

NEW ETHNIC NAMES FOR THE TIN OF NAN PROVINCE

By what name shall we call these people, the Tin of Nan Province? Shall we use a name or names that outsiders have given them? Or shall we use the name (s) they use to designate themselves when talking to each other

These questions are not unique to the Tin. Indeed, they depict the same situation faced by many tribal or ethnic groups around the world. Whenever these questions have been seriously considered, the consensus has been that each ethnic group should be called by the name (s) that the people (of the ethnic group) use to designate themselves and not by the name (s) given to them by outsiders. The main reason behind this consensus is that since in such cases outsiders are often the majority population, the names they give to an ethnic or minority group are more often than not derogatory terms, or at best terms that connote inferior status in society. Consequently the minority group often resents, secretly or openly, the name (s) by which they are known to the outside world.

Also as a result, there has been a drive in recent decades in anthropological circles urging all of us to stop using name (s) given by outsiders to an ethnic group and adopt instead the name (s) that people who are members of the ethnic group use in referring to themselves. The reason behind this is that no ethnic group will be likely to choose or use a name that is self-deprecatory. The members of an ethnic group will in all probability use names that make them feel good about themselves regardless of the names (derogatory or otherwise) that outsiders may use to designate them.

The above two reasons (names given by outsiders are often derogatory; names used by members are usually good designations) have also been the reason underlying the name changes of hilltribe groups in Thailand. For example, the Meo (Miao) are now called Hmong (or Mong), because this is what the Meo people call themselves. Also, the Yao are now called Mien, and the Musur are now called Lahu for the same reason.

I propose that we do the same with the Tin of Thailand* stop using those names given to them by outsiders and start using the names they use when referring to themselves. The Tin have their own ethnic names, or ethnonyms, that they use

daily when talking among and about themselves. These are largely unknown by the outside world. It is high time that we ourselves become acquainted with these ethnic names and use them also in referring to the Tin people.

Names Thai Outsiders Give

The Tin are a Mon-Khmer tribe and live in the mountains that run north and south on either side of the border between Nan Province and Sayabury Province in Laos. Unfortunately no reliable data on the Tin in Laos is readily available; however, one estimate puts their number at over 5000 people. In Thailand, the Tin are estimated to number from 14,000 in 40 villages to over 24,000 in 63 villages.¹ The majority of the Tin live in three Amphurs of Districts of Nan: Pua, Chiang Klang and Thung Chang. A few families have migrated southward to Muang and Santisuk Districts of Nan, but the number of people involved is too small at this time to represent any significant migration of Tin outside of their traditional homeland in the northern part of Nan Province.

Both the Mon and Khmer (Cambodian or Kampuchean) occupied the Southeast Asia mainland before the Thai made their appearance. If we assume that the Thai originated in southern China and later migrated southward, then the present day Tin would be the descendents of those who originally inhabited this part of Southeast Asia before the Thai arrived. In other words, the Tin, along with the Khmu, and the Lamet of Laos, the Kuy of the Northeast and the Lawa of Maehongsong, plus many more such groups, were already living and farming in Thailand as the Thai moved in from China and eventually gaining ascendancy.

There are several ethnic names used in referring to the Tin. These names are used by government officials and others who live close by or are in contact with the Tin and therefore are names used by outsiders to refer to the Tin.

The first name is the word "Tin" itself. It is not a native Tin word. Rather it is the Thai word ^๕ถิ่น meaning, in this case, local inhabitant or those who are native to the area. Because of this meaning there often arises some confusion, especially outside of Nan, as to who the Tin of Nan Province really are. Are they the local (Thai) inhabitants or are they the Tin tribal people? Those who have not heard of the Tin tribe naturally think that the Tin refer to the local Thai population. Locally, of course, in the Amphurs of Pua, Chiang Klang and Thung Chang, this Thai word is used to refer to the Tin tribal people.

That the Thai term ^๕ถิ่น is used to designate these people is perhaps not too surprising. In addition to designating them as an ethnic group it also indicates that they are the descendents of the early inhabitants of this part of Thailand as was

mentioned above. In other words, the term Tin recognizes that these people are the original เจ้าของที่ดิน, the “owners of the land”.

The second word used to designate these people is the term “Lua” (ลัวะ). Lua is evidently a Northern Thai word and accordingly is used by the Northern Thai speaking people of Nan Province to refer to the Tin. In the Maehongsong and Chiang Mai areas the same term is used to designate the Lawa. However, the Lawa and Tin are only remotely related culturally and linguistically.

Still a third word is the term “Phai”, a term used more in Laos than in Thailand to refer to the Tin. Phai is from the Thai word ไพร่ which means common person, peasant, perhaps serf. It is a term that was used more in the early part of Thai history than it is today referring in former times to the common or ordinary class of people in Thai society. To be sure the common people in early Thai society were divided into two classes, the ไพร่ and ไพร่หลวง. While both groups were required to perform government service on a rotating basis, the latter enjoyed more responsibility, hence more of the privileges, of government service than the former.

Presumably the Tin were classified as ไพร่ and not ไพร่หลวง. The linguistic evidence for this comes from the term “Kha”, again a term used more in Laos than in Thailand. Moreover, it is used to designate other Mon-Khmer groups than just the Tin. The term Kha is evidently from the Thai word ข้า although some say it is from the word ชา. Regardless of the derivation the most common explanation of this term is that the groups so designated as Kha were considered servants or slaves, an explanation which would support the first derivation and not the second.² Now when the word is used to designate the Tin the combination “Kha Phai” is used. Therefore, if the above explanation of Kha is true, then the Tin would have been the ข้าไพร่ in early Thai society, i.e. those common people whose status/role in society was to be servants.

Of the four terms discussed above only the first two, Tin and Lua, are currently used in Thailand to designate the Tin tribal people. However, the latter two terms are sometimes printed in literature on the hilltribes of Thailand and on occasion I have heard them spoken by Hmong (Miao) in referring to the Tin. Of all four terms, of course, the term Tin is emerging as the main one to designate this tribe. This ascendancy is due in large measure to the Indo-China War which affected the Tin along with other hilltribe groups in Nan Province. The war brought the attention of the Tin to government and army officials. While the Hmong and Mien were readily recognizable and known by name, the Tin were not. In searching for a name to refer to these people, then, the term Tin quickly came to the forefront.

From that time I have noticed that this term has increasingly been used even by the Tin themselves.

As can be concluded the above four terms of Tin, Lua, Phai and Kha (Phai) connote that the Tin have historically enjoyed only low standing or status in both Thai and Laotian society. It is no doubt for this reason that these terms or names have not been readily accepted by the Tin in referring to themselves.³ Doing so would be comparable to calling oneself a derogatory name, an exercise no one finds enjoyable. Furthermore the continual use of these names by outsiders has undoubtedly contributed to the sad look of the Tin that so many people in times past have mentioned, for to be continually reminded of one's low class existence in society by the names outsiders use is enough to kill all joy and spirit in life, especially when one finds him- or herself in the midst of those same outsiders!

This is clearly a situation that needs rectifying. It is, in many respects, a crime against these people to constantly use terms of designation that function also to demean them before themselves and the world. As was mentioned in the beginning, other ethnic groups have faced this problem and in many cases have been able to change the situation to their benefit. One of the most startling examples of this has been the case of the Blacks in the United States. Formerly the term Negro was a respectful enough term, but it was easily vulgarized into "Nigger" by the white population. The term Black, on the other hand, while perhaps not quite as respectful at first, was nevertheless unable to be vulgarized. Consequently Black was elevated into a respectful term while Negro was effectively expunged from "respectful" vocabulary.

Two Groups

The Tin are not a homogeneous tribe, whether linguistically, culturally or in tribal tradition. They are divided into several dialects, some of which vary only slightly from each other while others are very nearly separate languages in their own right. Moreover there is not a "single" culture that binds all the Tin into a single tribe; rather, different villages will do things differently for different reasons. While there are Tin traditions the emphasis should be placed on the plural, for among the Tin different groups will align themselves under one tradition or another, or under no (Tin) tradition at all!

Yet, in spite of their linguistic and cultural maze, the Tin divide themselves into two main groups or branches. And, surprising enough, all the linguistic and

cultural heterogeneity mentioned above fall neatly into either one group or the other. Among the Tin themselves one group is known as the “phyam mal”, i.e. the Mal people who speak the Mal language, while the other group is known as the “khram prai”, i.e. the Prai people who in turn speak the Prai language.⁴ These two names or ethnonyms deserve additional comment before proceeding on to other matters.

The Mal

Of the two ethnonyms mentioned above the term Mal is apparently the only indigenous ethnonym (see discussion below on Prai). In my earlier research and writings (David Fibeck 1966, 1971a, 1971b, 1972, 1973a, 1972b, 1976a, 1976b, 1976c, 1978, 1979) I had mistakenly stated or understood that the term Mal was the same as /maal/ (/simaal/ in Prai), which means ชั่วญ “soul, spirit”. The reason for this confusion was linguistic more than anything else (see David Filbeck 1985). The Mal dialect of Tin has a phonemic distinction in vowels between the short /a/ (อะ) and the long /aa/ (อา). However, under certain intonational conditions this distinction becomes blurred with all short /a/s becoming long /aa/s. For example, a word that occurs at the end of a declarative sentence receives the heaviest stress of all other words in the sentence. Now if this final word ends with a continuous sound (e.g. a vowel sound or a liquid sound as /l/) and not a stop sound (e.g. /p/ or /t/), then a short vowel is pronounced long under the influence of the heavy stress. So in the sentence

nam kayh phyam mal

He is (a) Mal person.

the final word Mal (มัล), which has a short vowel, is pronounced as /maal/ (มาล) containing a long vowel. This pronunciation coincides with the final word of

nam aem maal

he does (the) ชั่วญ (ceremony)

in which the word /maal/ มาล is likewise pronounced with a long vowel.

This difference between /mal/ and /maal/ came to light in 1982 when I had the opportunity to resume linguistic and cultural research among the Mal branch of the Tin. In trying to draw out some of the ramifications that the Mal people were “phyam maal)” (i.e. คน ชั่วญ), I was rudely taken back when my Mal language and cultural helper firmly rejected the idea that they were “phyam maal”. He went on to explain that while /maal/ meant soul, the term /mal/ had no such meaning. When pressed for the meaning of /mal/, he said that the term had no meaning but was in

reality the name of a ๓๗๕๓๓๓ “clan, lineage”. In other words, the term Mal is nothing more than the name of a clan or lineage among the Tin. And all the Mal people consider themselves as belonging to this particular lineage.

The above confusion between /mal/ and /maal/ also led me to make another mistake in my earlier writings. I had stated that there were no clans or lineages among the Tin which, of course, cannot be true since the term Mal is the name of one (even if it is only one!) such lineage. Of interest here is that at about the same time (in 1982) David Jordan, who has done extensive linguistic and cultural research among the Prai in Thung Chang District of Nan Province, communicated to me that he has discovered a number of matrilineal clans or lineages among the Prai.⁵ With these new data on both the Mal and the Prai we must update our knowledge on the Tin. I regret that other scholars, in summarizing my research on the Tin (e.g. David Filbeck 1973) have had to perpetrate these same errors in their own writing and publications on the Tin (cf. William Dessaint 1973, 1981).

The Prai

While the term Prai did not originate as an indigenous ethnonym among the Tin, it probably should now be so considered. The reason for this are both historical and linguistic.

The Term Prai (or ๓๗๕๓ in Thai as the /p/ is not aspirated) derives from the Thai word ๓๗๕๓. According to J. Marvin Brown (1965) the Thai sound ๓ (ph) is a linguistic change from the ancient Thai ๓ (b). In my historical research on the Tin dialects (David Filbeck 1971, 1978), I observed that as Proto-Tin (i.e. the language in historical times that predated Mal/Prai) emerged as a separate language from its pre-Tin base all /b/ sounds changed into /p/s (๓ voiceless unaspirated bilabial stops). As based on this evidence, then, the term Prai was first borrowed from Thai in its ancient form of ๓๗๕๓ (/brai/) and later changed independently to Prai, while in Thai ๓๗๕๓ (/brai/) changed to ๓๗๕๓ (/phai/).

In other words, due to these separate historical changes in the two languages, ๓๗๕๓ (/prai/) has emerged as a separate word in its own right completely different from ๓๗๕๓ (/phrai/). Even among the Tin to say ๓๗๕๓ (/prai/) is say something different from ๓๗๕๓ (/phrai/). Based on these facts, then, we may say that the experience of this section of the Tin roughly parallels the experience of the Black population in the U.S. That is, these Tin took a potentially disrespectful term (๓๗๕๓ or ๓๗๕๓) and by means of a historical change turned it into a respectful ethnonym (๓๗๕๓) for themselves.

In Thailand the Prai are further divided into two subgroups. The differences are marked along linguistic and cultural differences as well. For example, in Thung Chang District many still pronounce the /r/ in the word Prai while further south in Pua District the pronunciation is Pyai (ປຸ້ຍ).⁶ A cultural difference is that Prai villages still observe their Red Flower rice tradition while Pyai villages have apparently abandoned it. On the social side the Prai have clans or lineages while the Pyai do not pay much attention to whatever lineages they may have. More research on the differences between Prai and Pyai is needed before any definite conclusions can be drawn.

Ban Salaeng

There is yet one more tribal name that we should consider. In an earlier footnote I mentioned the village of Ban Salaeng, which is an /r/ speaking Prai village. This village is located in the midst of Mal speaking villages in Pua district of Nan Province. Still another village in this area that speaks this dialect is Ban Pa Rai. Just south of this area, in Subdistrict Santisuk of Nan Province, is yet another village that speaks this dialect of Tin. It is Ban Mae Sinan, a new village settled by former communists who recently turned themselves in to the Thai Army.

The surrounding Mal villagers have a special name for the dialect spoken by these villages. It is called /siet/ (pronounced “see-et”). In fact, Siet is the Mal name for the village of Ban Salaeng (also spelled Saraeng in Thai).

The people of Ban Salaeng and Ban Pa Rai, however, recognize the term Siet as only the Mal designation for them. But when I have asked these same villagers what they call themselves in their own language or dialect, no particular term emerges from the conversation. For example, they appear to not know or recognize the term Prai which is used by those Tin who live in Thung Chang District and speak the same /r/ dialect. On the other hand, when pressed, some villagers of these two villages will use the term /khram raaw/ “the Rao People” in referring to themselves. But when pressed further to check to see if this is a true ethnonym (tribal name), there is reluctance and often in the end a rejection of this term.

Obviously Ban Salaeng and Ban Pa Rai are a special case. It may be that with more anthropological research it will be discovered what these villagers call themselves. Regardless of this future discovery, however, linguistically these people must be classified as speakers of an /r/ dialect of Prai. Because of this fact, therefore, we will use the term Prai to include these villagers as well.

New Names

It should now be obvious by what name (s) we should use in referring to the Tin of Nan Province. These names are Mal and Prai.⁷ We must realize, however, that these two terms are not just replacements for the term Tin.⁸ Rather, they are terms for two separate groups of Tin. To use one or the other term to designate all the Tin would not represent present reality either socially or consciously of both the Mal and Prai people. The Mal are Mal and the Prai are Prai, a separation that has existed at least 200 or more years (see David Filbeck 1978, 1985).

It is tempting at this point to speculate about what the original tribal name of the Mal/Prai might have been. Of course, in the absence of historical records it is impossible to know. However, there is one line of investigation that may provide some clues.

The Mal/Prai languages are closely related to the Khmu language (or dialects; David Filbeck 1978). According to William Smalley (1961) the correct pronunciation of the word Khmu is /kyrmu/ (where the /y/ sound is similar to the vowel ๕ in Thai) and the /r/ sound is voiceless making it a sound similar to /h/. However, of real interest here is the meaning of the word /kyrmu/ (i.e. khmu), which means "person, people".⁹ Now the Prai word for person is /khram/ (/phram/ or /phyam/ in Mal). So here we have two words that appear to be cognates, or related to each other as having come from the same source. There is the basic phonological structure of /krm/ and the same basic meaning. As Khumu and Mal/Prai diverged to become separate ethnic groups (perhaps 600 or so years ago), Mal/Prai kept the word for person. But at this point they were no longer just /kyrmu/ or Khmu. They were a separate ethnic group having a different identity and name.

At this point it is also tempting to speculate whether the term Mal was indeed the original name of all the Tin at that time. It may have been that Mal was the name of a lineage of the original Khmu/Mal/Prai group. After the separation the Mal/Prai were known simply as the Mal. But as the Mal begin to divide further, one group maintained the indigenous name Mal while the other group for some reason adopted the term Prai.¹⁰ If this was indeed the case, it would be tempting to try restoring the term Mal as the tribal name for all the Tin. However, it is uncertain whether this was true at one time or not. Moreover it is doubtful if the term Mal would truly be (re)adopted by the Prai even if at one time in history all the Mal/Prai were known as the Mal.

Conclusion

Regardless of the situation that may have existed at one time in history with regard to the Mal/Prai, it is the present situation that is significant. That situation is this: On the one hand there are two groups, the Mal and Prai. On the other hand both groups are historically related even to the point of having retained a great number of similar elements both linguistically and culturally from their common past. Evidently, then, what we are observing is the emergence of two new ethnic groups, a process furthermore that is still taking place. Perhaps the present situation among the Mal/Prai is not unlike what we could have observed if we had lived a few generations ago, as both the Sgaw and Pwo Karen separated from each other, or the Lahu from the Lisu, etc.

However, whether this process will finish its course and the Mal and Prai complete their separation is another question. Already there are competing forces which could stop this process, more precisely divert this process into something else. One such factor is the contact between the Mal/Prai and the larger, dominant Thai society. Under the pressure of this contact both the Mal and Prai are in varying degrees of leaving their traditional ways and adopting the ways of their Thai neighbors. For example, a number of both Mal and Prai villages have all but forsaken their own particular (Tin) dialect and now speak the northern dialect of Thai. Under the pressure of Thai education this process, moreover, may speed up in the years to come.

There also could be a resurgence of ethnic and linguistic pride among the Mal/Prai. If this happens then we may see renewed interest in maintaining their own language(s) and customs against the influence of outsiders, which in this case would be the Thai language and culture.

We of course are now speculating in the future, which is a futile exercise even under the best of circumstances. What is sufficient for our current purposes is the present situation. Which leads us back to our opening question: By what name shall we call these people, the Tin of Nan Province?

Let me suggest that we use the names Mal and Prai from now on.

David Filbeck

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Endnotes

1. Both estimates are currently found at the Hilltribe Research Institute of Chiang Mai University. The latter and larger estimate is found in the book compiled by Mr. Wanat Bhruksasri, ศาสตราจารย์ ดร. วานัท บรูคซาสรี (date of publication BE 2528) the Director of the Hilltribe Research Institute. This book is available through the Institute.
2. Of interest here is that Kha ข่า is a loanword in Tin dialects, often pronounced as /khraa/ or /khyaa/ and meaning slave. However, it is not used by the Tin (when speaking Tin) as an ethnic designation for themselves.
3. Other factors are also involved, e.g. dialects, cultural traditions, etc., all of which add up to a lack of a single tribal consciousness among the Tin.
4. Of all the Tin villages I am acquainted with, I have found only one that cannot be so neatly classified. It is the village of Ban Chool (pronounced as /cuul/ with the final "l" sounding like the "d" in the English word "middle"). It is a village located in Pua District. While the villagers claim to speak Mal, their own dialect contains several features unlike any other Tin dialect whether Mal or Prai, thus making it difficult to classify linguistically as to which branch it belongs. Furthermore the villagers observe neither the Mal or Prai rice traditions.
5. Anthropologically the difference between clans and lineage is that the former includes a broader network of kin (but not necessarily biological) while the latter includes a smaller (and normally biological) network of kin. With regards to the Prai it is not yet certain whether these groupings should be classified as clans or lineages; more research among the Prai is needed in this respect. For this article, therefore, I use the two terms interchangeably. See also David Filbeck (forthcoming) for remarks on the implications, both historical and current, of clans or lineages among the Mal and Prai.
6. According to David Jordan (in personal communication) the /r/ sound is currently changing to /y/ in Thung Chang as well. This phonological change is a widespread one in Tin dialects (cf. David Filbeck 1976) and appears to have about completed its course in the language. I know of only two villages, Ban Kwet (Mal) and Ban Salaeng (Prai) where the /r/ sound is still firmly entrenched as a part of the village dialect. Before too many more years we may see the disappearance of /r/ from Tin.
7. Even though the /r/ sound in the term Prai is changing to /y/ we could still write /r/, for whenever /r/ is seen following /p/ it would automatically be pronounced as /y/.
8. Even if it is found more convenient to keep on using the term Tin, we should at least stop using the spelling "Htin", which is a carryover from a writing system used in Burma. There is no merit in writing an "H" before Tin in this case. This spelling should be relegated to the museum!
9. It is a common occurrence to find in a small tribal group that the word for person or man is also the name for the tribe.
10. While this line of reasoning is speculative it is still plausible. One strong piece of evidence in favor of its plausibility is the fact that Prai dialects have assimilated, when compared to Mal dialects, a far greater number of Thai loanwords. Many of these words are basic words (e.g. "to be", "to have", etc.) which linguists do not expect to find borrowed from another language. So it would not be surprising to learn that this Tin group also adopted the Thai term Prai as the name for the group.