Thai Vernacular Architecture and Heritage

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Vernacular environments develop in response to human actions and behaviors, and express the social orders, worldviews, and identities of the societies that build and shape them. Successive generations become enculturated and gain competence among members of their society through these dimensions of intangible heritage, deeply embedded in the physical characteristics of the environment and often unacknowledged by occupants. This most local level of intangible cultural heritage is frequently overshadowed in Thailand by the country’s rich dominant Thai heritage visible through numerous impressive historic architectural and archeological sites. Often linked to the country’s royal narrative, these sites are enthusiastically developed by the Thai state both for local and international tourism. However, while approximately 80 percent of the country is of pure “Thai” descent, 20 percent is non-Thai. In Thailand’s north, the highlands support concentrations of minority ethnic mountain groups. In out-of-the-way areas, these minority groups conduct their daily lives in their vernacular environments.

In a study ongoing since 2008, I have documented and examined vernacular environments of the Hmong, one of northern Thailand’s minority ethnic mountain groups. Focused primarily on four Hmong villages, Doi Pui, Pa Nok Kok, Huay Luk and Khun Klang (see next page for map) and with other supporting data, this study seeks to understand ways that primarily intangible heritage, embedded in vernacular environments, has been used to support improved well-being and quality of life for rural Hmong in northern Thailand. Further I consider the initiation and support of these efforts and what might be learned to preserve intangible heritage of minority groups in other locations.