalism in Thailand was first propagated by Rama VI (Vella, 1978), but reached its jingoistic zenith only after the end of the absolute monarchy in the 1930s to 1940s under Field Marshal Phibulsongkhram and his chief architect of nationalism, Luang Wichit Watthakan. Luang Wichit was fervent in his promotion of Thai national identity, and was able to propagate it widely throughout the country by means of a nascent mass media, especially radio, print and theatre. His writings set out to establish the history and natural unity of the ‘Thai race’, with the Siamese reigning supreme. Much of what he wrote had specific irredentist aims, looking to recover territory in Laos lost to the French colonial authorities. Irredentism was extended to cover Cambodians as well: Luang Wichit depicted Cambodians (as opposed to some presumably ancient stock of ‘Khmer’) as essentially a degenerate form of Thai. In his 1941 book *Thailand’s case*, Luang Wichit (1941, pp. 129–30) writes:

The Cambodians are otherwise called ‘Khmer’ (pronounced as ‘Khamair’). But it is an established fact that the Khmers and the Cambodians are not the same people. . . . About fifteen centuries ago the Thai came down to this peninsula and, according to Monsieur Etienne Aymonier, poured out in important influx, covering almost all the plains of Indochina. The Thais, according to the eminent French orientalist professor Louis Finot, spread themselves like an immense piece of cloth over the land from South China as far as Burma. The Thai blood poured into Khmer veins with insinuating effect like water, to use the expression of professor Louis Finot. The Khmers changed century by century. After five hundred years of blood mixture, the Khmers became more and more similar to Thais both physically and mentally. The coming into existence of this new name ‘Cambudja’ marked the end of the old Khmer race and the birth of a new people who have 90 per cent Thai blood.

The theme of Khmer subordination to the dominant Thai race was a common one in Luang Wichit’s writings, coming through again, for example, in the last lines of his heavy-handed nationalistic play, *Ratchamanu* (cited in Barmé, 1993, p. 125):

*Thai soldiers:* Eh! Khmers and Thais look just the same, Sir.

*Ratchamanu:* Of course, they’re Thais like us! A long time ago they happened to occupy the old Khom territory and came to be called Khmers. In fact, we’re all really Thai brothers.

*Thai soldiers:* We should all be friends, no more war.

*Ratchamanu:* Yes, there’s no more need to fight. All of us on the Golden Peninsula are the same . . . [but remember] the Siamese Thais [the Thais from Siam proper] are the elder brothers . . .

Luang Wichit, who admired Goebbel’s skill in propaganda, pursued a racially based irredentism aiming to recover the physical control of territory ceded to the French several decades earlier (known as the ‘lost provinces’) which, later, formed the basis of

nationalistic political antagonism during the Cold War. These historical events have much to do with the shift in the composition of the regional state, from a 'premodern' alliance of kingdoms/*muang* to a territorially based modern nation-state. From the mid-18th century, petty kingdoms in what are now the provinces of Surin, Buriram and Srisaket, as well as Battambang, Sisophon, and Siem Reap in Cambodia, were aligned in tributary relations with the Siamese court (and in many cases they were simultaneously aligned in relation to Vietnam).

In day-to-day affairs, these petty kingdoms were highly autonomous, and few outside their courts had dealings with any living, breathing Siamese. 'Siam' here was not specifically an ethnic or national term, but was more a political designation associated with the Siamese monarchy and its control over tributaries. Since it was not based on any essentialized ethnic identity, 'Siam' could include people who were ethnically not Thai, and in fact even Siamese courts are reported to have been ethnically quite diverse (Jory, 1999). However, Siam is a term derived from the Khmer language—it appears on inscriptions in Angkor—and it is not entirely clear that the Khmer use of [siam] does not denote a more ethno-linguistically based category that contrasts with Khmer. There was a saying among older Northern Khmer villagers, used to scare children into obedience, that if they did not behave *siam mo jap!*—the Siamese will come and get you! Whether this imputes an ethnically based identity to Siamese is not clear, but what certainly is clear is that the Siamese are considered alien intruders. 'Khmer' and 'Siamese' are both slippery terms of identity, quite likely meaning different things to different people, and changing over the course of time and context.

When the French began to encroach on (what is now) Cambodia and Laos (exploiting those areas' tributary relations to Vietnam, which it had already colonized), Siam responded by modernizing politically: it transformed these outlying regions into bureaucratic components of a centralized state rather than autonomous chieftainships held in tributary relations. Siam competed as well as it could with France, sending out cartographers to legitimate territorial claims and citing tribute relations recorded in local chronicles as evidence for historical incorporations into the Siamese state (Thongchai, 1994; Tully, 1996). In doing so, Siam was something of an 'internal' colonizer (Anderson, 1978; Thongchai, 1994; Vandergeest, 1993, p. 140) of outlying areas. It used methods learned from the British to incorporate them in politically new, 'modernized' ways, including civil reforms instituting a new form of government (Breazeale, 1975; Wyatt, 1984; Paitoon, 1984; Keyes, 1991), education (Wyatt, 1969; Paitoon, 1988), the creation of a standing army (Battye, 1974), mapping (Thongchai, 1994), and religious reform based on a Bangkok variety of Buddhism (Kamala, 1997; Wyatt, 1984). These reforms were resisted in Isan, often violently, in a series of rebellions nowadays referred to collectively as the 1902 'Holy Man's' rebellion because of their millenarian characteristics (Murdoch, 1974; Keyes, 1977; Paitoon, 1984; Gunn, 1990). The rebellions were brutally suppressed on both the Siamese and the French sides and, subsequently, the local polities in what are now the Khmer-speaking provinces of Surin, Buriram and Srisaket (among others) were drawn more firmly into the expanding and modernizing Siamese state. These events have passed from living memory, although I was able to interview one woman aged in her mid-to-late 90s who grew up in the immediate aftermath of that period and still complains about the Siamese as alien encroachers.

In 1907, having already firmly colonized most of Cambodia (or, technically, made it a protectorate), France took from Siam the border provinces of Battambang, Sisophon and Siem Reap in Cambodia with aggressive gunboat diplomacy (Tully, 1996). What

had been the province of Siam Rat ('where the Siamese rule') under Siamese domination was renamed Siem Reap ('where the Siamese were defeated'). As a testament to the differing perceptions of legitimacy and ownership, the city is to this day often still designated Siam Rat on Thai maps. It is these 'lost' provinces that later nationalists such as Luang Wichit and Phibulsongkhram wanted to recover from the French, and motivated them to make racially based irredentist claims over Khmer speakers.

## Cold War Tensions

The year 1932 saw the end of the absolute monarchy in Siam, and, with the rise of military dictatorships such as Phibul's, a massive campaign that was largely successful in inculcating a Thai national identity throughout the country. As part of the drive to establish a national identity, in 1939 the country's name was changed from the more ethno-linguistically neutral 'Siam' to the clearly nationalist 'Thailand'. This name was designed to unite Tai-speaking people under one national rubric, but alienated non-Tai speaking peoples, especially urban Chinese and ethnic Malays in the south, or attempted to subsume them by such means as Luang Wichit's dubious claims about Khmer racial identity cited above.

When the French were defeated in World War II, Phibul lost no time in reclaiming the 'lost provinces' of Cambodia. One of his first moves, unsurprisingly, was to change the doubtlessly odious term Siem Reap to 'Phibulsongkhram Province' (Barmé, 1993, p. 170). Programmes to Thai-ify the reclaimed provinces were quickly instituted. Many Thais were enlisted as teachers and quickly settled in teaching the Thai language to the locals. A woman I interviewed who had moved to the reclaimed provinces at that time recalls how much more energy was put into teaching Thai in these territories than into teaching Thai in her native Surin, and how quickly a national infrastructure was then being developed. Language and infrastructure were to be used as a basis to legitimize political control in a clearly contentious area. Surin, in contrast, was a region already securely incorporated into the Thai state, with a status unlikely to be contested when the war ended, and thus not a high priority for development.

Indeed, soon after the war, Thailand was forced to cede the reclaimed provinces back to France in exchange for entry into the United Nations. But many on the Thai right were enraged that what was to them a legitimate part of the Thai kingdom had again been lost. After ceding these provinces, Thailand began actively supporting the anti-French insurgency of the Khmer Issara, which had strong ties between members of the elite in Surin and Cambodians fighting for independence. After Cambodian independence in 1953, relations between the states were initially good, but rapidly deteriorated in the poisonous conditions of the Cold War and growing conflict in Vietnam.

At this time the leader of the newly independent Cambodia, Norodom Sihanouk, moved left in the political spectrum. As he did, right-wing dictators in Thailand, especially Field Marshal Phibulsongkhram (1938–1944; 1948–1957) and Field Marshal Sarit (1959–1963), propagated a jingoistic Thai national identity and actively disparaged both Cambodia and Sihanouk. They also supported a new insurgency group opposed to Sihanouk, the Khmer Serei. Border skirmishes became common, especially after the mid-1950s when Sihanouk began making political overtures to communist China. This was the beginning of rabid anti-communism in Thailand, eventually culminating, perhaps, in the 1976 assertion by influential monk Phra Kitthiwuttho that, although killing was a sin, killing communists was not (Keyes, 1987, p. 95).



It was also, of course, the time in which tensions in Vietnam were mounting, and the US was becoming involved militarily in support of the South Vietnamese. By the late 1950s, the border area in Thailand's Chantaburi province was rife with clashes and kidnappings of peasants by armed soldiers on both sides. The border area in Surin, however, was quieter, in large part owing to a pro-Thai warlord named Dap Chhuon, who was born in Surin and governed Siem Reap province at the time. In 1958, Dap Chhuon became embroiled in a Thai/South Vietnamese/US-sponsored plot to overthrow Sihanouk, but the plot unravelled and Dap Chhuon was killed (Sihanouk, 1973, pp. 102–11; Chandler, 1991, pp. 101–5). Sihanouk was enraged by the plot. He railed against Thailand and the Thai dictator Field Marshal Sarit in vociferous radio programmes broadcast from Phnom Penh that were translated into Thai. Sarit responded in kind. In those years, Thai and Cambodian jingoistic nationalism was reaching its zenith, and the Sarit–Sihanouk radio rivalry was one of the chief ways in which it was publicly instantiated. The leaders hurled insults at one another and lambasted one another's countries. A joke in Thailand at the time went:

Q: Thai mai chop sii arai? ('What colour don't Thais like?', where sii means colour)

A: Sii-hanouk!

Nationalist xenophobia between the two states finally peaked in a struggle over the ancient Khmer temple, Preah Vihear (Thai: Phra Viharn). Preah Vihear is an Angkor-period Khmer temple that straddles the border between Srisaket province in Thailand and Preah Vihear province in Cambodia. It is rough country and sparsely inhabited. The temple sits high on a cliff overlooking Cambodia's plains below, and the land on which the temple sits forms part of the Mun river watershed in Thailand. Access from the Cambodian side is nearly impossible because of the steepness of the cliff; access from the Thai side is easier, although in the late 1950s it was not easy even travelling there. Ownership of the temple became the site of an acrimonious controversy between Cambodia and Thailand, between Sihanouk and Sarit, with lasting and tangible repercussions for nationalism and identity among Northern Khmer speakers living in Isan.

Dap Chhuon, warlord of Siem Reap and sympathetic to Thailand, had turned a blind eye to Thailand's military fortification of the Preah Vihear temple grounds, but after he was killed, Sihanouk demanded that the Thais relinquish it. Sihanouk complained bitterly in his radio broadcasts, accusing Thailand of stealing Cambodian heritage, and he cut diplomatic relations with Thailand three times; twice in 1958 and once in 1961 (Nophadol, 1997 [2540], p. 68; Long, 1998 [2541]). The dispute involved two competing discourses—from Cambodian claims to ancient Khmer heritage and appeals to the history of the temple itself, and Thai claims of territoriality based on the watershed's location and the inaccessibility of the temple from the Cambodian side. Although it appeared to be a black-and-white dispute between Thais and Cambodians, both sides were aware of a grey area: the hundreds of thousands of Northern Khmer speakers who lived on the Thai side, people whose identity and perhaps even allegiance was potentially volatile.

The Northern Khmer of Isan were not often explicitly mentioned in the public sphere, and apparently not made pertinent in the subsequent World Court case, but clearly Thailand and Cambodia had differing views on which state those Khmer speakers belonged to legitimately. Thailand, having slowly incorporated the Northern

Khmer-speaking regions into its state across the course of over 100 years (Paitoon, 1984), would not even entertain the idea that those regions might not be part of Thailand. It is likely that most of the Khmer speakers in the region felt largely the same way, although perhaps not as adamantly. Sihanouk saw it differently. In 1958 he accused Thailand of stealing the regions of Surin, Buriram, Nakhon Ratchasima and Chantaburi, which, he declared, were properly part of Cambodia (*Siam Nihon*, 31 December 1958). In 2002, I interviewed an aged Cambodian monk residing in Surin Province, who told me much the same story. Cambodians, he said, felt the lower part of Isan to be properly a part of Cambodia, primarily because it was populated by Khmer speakers (albeit Northern Khmer) and had historically been part of the Angkor kingdom. The monk told me how with no realistic hope of recovering these Khmer-speaking regions, Sihanouk ‘settled’ for the ownership of Preah Vihear. A local historian in Surin told me that, in the late 1950s or early 1960s, Cambodian students had demonstrated for the return of Surin to Cambodia, but by that time ‘such a thing was no longer possible’.

Among the older villagers I interviewed, few would discuss this directly and those who did were ambivalent about it. By and large they reiterated their acceptance of being Thai citizens, but tempered this in several noteworthy ways. Several cited their reverence for Sihanouk as the Khmer king, who, they said, faced a much more difficult political situation than did the Thai king. These same villagers were then quick to point out that they also admired and had a strong sense of allegiance to the Thai king. We should recall that the ‘modernization’ of the region into a bureaucratic state had occurred only a few generations earlier (in some cases within informants’ lifetimes), and the religio-political significance of allegiance to kingship was (and is) still very much in play. Other villagers recalled their kin and trade relations with lowland Cambodia that had been cut off when the border was closed. Despite expressing a reverence for Sihanouk, none invoked any connections between themselves and an Angkorian heritage, and none expressed any interest in being part of the Cambodian state. Nevertheless it is somewhat difficult to assess how they might have felt about this 45 years ago and whether what they claimed to feel now was being projected back onto what they may or may not have felt then. Younger villagers (aged roughly under 45) adamantly disavowed any connections to Cambodia.

Sihanouk took the case of Preah Vihear to the World Court in 1959. Thailand, despite being utterly convinced of its rightful ownership to the temple (based on the watershed it sits on), lost both the case and the temple to Cambodia in 1962 (Long, 1998; Cuasay, 1998). Thais were outraged. Anti-Cambodian sentiment reached fever-pitch, the border was sealed, and both Cambodia and Sihanouk were publicly maligned throughout Thailand.

## Thai and Khmer as National Identities

It is perhaps important to recall at this juncture that there is no lexical difference in Thai between Khmer and Cambodian, as a language, nation or ethnicity; all are commonly referred to as *khamen*.<sup>5</sup> So the Northern Khmer of Surin and neighbouring provinces were, in a discursive sense, caught in the middle of this nationalistic mud slinging. In the aftermath of the Preah Vihear case, there were several large-scale anti-Cambodian

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5 Khmer villagers where I researched began using *Kampuchea* as the name for Cambodia in order to distinguish it, but said this was not done in the past.

demonstrations and propaganda drives, especially in Srisaket province where the temple is. In some cases, Thai authorities ordered Northern Khmer villagers to burn Khmer language materials, most of which were religious documents inscribed on palm leaves. One informant told me how he and his friends, when ordered to do so, could not go through with it because of the potential religious consequences; they felt they would accrue too much *baap*, or Buddhist demerit. They removed the manuscripts from the temple, but reportedly hid them instead of destroying them. The abbot of one temple related to me how officials approached him and forbade him giving sermons in Khmer, since it would suggest his allegiance was with the Cambodian rather than the Thai side. These linguistic interventions—insisting Khmer language materials be destroyed and disallowing Khmer language sermons—demonstrate clearly how national constructs were impinging on everyday life. The Khmer in Cambodia had formed a national identity in the postcolonial period, but one that was maligned in the Thai state, while for Northern Khmer speakers in Thailand, faced with an increasingly jingoistic government, it appears the only option was to be Thai.

I want to avoid making essentializing generalizations here about local Northern Khmer identity. It is too simplistic to say that Surin Khmer universally felt themselves to be either Thai or Khmer, especially given their increasing but uneven incorporation into the Thai state over several generations. Nor do I want to suggest that Khmer were living in the Thai state or acquiescing to a Thai national identity against their will. There appears to have been a lot of loyalty among these Khmer to the Thai state, although this was not true everywhere. In any event, how identities were and are constructed—on what combination of language, descent, religion, class, political affiliation, royal allegiance, and nationalism—is a complex affair, which I discuss in more detail below. What I do want to suggest, however, is that in a relatively brief span of time, and in the black-and-white world of Cold War politics, 'Thai' and 'Cambodian' became two dominant, mutually exclusive *national* identities (see also Vandergeest, 1993, p. 135). Whatever 'Khmer' may have signified before, it now took on an overarching national meaning associated with the Cambodian state. Northern Khmer in Isan, whether they willingly assented or not, generally had little practical choice but to embrace Thai national identity when dealing with officialdom, or, for those who dissented, to position themselves as radically outside the Thai state order (as the Communist Party of Thailand eventually did throughout Isan).<sup>6</sup> As a result, their 'Khmer' identity became, at best, a regional variation within a broader Thai national identity, and at worst a cultural and social stigma. Today, many Khmer speakers in Thailand describe themselves as being 'embarrassed' or 'shy' to be Khmer.

Even when direct tensions between Cambodia and Thailand subsided, the ensuing years saw little but trouble and conflict inside Cambodia: the devastating American bombing campaigns, the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, and the subsequent civil war lasted into the 1990s. Cambodian refugees poured into Thailand, and lived in immense refugee camps on the Thai–Cambodia border for ten or more years. In what was perhaps a cruel revenge for the nation's 1962 loss in the World Court, Thailand at one point rounded up more than 40,000 Cambodian refugees from the east, trucked them to Srisaket province, and repatriated them to Cambodia by forcing them over the cliff near

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6 It is also interesting that the Thai government always depicted the Communist Party as being necessarily something other than 'Thai' (Chai-anan, 1991, p. 73), implying that one could not be ethnically or nationally Thai and communist at the same time.

Preah Vihear. Apparently thousands of these refugees died (Shawcross, 1984, p. 90; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1987, p. 26; Cuasay, 1998, p. 882).<sup>7</sup>

Khmer speakers whom I interviewed in Surin about their memories of this time recall being ‘embarrassed’ to be Khmer, and wanted to disassociate themselves as much as possible from Cambodia and especially from the Cambodian refugees. For example, two villagers told me that, even when they would go to work in Bangkok, they would consciously avoid speaking Khmer with each other. Had they been mistaken for Cambodians, they would have been intensely ‘embarrassed’ and perhaps even at risk. A Khmer-speaking colleague of mine in Isan tells of how he would hide his Khmer origins when he went to school in other parts of Thailand; like other villagers, he had internalized the denigration of Khmer identity within the national context.

Nationalistic antagonism between Thailand and Cambodia still erupts, sometimes suddenly and violently, and usually spurred by some issue of national cultural identity. Cambodia, for example, has refused to send boxing teams to compete in Thailand, claiming the Thai have appropriated Cambodian boxing heritage and deceptively renamed it Muay Thai. In a more violent case discussed above, rioters in Phnom Penh burned down the Thai embassy and went on a rampage against Thai-owned businesses—all because a Cambodian newspaper article erroneously reported a Thai television star opining that Angkor Wat should belong to Thailand. Other disputes, such as those concerning the construction of casinos along the border, are quickly framed in nationalistic terms even though they are chiefly about business. Cultural animosity runs deep between these two nationalistic states, and seems to simmer just below a calm facade.

Overall, Cold War Thai nationalism and the perceived failure of the Cambodian state have helped inculcate in young generations of Northern Khmer an overarching Thai national identity. Coupled over the last three or four generations with effective bureaucratic, economic, religious and social integration into the Thai state, most Northern Khmer speakers under the age of about 45 or so now firmly identify themselves as Thai who happen to speak a different local language. By and large, they actively disavow any connection to Cambodia, and are ambivalent or apathetic towards a regional Khmer identity. Older Northern Khmers whom I interviewed do not reject their Khmer identity but rarely voice it. Their experiences during the Cold War (which was not so ‘cold’ in Southeast Asia) lead them to be circumspect in how and when this identity is to be expressed. It is this combination—of assent to Thai-ness and a rejection of any Cambodian cultural connections—that in the larger picture of cultural politics has rendered the Northern Khmer an ‘invisible minority’.

I began this paper arguing that the chief difference between ethnic Khmer and their Isan–Lao neighbours was manifest in language. To explicate this difference, and to show the importance of bilingualism and language shift in Khmer identity, I want to turn now to an assessment of language policy and language integration in Thailand. By doing so, I aim to provide a linguistic context for the understanding of language practices and identity of Isan Khmer today.

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7 Explanations of this atrocity vary. Thai authorities suggest that repatriating refugees in Preah Vihear was more humane than repatriating them in Chantaburi because the Vietnamese forces controlling the Preah Vihear region were likely to be more merciful than the Khmer Rouge forces controlling the areas contiguous to Chantaburi. But the fact that Thai authorities had ordered forcible repatriation of these refugees into a war zone, and the cruel means by which they effected this repatriation, suggest that mercy was not an especially high priority.

## Official Language Policy in Thailand and Early Education in Surin

Linguists and anthropologists frequently talk about Thai as the 'official' state language of Thailand, but none to my knowledge have specified where that official status is documented. William Smalley, for example, whose 1994 book *Linguistic diversity and national unity: Language ecology in Thailand* is by far the most comprehensive survey of language in Thailand, frequently mentions the fact that Thai is the sole official language of Thailand, but never does he show where it is so designated. The same is true for Esman (1990, p. 188), who argues forcefully that Thai is the 'exclusive medium of communication in every dimension of life that is affected by the activities of government',<sup>8</sup> but again provides no specifics. Anthony Diller, in his 1991 article 'What makes Central Thai a national language?', also does not specify, but he does explain convincingly how Thai has come to be perceived as the national language. Diller writes, 'Especially during the period since "Thailand" has become the nation's name, typical modern national-language functions of Thai have become ingrained and obvious; so much so, that to claim that "Thai is the National Language of Thailand" now sounds like a tautology'. Diller goes on to show that Thai does in fact have the 'main national-language credentials as normally recognized' by Omar (1987, cited in Diller, 1991), except for 'universal first language status'. Thai is used in education, government, law, religion and mass media and so is clearly established as the official language.<sup>9</sup>

Thai has in fact never been designated the official language in any of the country's numerous constitutions, although the constitutions themselves are all composed in Thai. Thai language is, however, officially disseminated by the Ministry of Education's charter, and explicitly endorsed in the National Education Act (1999 [BE 2542]):

Section 23 Education through formal, non-formal, and informal approaches shall give emphases to knowledge, morality, learning process, and integration of the following, depending on the appropriateness of each level of education:

(4) Knowledge and skills in mathematics and languages, *with emphasis on proper use of the Thai language* [Emphasis added, and note 'languages' here is pluralized; in Thai the plural is not marked, and so it is not entirely transparent what is meant by 'languages' in this official translation.]

8 Esman is worth quoting in full. He writes (1990, p. 188), 'Thailand is an example of a consistent unremitting, and uncompromising language policy—the promotion by state elites of the language and indeed the specific dialect of the largest and politically dominant community as the exclusive medium of communication in every dimension of life that is affected by the activities of government. The limited exception for Malay-speaking Muslims in the far south is a reluctant concession to a small minority that is willing to accept marginal political status rather than yield its culture. Minority languages and even dialects of Thai are systematically devalued and delegitimized. Anyone who wishes to advance in the world must do so in standard Thai. This unilingual policy is in the service of an assimilationist strategy that seeks eventually—and the sooner the better—to eliminate and supplant existing ethnic pluralism, thereby incorporating all the permanent residents of the land into a culturally homogeneous, therefore unified, Thai political community'. Although Esman may be overstating government intolerance for other languages and dialects, his points about social mobility and the incorporation into a unified Thai political community are well conceived.

9 In what is really a penetrating article, however, Diller shows how 'Central Thai' is actually a rather complicated concept, and how its complexity is obscured by common usage and misconceptions about the homogeneous nature of language.

Interestingly, Thai *identity* is also specifically endorsed by the Act:

Section 7 The learning process shall aim at inculcating sound awareness of politics; democratic system of government under a constitutional monarchy; ability to protect and promote their rights, responsibilities, freedom, respect of the rule of law, equality, and human dignity; *pride in Thai identity*; ability to protect public and national interests; *promotion of religion, art, national culture, sports, local wisdom, Thai wisdom and universal knowledge*; inculcating ability to preserve natural resources and the environment; ability to earn a living; self-reliance; creativity; acquiring thirst for knowledge and capability of self-learning on a continuous basis. [Emphasis added]

The Education Act of 1977 had similar requirements, although they are somewhat more explicit about the fundamental role of language. In section 2, clause 13 reads, ‘The state has thus established education so that the population will have the ability to use Thai language well in communicating and understanding.’ The Act further stipulates (clauses 26 and 27) that all educational materials must be appropriate to Thai culture and identity, and that textbooks cannot go against Thai culture.

So, in national education policy at least, Thai is clearly endorsed as the country’s official language *and* identity and indeed, virtually no one in the country seems to imagine any other language assuming that role or even sharing it. This has come about not only historically through the development of the modern state, but also discursively, as language varieties other than Thai are subsumed into Thai. The Thai-ification of other language varieties and identities forms part of Thailand’s national consolidation. Gupta (1985, p. 14), for example, claimed, ‘Varieties of Thai are spoken natively by around 91 per cent of the population, thus Thai is an obvious choice as a sole official language. Thailand has never been under the dominion of a colonial power, another factor removing languages from competition’. The varieties of ‘Thai’ that Gupta mentions obliquely here are largely Lao and the closely related Khammuang of the north, spoken by roughly 35 per cent of the country’s population. The designation of Lao as a variety of Thai is debatable (see Diller, 1991, p. 98); but since I am here chiefly concerned with the status of Khmer language and identity in Thailand, I will not elaborate the point here. Gupta’s second point, however—that Thailand was never colonized and as a result has less linguistic competition from presumably colonial languages—needs closer attention.

It is true that Thailand was never colonized by a European country, a fate that befell all Thailand’s contiguous neighbours. This fact is a defining feature in the narrative of Thai history. It is what the Thais ‘tell themselves about themselves’, as Clifford Geertz (1973) put it. Anderson (1978) points out how Thai nationalism was, significantly, instituted from above; it was not forged in a struggle against a European colonizer as it was in surrounding countries. Moreover, I should reiterate here that Siam itself can be regarded as a colonizing power, a point best made in Thongchai Winichakul’s 1994 book *Siam mapped*. As mentioned above, at the end of the 19th century, Siam effected a fast and far-reaching political transformation from principality (*muang*) to nation-state, incorporating smaller, surrounding tributary kingdoms as provinces. Reforms that were implemented created a centralized bureaucracy, regulated Buddhism, reformed taxes, inaugurated a standing army and introduced mass education. The successful *communitas* of nationalism in Thailand obscures this internal colonial history both domestically and to the foreign observer. In part this is because Siam was not a

European colonizer and thus falls outside the frame we normally associate with colonialism. Furthermore, we view the nation-state of Thailand through a lens in which such national units have become naturalized.

Language was an essential component of these reforms. Unsurprisingly, teaching Thai language was one of the two primary purposes of establishing the education system from the outset (Wyatt, 1969; Paitoon, 1988). In pre-modern times, rural areas, including Khmer-speaking Surin, depended on temples for basic education. Most of this education was religious in nature and, in the Northeast at least, did not typically involve learning Siamese Thai. Instead, monks and novices in Surin could learn Khmer Mul, a sacred religious script. But also available was a Lao script, called Tua Thai Noi, and Dhammic script called Tua Thai Yai (Paitoon, 1988, pp. 89–91). Vernacular scripts, whether Siamese, Khmer or Lao, do not appear to have been in circulation. Aymonier, however, who visited Surin in 1883–1884, reports that the only script he saw in use was in fact Siamese (2000 [1895], p. 201). Aymonier may have been referring to the Siamese-backed ruling court in Surin's urban centre and not in the countryside, but it is impossible now to tell. At any rate, education was not standardized, did not use Thai as a medium for instruction, and had explicitly religious goals. Children of the elite, who could expect to get an appointment at the court, were sent to Bangkok to study Thai (Paitoon, 1988, p. 92).

Although a government Act created a national school system in 1892, this had no discernable effect in the north-eastern countryside until at least 1898 when the state began the slow process of instituting mass education. The north-east was always the last area to be developed and, for many years, temple schools coexisted side-by-side with the slowly developing state schools. Paitoon discusses how the first state schools came in two varieties, *munlasuksa* (two year basic education) and *prathomsuksa* (elementary education). The chief goal of the *munlasuksa* schools was to provide instruction in Thai language and arithmetic, as preparation for entry into the *prathomsuksa* schools. The first *munlasuksa* in Surin were opened in 1901. Students performed dismally: none of the Surin students passed the exam from *munlasuksa* 1 to *munlasuksa* 2, and only four passed the level 2 exam (Paitoon, 1988, p. 97). Clearly, there were significant obstacles for Northern Khmer children learning Thai, and far more so than for Lao-speaking children, as Lao is lexicographically very similar to Thai. This continues to be an issue today (see e.g. Sangrunee, 1995).

As part of a far-reaching religious reform associated with the Sangha Act of 1902, monks at temple schools were no longer permitted to teach Lao and Khmer scripts; only Siamese Thai script was to be taught. Private schools, however, could teach in other languages. In a review of education policy, Prince Damrong, the interior minister, decided that 'in areas where two languages were in use, as in the North and Northeast, "the local language may be taught, but only education in [central] Thai may be supported by the government"' (Damrong, cited in Wyatt, 1969, p. 333). The Sangha Act and other bureaucratic, economic and political reforms caused widespread dissatisfaction in the north-east, leading to a succession of armed revolts and resistance. Siamese forces crushed these rebellions ruthlessly, and in the process, Bangkok was able to integrate them more tightly into the emerging territorially defined state of Siam. After the rebellions were put down, schools spread more quickly. By 1921, a royal decree made school compulsory for children aged 7 to 14 (through *prathomsuksa* 4), apparently with such success that by 1926 an official from Bangkok reported of Khmer-speaking Surin province that 'A lot has already been done

administratively to make them realize they are “Thai” people’ (Paitoon, 1988, p. 108).<sup>10</sup>

Although the period leading up to the fall of the monarchy in Siam (1932) saw the beginnings of an education system prioritizing Thai language, it was only under military dictator Phibulsongkhram that such schooling took on an overtly populist and nationalistic flavour. Beginning with a decree promulgated in 1939, Phibul outlawed the use of regional appellations throughout Thailand, meaning it was no longer acceptable to talk about Thailand in terms of ‘Northern Thai’ or ‘Isan’, and that the only permitted word was the homogenizing ‘Thai’ (Phibulsongkhram, 1940a). Also in 1939, the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand, specifically to foster a sense of nationalism, as noted above.

In 1940, Phibul promulgated an explicit language policy, one laden with nationalist ideology. To ensure that the nation ‘prospered and progressed’, Phibul announced the ‘duties of Thai citizens regarding language and letters’. First, all citizens were to admire and respect the Thai language and must feel honour in using it. Second, it was the duty of all Thai citizens to learn Thai language and letters, the ‘language of the nation’, and citizens must at the very least be able to read and write it. Citizens were also to ‘support and induce’ those citizens who did not yet know Thai to learn it. And third, citizens were not to use their regional identification, birthplace, residence or regional accent as a means to express [cultural] difference. Phibul argued that, ‘All citizens must respect the fact that when they are born they have Thai blood, and all speak the same Thai’ (Phibul, 1940b; for parliamentary reactions to Phibul’s proclamations, see Bupha, 1986).<sup>11</sup> These declarations aimed primarily to force the assimilation of Thailand’s urban Chinese and southern Muslim communities, but they applied also to Northern Khmer speakers in Surin. The abbot of one local temple during my field research remembers vividly when Thai government officials came to the temple and forbade the monks to speak in Khmer. The abbot also mentioned that, once the government officials were out of earshot, this directive was not strictly followed.

The subsequent two to three generations witnessed Thai effectively inculcated as the national language, to the extent that there are probably no longer any monolingual Northern Khmer speakers in Isan. Among the myriad ways in which Thai language has penetrated village life, through radio, television, books and newspapers, school was and remains the primary vehicle.

The medium of instruction in school is Thai for all subjects, including English, and children take classes that specifically teach Thai language. This is all in keeping with the Thai Education Act cited above and the role of Thai as the national language. Language ideology is prominently instantiated in the school, both materially and in practice. The classrooms, like all classrooms in Thailand, display at the front the tripartite symbols of the Thai Nation, Religion and King, and are adorned with cut-out alphabets of Thai and English on bulletin boards or taped to the walls. In some rooms I visited, hanging signs read *nuu rak phasaa Thai*, meaning, ‘I [diminutive form] love Thai language’. Here the diminutive form of ‘I’ is meant to express a child’s voice; thus the sign is modelling what a child ought to believe.

10 Seidenfaden (1958, p. 115) observed that a few years earlier, in about 1911, ‘The Khmers, in spite of Thai only being taught in the schools, still cling to their language and any particular custom of their’s own [sic] but are as good Thai citizens as any Thai.’

11 Some of Phibul’s directives were decidedly odd. To modernize Thailand, for example, he ordered that certain Western practices be observed, including that all men wear Western-style hats and kiss their wives goodbye when they went to work. See Kobkua (1995).



Thai and English are prestige languages of the school. English is taught very poorly, and children in the villages where I conducted fieldwork could say little besides a few stock phrases. The phrases 'Good morning, teacher' (chanted in unison irrespective of the time of day), and 'Thank you teacher' largely exhaust the students' communicative competence. Students also learn the English alphabet and some basic vocabulary. Although the students learn minimal English, they are inculcated with the understanding that English is a prestige language worthy of significant class time.

This is in stark contrast to Khmer, which is given no official status and is even actively denigrated. In the past, the school expressly forbade the use of Khmer, and children who transgressed in class were charged one baht for their transgression, or if they were too poor to pay a baht, they were given menial chores. This penal programme for language was instituted ostensibly because Khmer children did very poorly on Thai language tests, but it also rather clearly demonstrates ethno-linguistic chauvinism. One day, for example, when I was visiting the village school, a teacher asked the class, for my benefit, what appeared to be a stock (and rehearsed) question:

*Teacher:* What are Khmer?

*Students* (in rehearsed unison): Dark!

Dark skin is strongly devalued in Thai national culture, and here Khmer students' phenotypical dark skin becomes almost a ritual chant, in Thai, of their own debasement.

Teachers claim that the children nowadays speak Thai well enough that they no longer need to punish linguistic infractions, although Surin province as a whole still consistently scores among the lowest of any province on standardized Thai tests. Children are still admonished to speak Thai but, as I witnessed, bits of Khmer here and there are not dealt with harshly.

There is also a strong norm in the villages I studied for parents to speak exclusively Thai with their children. This is done purposefully as a way to prepare children for school, and for eventual success in the Thai economy thereafter. Thai is seen as a critical tool for socioeconomic success, and the consistency with which parents use Thai with their children attests to the efficacy of national language ideology. Those few parents who used Khmer with their children were deemed retrograde by the majority who used Thai. A linguistic snapshot of present practices would show a domain-specific bilingualism, with Khmer being the adult home and village language, and Thai the official, supra-village (or supra-regional) language. As I have argued elsewhere (Vail, 2006), the domains in which Khmer is used appear to be shrinking, as villagers move to the cities for work and rural villages become deterritorialized. It is thus possible to interpret the current bilingualism as an intermediate step on the way to an overall linguistic shift to Thai and the eventual loss of Khmer.

Examining the macro-politics of national identity, on the one hand, and specific language policies and practices, on the other, we can see where the apathy to Khmer identity originates. Khmer speakers are disinclined to be 'Khmer' because of the association with the troubled Cambodian state. At the same time, they are largely excluded from the regional Isan identity characterized as Lao, and they are also drawn towards being and speaking Thai because of the economic opportunities that doing so affords and because of the successful inculcation of national identity. Connections between Khmer speakers and their regional history have been obscured as a part of

Thai nationalist history and, apart from a few ethnic revivalists among the Khmer urban middle class (Denes, 2004), there is very little interest among villagers in establishing a visible Khmer regional identity for the purposes of political gain, local empowerment or cultural nostalgia. Khmer speakers prefer to self-identify as Thai, are apathetic to the viability of a Khmer identity and have thus been rendered, from within and without, as ethnically ‘invisible’.

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