

## A Study of Hmong and Karen Employed in Tourism Enterprises in the Doi Inthanon National Park Managed by Ethnic Thais

Kanokkarn Kaewnuch <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NIDA Centre for Integrated Tourism Management Studies National Institute of Development Administration  
118 Moo 3, Sereethai Road, Klong-Chan, Bangkok  
Telephone: 088-620-5522 E-mail: kkaewnuch@gmail.com

### Abstract

The Hmong and Karen hill tribes in northern Thailand have been promoted as a cultural tourism attraction for several decades and have, as a consequence, been the focus of a range of research studies. This paper seeks to extend our knowledge and understanding of these two culturally distinct groups by considering them not as an ‘attraction’ but as employees in tourism enterprises located in the Doi Inthanon National Park. The analysis discusses the experiences and perceptions of Karen and Hmong employees, working for tourism enterprises owned or managed by Thai nationals from outside their communities. The analysis focuses upon the respondents’ experiences and perceptions of the nature of their employment, their reasons for working with these external tourism actors (ETAs) and their degree of involvement. As the existing literature suggests that the measurement and understanding of perceptions plays an important role in maximising benefits while minimising conflicts within a multi-cultural work place. In addition to an analysis of secondary data two focus groups were undertaken and 200 questionnaires administered, 100 to each tribal group. The research clearly demonstrated that although ‘hill tribes’ are often considered as comprising a single homogenous minority group, living in the same locality, the history, cultural backgrounds and ethnicities of these two tribes do effect their perceptions resulting in significant differences in their views of employment with these ETAs.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, hill tribe, tourism, employment, perception

### 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growth in multi-cultural working environments (Fine *et al.*, 1990; Triandis *et al.*, 1993), not only in the developed world (Berry, 1997) but also in less developed countries and regions, (Wilson *et al.*, 2001). Vergunst (2008) argues that as societies develop economically there is an increased demand for resources, including human resources and as a result, there is an increased degree of interaction between people from more developed, often urban areas and those from the less developed, often rural areas, despite similarities or dissimilarities in culture and/or ethnicity. Many countries in both the developed and developing world view the tourism industry as an agent for developing rural areas and in some countries, including Thailand, tourism is associated with the development of remote areas inhabited by hill tribes (Rajani, 2002). The Thai government has for some time recognised tourism as an opportunity for reducing the prosperity gap between urban and rural areas, retaining the population and improving the welfare of rural communities (Community Based Tourism Institute (CBTI), 2008). Therefore, the Thai government promotes the development of hill tribe tourism to both private and public sector investors in order to create job opportunities and thereby improve the incomes of local people.

The relationship between tourism and hill tribe people can be examined from a number of different angles. Some of these have been well explored over a relatively long period. For example, hill tribe craft studies and hill tribe tourism impacts have been undertaken in the late 1970s and 1980s (Cohen 2000). Previous tourism impact studies (Cohen, 1979; Dearden, 1992; Parnwell, 1996) have examined the perceptions of host populations towards their involvement in the tourism industry in general. Specific research on the perceptions of employment by minority population groups such as hill tribes with incoming external tourism actors has, however, not been reported. In this research ‘external tourism actors’ (ETAs) are defined as Thai entrepreneurs who tend to dominate a host community due to their higher social status and wealth when compared to the hill tribe people. They are individuals from outside the tribal community who are not tourists, who are not there for leisure purposes and who tend to stay for longer than 12 months. They are attracted by the opportunity to develop their businesses in a new location. In Doi Inthanon they have sought to develop tourism enterprises which include accommodation, catering outlets, tour operations, souvenir shops, spas and tourism adventure activities.

The perceptions and attitudes of residents towards tourism employment has been investigated in a number of studies (Andriotis, 2005; Lankford, 1994; Pizam 1978). However, relatively little research has thus far been conducted on the perceptions of a tribal peoples who work with ETAs, let alone comparing perceptions of two different tribal groups towards tourism employment with ETAs, hence the purpose of this study was to improve our knowledge about the experience of hill tribe communities as they integrate into Thai society. Two hypotheses were considered; one (Ho) is that the respondents from each of the different tribes have similar experiences, perceptions and values in relation to employment

with individuals from outside their community. The alternative hypothesis (H1) is that ethnic tribal and cultural differences will result in differences in their views of their employment by individuals of another culture in this instance Thai national who are the majority of the Thai population.

## **2. Literature Review**

This paper will review the literature relevant to a study of residents’ perceptions from the interaction with ETAs.

### **2.1 Influences of perception**

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979) perception is not totally objective, it depends on neonatal, childhood, and later experiences (Freud 1930, 1953-7; Klein 1959, 1986). According to Supaap (1993) there are five determinants of changes in perception; these are family, friends, school, career and the media. Pert (1997) affirms that perception is selective in what it wishes to allow in, it also puts its own interpretation on what it lets in. Thus perception is the link between the internal world of an individual and their external worlds, these perceptions are heavily affected by emotions (Rungapadiachy, 1999). According to Reisinger and Turner (2003) perceptions are influenced by a number of external factors, economic, social, cultural, geographical, and internal factors, demographic, psychographic, behavioristic. Samovar and Porter (1991) point out that one of the main factors that directly influence perception is culture. They explain that culture strongly influences the environment in which people are raised, in that it exposes them to experiences and produces meanings. Therefore, the perceptions of an individual can be determined by culture, from which it can be concluded that, people may have different perceptions because they have different views of the world which are constructed by their own culture (Brislin and Cushner, 1996; Krench and Crutchfield, 1948; Robertson, 1970).

In terms of perceptions of tourism development, several scholars (e.g., Ap and Crompton, 1993; Brougham and Butler, 1981; Husbands, 1989; Lawson *et al.*, 1998; Murphy, 1983; Pizam, 1978; Ryan and Montgomery, 1994; Thomason *et al.*, 1979; Tyrell and Spaulding, 1984) have focused on the perceptions of tourism held by residents of the same destination community and as with Ryan and Montgomery (1994) in their study in the English Peak district, found that residents held different perceptions and interests. Therefore, it can also be concluded that people who live in the same community and share the same culture do not necessarily have shared interests or perceptions and they often hold very mixed views (Hall, 1994). The emphasis of these later definitions are particularly relevant to this investigation.

## **2.2 Cause of cultural diversities in the workplace**

According to Tung (1993) a cross-cultural work group often forms after an organization recruits people from different cultures to work together. Granrose and Oskamp (1997) highlight several factors as reasons for cultural diversity in the work place explaining that some groups voluntarily come to live together while others are involuntary. Some groups come into contact with other societies because they have migrated to a new location which could be permanent or temporary. While there are other groups that have had the new culture brought to them (Granrose and Oskamp, 1997). Despite different factors leading to the establishment of plural societies, Berry and Sam (1996) suggest that the fundamental processes of intercultural relations and psychology adaptation appear to be common among these groups, what is different is the degree of interaction of each group which can result in different outcomes.

Granrose and Oskamp (1997) explain that the outcome of contacts in culturally plural societies can be divided into two domains; acculturation and ethnic relations. Berry (1990a) points out that when individuals

or groups have continuous intercultural contact, this may result in changes in them he supports the idea by suggesting that minorities often become part of the mainstream culture. However, Granrose and Oskamp (1997) assert that the results from the interaction could vary due to a number of factors, social, political and psychological factors that characterize the two groups in contact. Granrose and Oskamp (1997) argue that acculturation and ethnic relations in plural societies can result in outcomes that range from conflict and stress to mutual accommodation and adaptation.

## **2.4 Social Exchange Theory**

Sutton (1967) asserts that host and guest contact can be compared to a social exchange, therefore, the social interaction between outsiders and host residents can be assessed in terms of perceived costs and benefits. Social exchange theory (SET), a model rooted in social psychology was first developed by Emerson (1962) and has been widely used in tourism research to determine resident's perceptions in tourist destinations (Allen *et al.*, 1993; Andereck and Vogt, 2000; Ap, 1992; Nash, 1989; Perdue *et al.*, 1987). Several researchers have applied this theory to study diversity of perceptions in a single community (Ap, 1992; Jurowski *et al.*, 1997; Madrigal, 1993; Perdue *et al.*, 1987; Riley, 1995; Snepenger *et al.*, 1998). These studies found that host residents favor tourism when the benefits they acquire from tourism is greater than their losses. The theory assumes that people select exchanges having assessed the rewards and the costs (Ap, 1992). Theoretically, residents who view the results of tourism as personally valuable and believe that the costs do not exceed the benefits will perceive more positively and favor the introduction of tourism (Ap, 1992; Turner, 1986) and these studies support this hypothesis. Reisinger and Turner (2003) suggest that the measurement of the perceived costs and benefits depends upon the cultural similarity and differences between participants. The more similar people are the more likely they perceive their

interaction as rewarding, and the more different they are the more likely they perceive their interaction as being costly for them.

### 3. Methodology

A two stage integrated methodology was adopted to gather primary data. In the first stage focus groups were conducted with respondents from each tribe who were employed by ETAs. The village headman from each tribe assisted in bringing together individuals who work with ETAs and who were willing to participate in the focus group. A focus group comprising six Karen villagers were conducted in the Karen village headman’s home, while the focus group with Hmong took place in the resting area in the Hmong village. The focus group discussions explored the following themes; types of tourism businesses, degree of involvement and reasons for working with ETAs. The data from these focus groups were analyzed, using content analysis, and grouped together to identify the major themes relating to the respondents experience of employment with ETAs a number of which had not emerged from the preceding review of the literature. These findings together with the findings of the literature review were used to create and design a questionnaire which was distributed to a sample of respondents in the selected communities in order to identify the perceptions and attitudes of Karen and Hmong respondents. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements relating to: 1) the types of tourism businesses, 2) their degree of involvement, 3) their reasons for working with ETAs, 4) the conflicts they encountered with ETAs, 5) their proposed solutions. Each statement was evaluated on a five point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

A pilot study leading to a modification of the questionnaire was undertaken with a sample of

respondents who had experienced the role of ETAs in the expansion of tourism in Doi Inthanon and were therefore able to relate to the questionnaire. The results from the pilot tests demonstrated that some further clarification was required and also demonstrated that face-to-face interviews would be essential as some of the respondents had difficulties in understanding the Thai language and others did not like to read the questions, hence in order to gain as accurate information as possible interviewer completion was essential.

It was clear from the focus groups and general observations in the villages that the majority of both tribes are still employed in agriculture or other non ETA-related jobs. Unfortunately no records or data exists as to how many of the Karen and Hmong in Doi Inthanon work with ETAs. An estimate made by the village headmen from both tribes indicated that approximately 150 of their tribal members work for ETAs, representing approximately 15% of each tribal community. Based upon this information a sample size of 100 respondents from each tribe who work for ETAs was agreed. Logistical and pragmatic factors, not least the difficulty of finding respondents at home during daylight resulted in a snowballing approach to sampling being applied in order to reach 100 respondents from each tribe who were working with ETAs.

Data was analyzed using SPSS Version 16. Descriptive data including frequency, mean score and median were used in discussing the distribution of responses gathered during the quantitative survey. Differences between the samples were determined based upon the Mann Whitney U test. In addition to the Mann-Whitney U test, the chi-square test was used in the analysis of the nominal and categorical data collected (Field, 2006). In both cases the significant value for rejecting the null hypothesis was 0.05 (Bryman and Cramer, 2001; Field 2006; Pallant 2001).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Type of Karen and Hmong employment with ETAs

Data collected in the first stage of data collection through focus groups demonstrated that the types of tourism businesses run by ETAs in the study area were accommodation units, travel companies, tour business, entertainment providers, museums, spas, souvenir shops, and catering outlets. Employment in this range of tourism businesses were confirmed by the survey respondents with work in accommodation/hospitality being the most common type of employment undertaken by both the Karen (n=37) and Hmong (n=49). Catering represented the second highest form of employment employed by Karen (n=24) and Hmong (n=25). However, Karen were employed in a greater variety of tourism related activities such as traditional dancers, singers, performers, museum staff, masseurs and souvenir shop assistants, when compared to the Hmong. The results also demonstrate that among the survey respondents, more Hmong females than males were working for ETAs in every sector except tour-related businesses.

Due to the small numbers of the respondents in many of the recognized career types it was not acceptable to run a chi-square test on each individual type of employment hence the chi-square test was performed only on the total employment data. The result ( $p < .001$ ) indicated a significant difference between Karen and Hmong in regard to type of employment they had with ETAs. That the Karen captured a wider range of employment opportunities, may well reflect their community being a more established tourist destination presented a wider range of opportunities but also because they were more knowledgeable and aware of tourism related employment opportunities which generally they welcomed. According to Inthanon (2007), the level of development of tourism in the Karen community in Doi Inthanon has increased the demand for

sightseeing tour guides, trekking guides and other jobs such as porters who help with the carrying of food during the trek and help the guide to cook for tourists. By contrast the Hmong community was at an earlier stage of tourism development and the majority of the Hmong worked for ETAs in homestay businesses, the establishment of which is a necessary first step in attracting tourists to visit hill tribe villages (TAT 2009). To be noted, the homestay business was also the first tourism business for the Karen and ETAs to work together in late 1990s (Chareonchai, 2002; Sabphiboonpol, 2001).

### 4.2 Patterns of Employment

Two thirds of the Karen (68%) were working full time for ETAs and 32% were working part-time or seasonally while only 39% of the 100 Hmong respondents were working full-time with ETAs and 61% were working part-time or seasonally. These differences are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). A possible reason advanced by Inthanon (2007) and TAT (2009), is that tourism jobs have become the main source of income for many Karen people as their community has developed into a well known tourist destination. Conversely, the Hmong village studied was still in its early stage of tourism development; therefore, most of the villagers are engaged in their traditional occupations such as agriculture (Chalermrat and Narumon, 2007; Lee, 2007; Sutamongkol, 2006).

Another possible reason may have to do with the differences in characteristics of Karen and Hmong and their cultural values. That the Karen people in Doi Inthanon are more flexible and willingly to cooperate and undertake any job opportunity offered by the ETAs was evident during the interviews in that the Karen's sense of appreciation for the employment opportunities given by the ETAs was much stronger than those of the Hmong people who would rather be independent and were determined to build their own success. Nonetheless, the development of tourism and arrival of ETAs has given the Hmong

opportunities to earn a supplementary income in addition to farming by working in tourism businesses as their second job with the result that they were less financially dependent upon the ETAs.

#### 4.3 Reasons given for working with ETAs

Previous studies (Choy, 1995; Lucas, 2004; Marshall, 1999; Pizam, 1982; Riley *et al.*, 2002; Sindiga, 1994; Szivas and Riley, 1999; Tribe and Lewis, 2003; Vaugeois and Rollins, 2007; Wright and Pollert, 2006) have examined perceptions of working in the tourism industry. Their studies found that people generally viewed certain aspects of working in the tourism industry unfavorably and concluded that these factors accounted for negative attitudes towards tourism careers (Jiang and Tribe, 2009). These factors may result in negative influences and demotivate individuals from working in the industry (Parsons and Care, 1991). However, this study of Karen and Hmong showed that they currently overlook the negative issues of tourism employment and still choose to work for ETAs due to reasons they perceived as rational wherein the benefits they obtained from their actions outweighed the costs.

The reasons given for working with ETAs by the focus groups respondents were; economic, employment, self-esteem and self-improvement. However, there is only one economic factor that was equally valued by Karen and Hmong: the opportunity to receive a regular income (daily, weekly or monthly) (mean >3.5). This reason also emerged during the focus groups in the first stage of data collection, namely, that ‘receiving regular pay’ resulting from working for ETAs, compares favorably with agricultural work where they have to wait for the harvest season.

In terms of employment factors, both groups agree that the work offered by ETAs is easy and desirable and many part-time and seasonal jobs are available. The availability of part-time and seasonal jobs is the most important reason given by both Karen and Hmong to work for ETAs (mean >4), while the

chance to pursue a dream job is the least important reason given for them working with ETAs (mean <2). Conversely ‘the chance to become more ‘Thai like’ and be accepted by Thai society’ was the most important of the self esteem factors for both Karen and Hmong respondents. These factors emerging from the study are consistent with the social exchange theory and the fact that they perceive the benefits outweighing the costs is instrumental in their decision to work with ETAs. However, this finding regarding cultural assimilation is rarely discussed in the literature of tourism employment, which generally argues that the primary reason for host residents to work in tourism industry is to boost their economic status and to earn supplementary income for a better life (Allen *et al.*, 1988; Cooper *et al.*, 2008; Hitchcock *et al.*, 1993; Macleod, 2004; Sharpley, 1994; Theobald, 1998; Tomljenovic and Faulkner, 2000).

Having looked at the similarities in their reasons for working with ETAs, now let us turn to significant differences in the reasons given by Karen and Hmong explaining their reasons for working with ETAs. The findings of this study demonstrate that economic reasons, frequently mentioned in the literature, are not the primary reason to work in the tourism industry for these particular groups of hill tribe people in Doi Inthanon. They are, nevertheless, one of the factors that influence Karen and Hmong in deciding to work for ETAs. However, the two groups have clearly different reasons and place completely different values upon the economic considerations that encourage them to work for ETAs. For example, the Karen value the opportunity to earn money to support themselves and family, while the Hmong value the chance to save money for creating their own businesses. This later finding is supported by Rajani (2002) and Sutamongkol (2007b) that the Hmong are one of the tribes with a better economic status because of their diligence and ambition. This study found that a cash income is important for

both Karen and Hmong as they perceive it as one of the reasons to work for ETAs. It is equally apparent that culture plays an important role in differentiating what they value. As has been shown in the case of these hill tribe peoples, different cultures, beliefs and historical backgrounds have led them to justify their needs for cash differently. This finding provides support for previous study results (Collins *et al.*, 2002; Johnson *et al.*, 2004; Hofstede, 1980; Luria, 1976; Prensky, 2001; Samovar and Porter, 1991) that the environment and culture in which people are raised affects and even determines many of their thought processes, meaning, people who grow up in different cultures tend to think differently. Earley and Randel (1997) also note that differences in judgments of self and others have to do with differences in their cultures.

In regard to the nature of their employment, Hmong people were less concerned about career progression than were Karen people and this may well be the reason why Hmong people did not agree with Karen people in regard to statements about opportunity to get a higher position in the tourism career and obtain a good resume from working with ETAs both of which are clearly important to the Karen. Yet, Hmong rather pay more attention in setting up their own businesses. This reflects what Hmong people value in life, as they are more independent, self-sufficient and therefore, by having their own business can reflect their prosperity and sense of achievement. This finding is confirmed by previous studies (Rajani, 2002; Leepreecha, 2006) that the main characteristics of Hmong people are hard working and independent. These results are partially supported by Granrose and Oskamp (1997) who argue that each person has a different perspective and interprets the world differently, especially those with different cultural backgrounds. LeBaron (2003) also offers a similar view by suggesting that culture plays a vital role in shaping people's perceptions, judgments and actions.

In terms of self-improvement factors, Karen people considered a chance to learn new skills in order to do something else apart from agriculture important, while the Hmong were more concerned about a chance to gain new skills and work experience before opening their own business. This is consistent with Hofstede's (1980) thesis that perceptions and expectations come primarily from their own socialization, which predisposes them to view the world from a particular perspective. Again these findings reflect the rational choice theory; both tribes decided to work for ETAs due to different reasons they thought could benefit them. Individuals are seen as motivated by the wants or goals that express their preferences (Elster, 1986, 1989; Hindess, 1988). Social exchange theory suggests that individuals anticipate the outcomes of alternative courses of action and calculate which ones will be best for them (Carling, 1992; Coleman, 1973; Heath, 1976). These findings have confirmed that the Karen and Hmong choose the alternative that is likely to fulfill their purpose and give them the greatest satisfaction.

## 5. Conclusions

The results indicate that the differences in their views of the impacts of employment between the Karen and Hmong are due to their differences in culture and historical backgrounds. Therefore, the null hypothesis that all hill tribe people living together among Thai people, hold similar values and perceptions of their employment experience from working with the Thai, is rejected and the hypothesis that tribal cultural differences result in differences of their views of employment is accepted. The findings give support to the argument that it is inappropriate to view the culture of hill tribe people' as being homogenous and confirms the view of Mayo and Jarvis (1981) that culture causes different nationalities to arrive at similar perceptions. Each tribe has its own culture and values and therefore they often think and

behave differently. However, the results can only be generalized cautiously as applying to the Karen and Hmong tribes since it was based on the perceptions of particular groups of Karen and Hmong from Doi Inthanon, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Therefore, future studies are needed to consider different locations or different groups of respondents comparing differently variables such as, their length of employment in the tourism industry, the age and gender of the respondents it maybe that younger hill tribe members (adolescents and youth) might embrace the ways of outsiders more readily than older hill tribe members. Different levels of education can be another aspect that may have an influence on hill tribe people perceptions and their choice of actions.

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