

The Hmong in Argentina and their 'convergence' with the Rankülche

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Abstract

After the defeat of the United States in Laos in 1975, the Hmong's resettlement in Argentina during their diaspora from refugee camps in Thailand is a topic that has yet to be fully studied. At the moment of their arrival, the Argentine political and historical context, that is, the military regime during the Dirty War (1976-1983), which was internationally condemned for thousands of cases of violation of human rights, and the Centenary Celebrations of the Conquest of the Desert (1878-1885), when the indigenous population was destroyed under the Europeanization plan of the government, specifically influenced the situation of the newcomers. One of these Argentinian ethnic peoples was the Rankülche who display surprising similarities with the Hmong. This coincidence has suggested a novel perspective from which to study the presence of refugees from Southeast Asia through a comparative study with the Argentine native group, who once occupied the land allocated for the newcomers a century later. In spite of a huge geographical gulf, both ethnic groups share geopolitical and cultural commonalities. They were also considered by the central governments, in Argentina, Thailand and nearby countries, as the 'other' in their 'marginal' land and, thus, constituted a 'problem' of national security that have resulted in them facing different destinies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively.

Keywords: Argentina, Thailand, Hmong, Rankülche, resettlement

Argentina is one of the least known destinations of the Hmong diaspora after the 1975 United States’ defeat in the Laotian Civil War. Their arrival, together with other Southeast Asians from refugee camps in Thailand, and a lack of research on this topic, has meant that the story of the Hmong in this Latin American country has become obscure in comparison with those groups that resettled in other countries. The Hmong’s arrival in Argentina in 1979 coincided with two important incidents of national history that enhances interest in the study of the newcomers’ particular situation: the Dirty War (1976-1983), for which the military regime was internationally condemned for the violation of the human rights of the Argentinian population, and the Centenary Celebrations of the Conquest of the Desert (1878-1885), in which different native groups were destroyed under the Europeanization plan of the country.

This article aims to study the Hmong’s presence in Argentina from a double perspective. Firstly, it explores their arrival and their difficult circumstances in political crises in this country up to their situation in most recent times. Secondly, it revises the Argentinian historical context that expands the dimension of the Hmong’s resettlement in this faraway land. The focus of this paper, thus, is found in the nineteenth century story of ‘marginal people’, former owners of the lands allocated to the Hmong in the twentieth century. One of the important ‘disappeared’ ethnic groups was the Rankülche who, in spite of their separation by geographical distance, shared significant commonalities with the Hmong. Both were immigrants from Chile to Argentina and China to different Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. They faced similar geopolitical situations and also shared some similar cultural features. These two ‘marginal’ groups, the Hmong and the Rankülche, were considered by central governments to be the ‘other’ in their own lands within the national territory and, later, as a ‘problem’ that needed to be solved urgently at the end of nineteenth century and in the twentieth century.

This article is divided into three parts: The ‘marginal’ history of the Hmong and the Rankülche, their representation as a national ‘problem’ in Thailand and Argentina, and the situation of the Hmong in Argentina and their ‘convergence’ with the Rankülche.

I. The Hmong and the Rankülche: The ‘marginal’ peoples of Thailand and Argentina

The Hmong in Thailand and the Rankülche in Argentina were not autochthonous ethnic groups. Both were refugees from nearby territories who came throughout the nineteenth century, escaping warlike violence in their homelands. The Rankülche arrived in Argentina and the Hmong in Thailand before these countries had completed the work of transforming themselves into modern states. The porous condition of the frontiers in that period allowed both ethnic groups to travel freely back and forth across borders and to maintain supranational kinship relations, forming their particular cultural hybrids. The Rankülche and the Hmong found refuge in the 'marginal' zones, where geographical conditions contributed to their relative independence and cultural resistance.

According to Luis Esteban Amaya, the Rankülche were first documented in 1749.¹ The denomination 'Rankülche', or Ranquel in Spanish, means "the people of the reeds." They were associated with the plants that grew around the lakes in their communities², which were situated on the Inner Land or the Pampa, a vast and lonely plain that stretches across the heart of Argentina. This area was known as an important part of the indigenous or 'barbarian' zones that were without European 'civilization'. It was a so-called Desert, a realm of the Mapuche immigrants from Chile and their descendants, the Pehuenche, Vorogano, Rankülche and Huilliche.³ The Rankülche's own historical homeland experienced many expansions and contractions through different periods. However, their lands basically stretched across three Argentine provinces, La Pampa, San Luis and Córdoba, which are situated in the centre of the country. This space was known as *Mamil Mapu* or the Mountain Country, a land covered by 'mountains' of thorny brushwood and forests of caldén, vegetation typical of the Pampa.⁴ Their capital city was Leuvucó, a strategic point known to all their members but kept secret from the Creole authorities. Isolated from each other and from the outside world, the Rankülche communities depended very much on the use of horses for communication and transport.

¹ Luis Esteban Amaya, 'Aculturación en torno a los indios ranqueles', *Cuadernos del Instituto Nacional de Antropología*, 9, 1979-1982, p. 271.

² Jorge Fernández C., *Historia de los indios ranqueles: orígenes, elevación y caída del cacicazgo ranquelino en la pampa central (siglos XVIII y XIX)*, Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Antropología y pensamiento latinoamericano, 1998, p. 25.

³ Lila Bujaldón de Esteves, 'La frontera interior como tema central de la literatura argentina', *Boletín de literatura comparada*, 16-17, 1991-1993, p. 55, and Isabel Hernández, *Los indios de Argentina*, Quito: Abya-Yala, 1995, p. 217.

⁴ Fernández C., *Historia de los indios ranqueles*, p. 15.

The Rankülche population was the result of the Mapuche's migration from central and southern Chile, across the Andes, into southern Argentina and expanding northwards as far as the Pampa in the central region. It was a gradual process that may have commenced in the seventeenth century or even earlier. At first, the Mapuche travelled through the Andes for trade and livestock exchange. Some of them married native women and settled down in Argentina. This process intensified during the Independence War in Chile in the first decades of the nineteenth century, when this ethnic group was obliged to participate with Creole troops. Many of their military leaders, the caciques, and their people opted for migration to a well-known land, Argentina, from where they continued to sustain close relationships with their Mapuche relatives in Chile.⁵ The Mapuche who settled in the Pampa brought with them their handicrafts, religion, language, sedentary lifestyle and agricultural activity. They learned the Pampa's hunting techniques and made use of animal by-products in their daily lives like other local ethnic groups.⁶

Turning towards the Eastern Hemisphere and across the Pacific to the Asian continent, the Hmong ethnic people settled across the mountainous zones of Southern China and in the Northern regions of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. The Hmong were thus the inhabitants of a so-called Zomia, a 'non state space'. Their communities were extremely difficult to access as a result of their altitude and great distance from central societies. As a result, these people long enjoyed relative political autonomy and historically resisted the efforts of any state to assimilate the lands in which they lived.⁷ 'Hmong' is the recent term for 'Miao', a group first mentioned in Chinese historical documents composed around 500 BCE. In some old literature, the Miao are looked on as aboriginal Chinese. This ethnic group lived in the mountainous regions of southern China, especially in the upland provinces of Guizhou, Hunan and nearby areas⁸, where horses were the vital means of communication with the outside world. Early in the Christian millennium, the term 'Miao' was already being widely applied to all non-Han southern

⁵ Raúl Mandriniand Sara Orтели, *Volver al país de los araucanos*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1992, p. 36.

⁶ Lucio V. Mansilla, *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*, Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, 1993, pp. 19-30, and Carlos D. Heguy, *La pampa central. De la aventura de la frontera al desafío del desarrollo*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Dunken, 2007, pp. 21-3.

⁷ James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2010, pp. 19-22.

⁸ Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and customs of the Hmong*, Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010, p. 5.

populations that included the ancestors of the Hmong. It is a general Chinese designation that can translate as 'sons of the land', 'indigenous people', 'weeds in the farm' or just the 'sound of a cat'. In any case, all of these terms have a somewhat pejorative connotation that coincides with the reference to this ethnic group in Chinese documents as 'barbarians of the mountains'.⁹

The Chinese State during the Han Dynasty expanded southward in its early stages, employing a policy of 'barbarians to control barbarians'. Local chieftains were appointed to rule their own people.¹⁰ At the same time, the central government intended to make these highlanders more like the Chinese by initiating them into Chinese culture, a project that had some success. Early Western colonial writers and ethnographers have pointed out many similarities between Miao social customs and some of the very earliest practices ever recorded in China.¹¹ For example, the Miao divided themselves into patrilineal clans, some of which have Chinese surnames.¹²

Violent clashes between the Miao and the Chinese had been recorded since the twelfth century. The Han continued to advance and expand, satisfying the increasing need for arable land, especially after the introduction of maize and potatoes from the New World in the sixteenth century.¹³ Campaigns to suppress the Miao in Guizhou and Hunan provinces occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The major violent rebellions of the Miao took place between 1733 and 1737. They were just as violently suppressed. In one uprising in 1735, 18,000 Miao were reported to have been slaughtered.¹⁴ During the period 1854-73¹⁵, the Panthay Rebellion's uprisings in Guizhou and Yunnan were major insurrections. During these years, there was one exodus after another of this ethnic group, escaping into the territories of Southeast Asia.¹⁶ These refugees fled to Vietnam (1800-1860), Laos (1810-1820) and Thailand (1840-

⁹ Gary Yia Lee, 'Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 8, p. 13, <http://hmongstudies.org/GYLeeHSJ8.pdf> (consulted 2 February 2014), and The Secretary of the National Psychological Practice Committee, *The Hmong Hill Tribe* (Chaokhao phao Mong), Bangkok: Royal Thai Survey Department Press, 1975, p. 1.

¹⁰ Nicholas Tapp, *The Hmong of Thailand: opium people of the Golden Triangle*, London: Anti-Slavery Society, 1986, p. 10.

¹¹ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and customs of the Hmong*, p. 6.

¹² Tapp, *The Hmong of Thailand: opium people of the Golden Triangle*, p. 13.

¹³ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and customs of the Hmong*, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Scott, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*, p. 154.

¹⁶ Jean Mottin, *History of the Hmong* (Prawat khong chao Mong), Bangkok: Odeon Store, 1977, pp. 11-58.

1870), where they held on to their traditional ways and settled in the high mountains in order to enjoy the isolation they had so prized in China. The Miao's oral tradition, which accompanied them into these new lands, reflects their long history, including their loss of land and sovereignty to the Han Chinese. Although there was massive migration, the vast majority of the Miao chose to stay behind and to somehow adapt to their changing situation. Of the worldwide Miao population of around five million, three million remained in China.¹⁷ In the last decades, the Miao, especially those outside China, coined for themselves the term 'Hmong', which is not a Chinese word and cannot be written in traditional Chinese characters.¹⁸ It signifies their love of freedom and their own view of themselves through their long history.¹⁹

The Hmong entered Thailand through the mountain ranges of the North and Northeast, along the frontier with Laos. Their villages are situated at an average altitude of 1,200 metres in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Phrae, Nan, Petchaboon and Nakhonsawan.²⁰ In these upland regions, so distant from the agricultural plains where most of the population dwelt, the newcomers enjoyed relative independence. As before, horses had a central role in Hmong life.

In spite of the huge geographical distance that separated them, these two ethnic peoples had some notable cultural similarities. Both groups were patriarchal and the practice of polygamy was common, though women had sexual freedom before marriage. There were also parallel concepts of dowry (the 'bride price' or 'bride wealth' for the Hmong; the 'bride price' or 'precio de la novia' for the Rankülche). Such payments would be distributed among different members of the bride's family. A married woman then became a member of her husband's clan and was responsible for the domestic work of his family²¹. For both of these peoples, politics was an exclusively male affair. Each individual community had its own leader and governed itself

¹⁷ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and customs of the Hmong*, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Samai Suthitham, *Documentary about lives of the minorities in the mountains (Sarakhadi chiwit khong chon klum noi bon doi sung)*, Bangkok: 2020 World Media, 1998, p. 13.

²⁰ Sangkeet Chanthanapho, *The Meo's Junction (Chum thang khon Maeo)*, Nonthaburi: Than Buakaew, 2000, p. 13, and The Secretary of the National Psychological Practice Committee, *The Hmong Hill Tribe*, p.3.

²¹ Robert Cooper, Nicholas Tapp, Gary Yia Lee and Gretel Schwort-Kohl, *The Hmong*, Bangkok: Artasia Press Co., 1991, pp. 27-29; Patricia Veronica Symonds, *Cosmology and the Cycle of Life: Hmong Views of Birth, Death and Gender in a Mountain Village in Northern Thailand*, Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, 1991, p. 49; Mandrini and Ortelli, *Volver al país de los araucanos*, pp.168; Raúl Mandrini: *Los araucanos de las pampas en el siglo XIX*, Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latino, 1984, p. 13.

independently. When especially important issues were raised, a quasi- democratic council could be summoned. In the absence of a satisfactory conclusion, respected male elders had the right to make the final decision.²²

Religion was central to both the Rankülche and Hmong communities. Both were animists and traditionally acknowledged both good and evil spirits. The Spirits of Nature were loved and honoured, along with ancestors who could return to look after their descendants and their properties. Frightening and dangerous bad spirits included different types of harmful demons. There is an interesting similarity between the Hmong *Dang Cho* and the Rankülche *Chonchón*. These demons were said to have human bodies during the day and during the night were reputed to fly about with only a head and entrails dangling beneath, hunting for victims. In Rankülche and Hmong communities, the shamans were very powerful figures who communicated with the unseen world. They served as doctors who cured patients through trances and rituals to the accompaniment of percussion instruments. They were also fortune tellers and dream interpreters. Notably, the Rankülche shamans were women, or men with feminine characteristics, who had learned the traditions from the female members of the family. By contrast, the majority of Hmong shamans were men who had inherited this ability from their male ancestors.²³

II. The Rankülche and the Hmong: a national 'problem' for Argentina and Thailand

The local governments of Argentina and Thailand saw the Rankülche and the Hmong as the 'other' with a different culture from the mainstream in the marginal zones of the national territory. These strangers, who were not native sons, were regarded as a national problem at the very moment when the process of territorial unification and frontier security had become

²² Mandrini and Orтели, *Volver al país de los araucanos*, pp.147-8; Mansilla, *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*, p. 292; Suthitham, *Documentary about lives of the minorities on the mountains*, p. 35; and The Secretary of the National Psychological Practice Committee, *The Hmong Hill Tribe*, pp.29-38.

²³ Louis C. Faron, *Antüpaiñamko: Moral y Ritual Mapuche*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Nuevo Extremo, 1997, pp. 53-7 and 128; Mandrini and Orтели, *Volver al país de los araucanos*, p. 187; Óscar Barreto, *Fenomenología de la religiosidad mapuche*, Buenos Aires: Centro Salesiano de Estudios San Juan Bosco, 1992, p. 50; Khajadphai Burutphat, *The hill tribes (Chaokhao)*, Bangkok: Phrae Phittaya, 1975, pp. 48-9; Boonchuay Srisawas, *The hill tribes in Thailand (Chaokhao nai Thai)*, 2nd edition, Bangkok: Matichon, 2002, p. 442; and The Secretary of the National Psychological Practice Committee, *The Hmong Hill Tribe*, pp. 25-6.

politically urgent matters with the intervention of the United States: the Rankülche during the Europeanized national formation of the nineteenth century and the Hmong during the Cold War in the twentieth century.

The 'problem' of indigenous people, including the Rankülche, was one of the principal preoccupations of Argentinian governments. Their process of new nation building pursued under the dichotomist idea of 'civilization', the European population, their culture and progress, and 'barbarism', indigenous population and their related elements, was proposed in *Facundo* (1845) by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. According to Sarmiento, Argentina should be constructed on the model of the United States, which was composed of a huge population from European immigration after the 'clearing' of the native people²⁴. The implementation of the plan to 'civilize' the 'barbarian' territory was also encouraged by a boom in the Creole livestock industry in the Pampa. Until the nineteenth century, this zone was the indigenous' territory claimed by Chile because it had been occupied by the Mapuche and their descendants, considered to be Chilean citizens²⁵.

The frontier between Creole and Europeanized society and the Inner Land was not a fixed geocultural demarcation. It had been a zone of interaction to exchange goods, cultures and also militias since the colonial period. The last phenomenon occurred intensively during two warlike Argentinian conflicts in the nineteenth century when the indigenous people were considered both as allies and enemies of the Creole. As the livestock industry expanded, from 1815 the Creole communities advanced outwards into the Inner Land, which they regarded as 'empty'. The native communities, in return, sent their *Malón*, armed troops, to attack the Creole farms in order to obtain cattle. They considered that they were hunting on their own land.²⁶ They took additional plunder in the form of captives, who provided an important workforce, and also wives, for the indigenous societies. During the years of most conflict, 1858-1873, almost all the families in the frontier zone were affected by the *Malón*.²⁷ In response, the Creole governments

²⁴ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo. Civilización y barbarie* (Edición de Roberto Yahni), Madrid, Cátedra, 2008, p. 370.

²⁵ María Eugenia Ortiz, *Poblar el desierto argentino: modelos de civilización en la novela de la Organización Nacional (1850-1880)*, PhD thesis, Universidad de Navarra, 2009, p. 53.

²⁵ David Rock, Juan Carlos Torre and Liliana de Riz, eds., *Historia de la Argentina*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2001, p. 10.

²⁷ Fernando Operé, *Historias de la frontera: el cautiverio en la América hispánica*, Argentina, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001, p. 14.

used their own warlike strategies to suppress native insurgents in what was known as the Frontier War.

During this ethnic conflict for the occupation of the Pampa's territory, Argentina also experienced a Creole Civil War between the Federalists, whose support base was to be found in rural zones, and the Unitarians, the Centralists based on the European model. The indigenous people, because of their desert expertise, were persuaded to participate in this ideological conflict: some supported the first faction and others were with the second faction. One of the most important figures of the Civil War was the federalist Juan Manuel de Rosas. He ruled Buenos Aires with two governments in 1829-1832 and 1835-1852. Rosas, known as the 'Restorer of Law', used terror to bring 'order' to the country. During the most intense period, many Unitarians opted for exile both in neighbouring countries, such as Uruguay, Bolivia and Chile, and among the native communities in the Pampa. The governments of Rosas coincided with the most distinguished period of the Rankülche. The soldierly cacique leaders were central figures in these communities. Among sixty important caciques in the Pampa and Patagonia in the period 1830-1880, one-third were from the Rankülche.²⁸ The first great cacique was Llanquetruz, who led the Rankülche Empire at its height.²⁹ In 1831, Llanquetruz permitted Manuel Baigorria, a Unitarian colonel, to find refuge among the Rankülche people, far from the reach of Juan Manuel de Rosas. The presence of Baigorria, who became one of the most important Rankülche caciques after his integration into the communities until 1852, inaugurated an alliance of this ethnic group with the Unitarians and, as a consequence, sparked a conflict with the Federalist government.

Rosas saw indigenous peoples as either allies, native workers who had worked on his farm or in his militias, or enemies³⁰; and this included the Rankülche. During the lapse of these two governments, between 1833 and 1834, he led the Desert Campaign, as an important part of the Frontier War, south of Buenos Aires to suppress his enemies and to expand Creole territory. During this period, the Rankülche communities suffered great losses.

Baigorria returned to the Creole society after the fall of Rosas at the Battle of Caseros in 1852, the last chapter of the Civil War. However, the friendship of the Rankülche and Baigorria

²⁸ Carlos Martínez Sarasola, *Nuestros paisanos los indios*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 2005, p. 227.

²⁹ Fernández C., *Historia de los indios ranqueles*, p. 99.

³⁰ Alberto Julián Pérez, *Los dilemas políticos de la cultura letrada (Argentina-Siglo XIX)*, Buenos Aires, Corregidor, 2002, p. 42.

ended during the government of Paghitruz Güor, or Mariano Rosas, Llanquetruz's grandson, who ruled the capital of Leuvucó from 1858. Paghitruz Güor died of smallpox in 1877 and is remembered as the last Rankülche cacique to die of natural causes. The following year, the Frontier War came to the end. The Rankülche faced the same fate as the other ethnic groups in Argentina. The cacique Epumer was captured together with the cacique, Baigorrita, and 1,000 Rankülche were executed. The rest of the communities were enslaved or scattered across the Pampa.³¹ In the case of these communities, the informer who betrayed their geographic location was none other than Manuel Baigorria, the Unitarian colonel, who reappeared to help the central government suppress the indigenous people in the Pampa.³²

This project was completed during the Presidency of Nicolás Avellaneda (1874-1880), a follower of Sarmiento's doctrine, who considered the indigenous 'problem' as an urgent mission of his government. The first Defence Minister, Alfonso Alsina, advanced the Creole lines by building new villages and fortifications at strategic points and by constructing a systematic frontier demarcation, Zanja de Alsina. The project remained unfinished after his sudden death in 1877.³³ The plan, which had a defensive character, was replaced by a more aggressive formulation devised by the second Minister, Julio Argentino Roca. His project, the so-called Conquest of the Desert (1878-1885), was approved and sponsored by the Congress with the enactment of Law 215.³⁴ This initiative expanded Creole territory as far as the Río Negro in the southern part of the country, rid the nation of indigenous peoples by 'clearing' the Pampa and made the Inner Frontier disappear.

After the eradication of 'barbarism' in the Desert, Roca became a national hero. He was twice elected president of Argentina in 1880-1886 and 1898-1904. His portrait and the scenery of the Conquest of the Desert are memorialized on Argentina's one-hundred Peso banknotes. Different governments had extensive programmes to Europeanize the country with the 'importation' of Old Continent citizens to populate the 'empty' lands. As the new century approached, Europeans represented up to 34% of the total population³⁵. These opaque statistics

³¹ Fernández C., *Historia de los indios rankülchees*, p.217, and Carlos Martínez Sararola, *Nuestros paisanos los indios*, p. 258.

³² Fernández C., *Historia de los indios ranqueles*, pp. 190-1.

³³ Brass, *Historia Argentina (1806-2004): Una mirada crítica*, 362.

³⁴ Hernández, *Los indios de Argentina*, 234.

³⁵ Fernando Aínsa, *Del topos al logos: Propuesta de geopoética*, Madrid/Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert/Iberoamericana, 2006, p. 260.

conceal the fact that the indigenous peoples, including the Rankülche, were not only erased from the national map but also from collective memory.

The indigenous communities only stepped back into the light of history at the beginning of the twenty-first century, thanks to the efforts of their descendants and interested authorities. There are two examples in relation to the Rankülche. Firstly, on 22nd June 2001, the remains of the cacique, Paghitrüz Güor, which had been preserved as part of the collection of the La Plata Natural Sciences Museum, were returned to the community in the province of La Pampa. This was the second cooperative gesture by the museum after the reclamation of the remains of the cacique, Inacayal, of the Mapuche community in the province of Chubut³⁶. After more than a decade of petitioning the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs, the Secretary of Culture of La Pampa and the Rankülche community, the cacique's skull, which had been exhumed from his tomb by soldiers and donated to the museum in 1889 by Estanislao Zeballos, was reinterred in the city of *Leuvucó*. Secondly, the first restitution of land and infrastructure to the Rankülche community took place in the province of San Luis on 30th May, 2009. It was the project of San Luis' governor, Dr. Alberto Rodríguez Saá, a Rankülche descendant. A piece of land was returned to the community in 2007 and, two years later, several houses, a hospital and a school were constructed, using traditional models, for the use of the people.³⁷

The modern era of nation-building had a completely different meaning for the Hmong than for the Rankülche in Argentina. The Hmong, like many highlanders in Northern Thailand were, in the nineteenth century, stigmatized by the central authorities not as a 'problem' but as 'other' in the national territories. It was only because of the political tensions in Indochina during the Cold War, a century later, that the Hmong began to be perceived as an urgent topic that needed solving.

During this period of profound global transition, the Hmong in Thailand and Laos, neighbouring countries with a considerable population of this ethnic group, became involved in the 'problem' of communism in contrasting ways. Their strong family ties, which often crossed national boundaries, and their expertise in living in inaccessible mountain ranges, made the

³⁶ 'El Museo La Plata restituye los restos de un cacique ranquel', 22 June 2001, <http://www.mapuche.info/news02/ElDia010622.html> (consulted 1 March 2015).

³⁷'El pueblo ranquel renace en el sur de San Luis', <http://www.ranqueles.sanluis.gov.ar/> (consulted 1 March 2015).

involvement of political factions in these countries inevitable.³⁸ The United States, with its Cold War, anti-communist crusade, leaned on the majority elites to put more pressure on local ethnic minorities.

In Thailand, the mountainous Hmong settlements were considered the source of problems. The government focused on the trade in opium and on the threat of communism, topics that related closely to national security. For their part, the Hmong depended on opium as a crucial local medicine. The drug also, of course, was of great economic value.³⁹ In 1947, legislation was passed authorizing the consumption and cultivation of opium. At that time, various groups entered Thailand. Some were cultivators, like the Hmong from Laos, and some were traders like the Kuomintang, who set up their stronghold in the Golden Triangle following the success of the Chinese Revolution in 1949.⁴⁰ Under strong international pressure, in 1958 the Thai government decided to end the Royal Thai Opium Monopoly and banned the sale and consumption of opium in Thailand. However, the cultivation by the Hmong of this successful economic product continued to be tolerated by local officials in exchange for bribes; a situation that resulted in the ethnic group's being at risk of illegality. The situation was intensified by government suspicion that these hill peoples, especially the Hmong, because of the inaccessibility of their settlements and their status as ethnic minorities, might be open to communist persuasion.

Thai authorities applied various strategies, both civil and non-civil, to deal with this 'problem'.⁴¹ In 1953, surveillance of the problematic hill people was stepped up. The United States Operations Mission (USOM) helped found Thailand's Border Patrol Police, a task force charged with more effectively controlling the mountainous and border regions in the north. In 1959, one year after the Anti-Opium Act, the Department of Public Welfare proposed developing a plan to convince the highlanders to abandon their practice of shifting settlements and opium cultivation and to help the authorities to secure Thailand's national frontiers.⁴² Many projects

³⁸ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and customs of the Hmong*, p. 12.

³⁹ Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 66.

⁴⁰ Tapp, *The Hmong of Thailand: opium people of the Golden Triangle*, p. 24.

⁴¹ Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand*, pp. 34-5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

intended to encourage assimilation were initiated: mobile development units, classes in Thai literacy for young children, visits by Buddhist missionaries and the institution of a Tribal Research Center. Towards the end of the 1960s, the anticommunist movement, supported by the United States, intensified. For almost two decades, the Hmong were divided into two factions: those who remained in the zone controlled by the government and those who resisted government policy. Between 1967 and 1968, there was sporadic resistance and clashes between the Hmong and the authorities. Suspected Hmong villages were treated as full scale insurgents, resulting, in many cases, in forced evacuations of entire villages.⁴³ A number of Hmong did indeed flee to the jungle to join the communists. In 1971, thousands of Hmong refugees found new homes in five major centres in the provinces of Tak, Nan, Chiang Rai, Phitsanulok and Petchaboon. These resettlement centres were constructed under the Ministry of Interior's policy to encourage hill people to give up shifting cultivation and settle down.⁴⁴

Many Hmong in Thailand were penalized for being pro-communist. In Laos, however, the Hmong were among the anticommunists. After the French withdrawal in 1954, political polarization in Laos escalated with the intervention of the Americans and the Vietnamese. Laos was divided among three main political parties. The socialist Pathet Lao was the strongest group, closely allied with the Vietnamese communists. The neutralist group sought a compromise with the communists. Finally, the royalist faction had economic and military support from the United States. From 1965 through 1973, the Hmong, under the leadership of the General Vang Pao, were recruited by the US Army.⁴⁵ During that period there were more than 120,000 Hmong refugees inside Laos and their death toll is said to have reached 30,000.⁴⁶

After the defeat of the United States in 1975, Hmong allies, together with Laotians and other ethnic groups of similar persuasion, took refuge in Thailand. By 1977, approximately 104,000 refugees from Laos had arrived in Thailand. With the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Thai Ministry of Interior constructed various refugee camps along the border with Laos. The biggest Hmong camp, Ban Winai in Loei province, sheltered around 48,000 people. The presence of Hmong from Laos was problematic

⁴³ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and customs of the Hmong*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ Lee, 'Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins', p. 3.

⁴⁶ Tapp, *The Hmong of Thailand: opium people of the Golden Triangle*, p. 43.

for the Thai government because there were still Hmong in northern Thailand fighting alongside communist rebels. According to Nicholas Tapp, the Thai government carefully isolated Hmong refugees from communist elements in Thailand.⁴⁷ However, Mr Vang Thai, one of the Hmong leaders during the civil war in Laos, confirmed that during his stay in Thailand, he helped local government negotiators to successfully disarm Hmong who had allied themselves with the Thai Communist Party.⁴⁸

III. The 'convergence' of the Rankülche and the Hmong in Argentina

By the end of the Civil War in Laos, the fighting had created a great exodus of this ethnic group from Asia to the West. It was during this period of dramatic dislocation and relocation that the Hmong and the Rankülche came to share geographical space in Argentina.

Hmong from the refugee camps in Thailand were resettled to third countries with the help of the UNHCR. A global diaspora of the Hmong was created without any territorial base.⁴⁹ From different parts of the world, however, they continued to maintain family connections. Large numbers of Hmong refugees were accepted by the United States (200,000-300,000 resettled) and France (15,000 resettled), while lesser numbers went to many other countries, including Germany, Canada and Australia.

A small number of Hmong gained asylum in two territories in South America: French Guiana, an overseas region belonging to France, and Argentina. Upon their arrival, the Hmong found themselves assigned to live in faraway agricultural zones. They were also confronted with the difficult process of cultural adaptation. A resettlement project in French Guiana was proposed to the government of France by the missionary, Yves Bertraid. Today, the number of Hmong descendants in this French dependency has increased from 500 people to around 2,500. They are living in the villages of Cacao, Javouhey and Regina⁵⁰ and produce between 50- 90 % of that nation's fruit and vegetables. Those who migrated to Argentina, however, had quite a different experience.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴⁸ My interview with Mr Vang Thai on 9 June 2014 in Bangkok, Thailand.

⁴⁹ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and customs of the Hmong*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Pal Ujvarosi, 'The Hmong Among Others', *Newton News*, 24 September 2012, <http://www.newtown-news.com/2012/09/24/the-hmong-among-others/> (consulted 15 April 2014), and Patrick F. Clarkin, 'Hmong Resettlement in French Guiana', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 6, 2005, pp. 1-6.

The Hmong, together with other Indochinese refugees, entered Argentina between 1979 and 1980, during the Presidency of Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-1981), who led the first military government of the Dictatorial Regime (1976-1983).⁵¹ Unfortunately, the arrival of the Hmong coincided with the Process of National Reorganization and Argentina's Dirty War (1976-1983). Early in 1979, the government of Argentina, as a UNHCR member ratified by law number 15,869, sent representatives from the Ministry of the Interior to visit refugee camps in Thailand.⁵² Argentina subsequently offered asylum to 1,000 Southeast Asian families, altogether 5,000 people. These asylum seekers were promised peace, work and progress in Argentina with the support and cooperation of the UNHCR, the Argentine Catholic Migration Commission and the Argentine government's Department of Migration.⁵³ The objective of this action was distressingly obvious. Argentina's military government, in the face of international condemnation for their violations of human rights in their own country, their complicity in the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of individuals, baby thefts and other crimes that forced hundreds of Argentinians into exile, was attempting to repair their image and improve their record pertaining to commitment to humanitarian issues and respect for human rights.⁵⁴ In the end, however, only 293 refugee families from the camps in Thailand entered the country. There were 266 families from Laos, 20 from Cambodia and 6 from Vietnam, for a total of approximately 1,270 people, many of them actually born in Thailand.⁵⁵ The UNHCR program continued but, thereafter, Argentina ceased to take more refugees. What had taken place was transparent political exploitation which showed the military government's lack of any genuine humanitarian interest in Indochinese refugee issues.⁵⁶

From the very beginning, these refugees faced a situation contrary to what the military government had promised. They were basically forced to occupy the inner provinces and to work in agricultural activities by decree number 2073/79, which granted them permanent residence

⁵¹ Dirección Nacional de Población, *Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático en la Argentina: 30 años de historia*, Buenos Aires: Ministerio del Interior y Transporte, 2012, p.13, <http://www.mininterior.gov.ar/poblacion/pdf/Documento07.pdf> (consulted 14 April 2014), p. 7.

⁵² Silvana Palermo and Ezequiel Ramoneda, 'Los Hmong en Argentina', in Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios de Asia y África (ALADAA), *XIV Congreso Internacional de ALADAA*, 2013, pp. 1544-5.

⁵³ Dirección Nacional de Población, *Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático en la Argentina*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵⁶ Palermo and Ramoneda, 'Los Hmong en Argentina', p. 1546.

only outside a radius of 100 kilometres from the capital city.⁵⁷ In a very short time, however, most of the new arrivals moved into the urban zones, especially to Buenos Aires, for reasons not difficult to explain. Those refugees who had actually been farmers in their former lives came from agricultural zones with quite different crops from those in Argentina. At the same time, many of those who had been shunted out to the countryside were not, in their countries of origin, farmers at all but had been government officials or businessmen.⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, when democratic rule revived in Argentina in 1983, and the refugee programme ended in 1984, many of these refugee families moved on to the United States or France.⁵⁹ In 1984, there were 1,160 Southeast Asian refugees in Argentina. By 1991, this number had decreased to only 792 people, of whom 628 or 80% were Laotians.⁶⁰

The Hmong in Argentina have an ambiguous identity. In the eyes of Argentinian society and the government, they are simply regarded as Laotians or even Thais. According to the Department of Demographic Policy, they are identified as Southeast Asians. In 1991, three provinces were home to the largest number of Southeast Asian refugees: Buenos Aires (27.6%), Misiones (33.6%) and Río Negro (24.7%).⁶¹ According to my interview with Mrs Mai Sung⁶², a Hmong refugee who is still living in Argentina, and also according to other similar studies, these zones were populated by Laotian and Hmong communities, with members of both groups living together in some areas. For example, Laotian communities were found in the city of Chascomús in the province of Buenos Aires and in Posadas, the capital city of the province of Misiones⁶³, where there are Lao spiritual centres, i.e. Wat Luang Argentina, whose abbot is a Thai monk, and Wat Ratanarangsayaram. In 1979, Hmong refugees, in numbers varying from 25 to 50 families and from 100 to 250 people, arrived in the province of Río Negro. After a temporary stay in the city of Viedma, they were sent to Lamarque, Luis Beltrán, Choele Choel and Villa Regina.⁶⁴ In

⁵⁷ Dirección Nacional de Población, *Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático en la Argentina*, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Palermo and Ramoneda, 'Los Hmong en Argentina', p. 1554.

⁵⁹ Dirección Nacional de Población, *Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático en la Argentina*, p. 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

⁶² My interview by telephone with Mrs Mai Sung on 15 November 2013.

⁶³ Dirección Nacional de Población, *Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático en la Argentina*, pp. 37-40, and Palermo and Ramoneda, 'Los Hmong en Argentina', p. 1556.

⁶⁴ Claudia Michelena, 'Los Hmoob. Los asiáticos que viven actualmente en Luis Beltrán no son Laosianos', *Sumpall*, 2011, <http://sumpall.blogspot.com.ar/2011/01/1-o-s-si-ati-cos-que-viven-actualmente.html> (consulted 16 August 2014); Cristina Patriarca and Liliana Cazorla, 'Laosianos: la última inmigración', *Todo es Historia*, 235, 1986, pp.

1991, the distribution of the Asian population was 5.4% in Choele Choel, 6.6% in General Roca, 5.1% in Luis Beltran and 7.6% in other provinces.⁶⁵

The arrival, in 1979, of Hmong in Río Negro was highly significant, marking a convergence of nineteenth and twentieth century Argentinian politics. Their coming ironically coincided with the Celebration of the Centenary of Conquest of the Desert, Argentina's 'cleansing' war against its own indigenous peoples, including the Rankülche. The province of Río Negro is named after the river that runs through the territory and which served, during the Frontier War, as a strategic frontier, in the minds of many Argentinians, between 'barbarism' and 'civilization'. There are many testimonies of nineteenth century violence against the targeted ethnic groups. For example, three cities, Adolfo Alsina (Viedma), Avellaneda (Choele Choel) and General Roca are so named. The monument to General Roca, constructed in 1940 in Bariloche, was frequently defaced by Mapuche descendants.

The Hmong presence in Argentina represents an interesting case study of the diaspora of this ethnic group which is comparable with those in other third countries. In the 1980s, they were actively contained in their communities and, as a result, preserved their ancestral traditions, almost intact. Their descendants, by contrast, having been born in Argentina and speaking Spanish as their mother tongue, integrated more successfully than their parents into the society.⁶⁶ Even so, recent statistics about the Hmong population in Argentina are still questionable. The number of Southeast Asian refugees in Argentina has decreased and according to my interview with Mrs Mai Sung and a study by Silvana and Ramoneda, there are only around 30-50 Hmong remaining in the whole country.⁶⁷ However, there are contrary opinions on this matter. According to estimates provided by Jacques Lemoine and Prasit Leepreecha, the numbers of Hmong in Argentina have increased from the original arrivals to 500-600 people.⁶⁸

Conclusion

32-35; and Kou Yang, 'Hmong Diaspora of the Post-War Period', *Asian and Pacific migration Journal*, 3, 2003, p. 278.

⁶⁵ Dirección Nacional de Población, *Refugiados del Sudeste Asiático en la Argentina*, p. 22.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28 and 34, and Patriarca and Cazorla, 'Laosianos: la 'última inmigración'', p. 40.

⁶⁷ My interview by telephone with Mrs Mai Sung on 15 November 2013, and Palermo and Ramoneda, 'Los Hmong en Argentina', p. 1550.

⁶⁸ Jacques Lemoine, 'What is the Actual Number of the Hmong in the World?' *Hmong Studies Journal*, 6, 2005, <http://hmongstudies.org/LemoineHSJ6.pdf> (consulted 12 August 2014), and Prasit Leepreecha, 'The ethnic group Hmong in the context of the modern Nation/State' (Klum chattiphon Mong nai boribot khong rat chat samai mai), in Suphang Chantawanich and Thawil Pliensri, eds., *Lao Hmong in Thailand (Mong lao nai Prathet Thai)*, Bangkok: Arun Press, 2011, p. 7.

The arrival in Argentina under Videla's regime of the Hmong from refugee camps in Thailand in 1979 coincided with the Centenary Celebration of the Conquest of the Desert, in which the central government suppressed native peoples on bloodsoaked battle fields that became the land inhabited by the Hmong a century later. This crucial situation represents the intersection between the Hmong and the indigenous people of Argentina. One of these local ethnic peoples was the Rankülche, who offer a comparative approach for research on the Hmong in Argentina. The Rankülche settled in the Pampa and the Hmong in the mountainous zones of Thailand and nearby countries, revealing a parallelism in origins, geopolitical situation, cultural aspects and resistance to central governments. Under the Argentinian process of national formation following the Europeanization plan at the end of the nineteenth century, the Rankülche faced the Conquest of the Desert that brought about the disappearance of indigenous people from the country. A century later, the Cold War and the intervention of the United States in Southeast Asia created many problems for the pro-communist Hmong in Thailand and also for the anticommunist Hmong in Laos, who found refuge in Thailand after the American defeat. One small group of Hmong accepted the opportunity to resettle in a faraway land, once inhabited by the Rankülche; in Argentina. The fates of these two ethnic groups intersected as a consequence of political crises in Southeast Asia and Latin America in the twentieth century and Argentinian policy towards ethnic groups that dates back to the nineteenth century.

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