

# Reproducing Statelessness: The subjectivity of citizenship in Thailand

## Introduction

This study examines the role of subjectivity in the adjudication of citizenship applications from stateless indigenous people in Thailand. Thailand contains one of the largest stateless populations in the world, counting 553.969 people in 2021 (UNHCRa), whereas most of them are indigenous people living in the mountain areas (Kithanapaibul et al. 2022). The statelessness of these people stems from a long history of expanding nation-state borders and following controversies over national belonging. This has resulted in indigenous people being socially marginalized in Thailand and framed as 'internal Others' (Morton & Baird 2019, 15). Today, many indigenous people find themselves in situations of severe social and economic precarity. Therefore, in 2014, the Thai government pledged to eliminate statelessness before 2024, but recent numbers suggest that this will not become a reality (UNHCRb). To explain this, scholars argue that government efforts actually reproduce statelessness rather than eliminate it (Flaim 2017). Flaim, for example, shows how adjudication of citizenships are not based on objective factors such as blood, birthplace, or residency in practice, but rather are left to the subjective interpretations of individual Thai state officials (ibid., 154). These interpretations vary widely between officials. While some see it as their job to provide citizenship to as many stateless people as possible, others aim for the opposite (ibid., 156). Therefore, this study seeks to examine how the individual interpretations of Thai state officials are shaped in their adjudications of citizenship, and what role these interpretations play in the reproduction of statelessness among indigenous people in Thailand.

## Research questions

The study will depart from the following research questions:

1. What are the procedural and legal frameworks provided by the Thai government that state officials follow in the adjudication of Thai citizenship applications?
2. What do these frameworks leave to interpretation?
3. How do state officials utilize this interpretational space, and how do they rationalize this interpretation?

## **Literature review**

The study will draw on anthropologist Perle Møhl's (2022) concept of the ID-entity. Through ethnographic fieldwork, Møhl shows how European security risk assessments of incoming migrants are not based on objective database information, but rather on the border guards' subjective interpretations of that information. She further argues that their subjective interpretations are actively shaped by the border technologies, which promote a certain understanding of what and who is to be deemed a security threat. Møhl's concept of the ID-entity can be used in a Thai context to show how the interpretations of Thai state officials are shaped by the bureaucratic guidelines issued by the Thai state, as well as by political narratives and the education and social life of state officials.

The study will draw on and contribute to an expanding literature on citizenship within fields such as political science and anthropology. Scholars are increasingly acknowledging citizenship not as a binary legal framework, but rather a scale of social inclusion: a person can be legally included but socially excluded and the opposite (Ishii 2020). This is exemplified in Thailand by the acknowledgement of indigenous peoples' claim to geographical residency within Thailand and the concurrent social conviction that many of them are not 'Thai enough' to obtain citizenship (Morton & Baird 2019). Scholars are also increasingly acknowledging that statelessness is not an abnormality, but rather an intrinsic part of national and international economies. By maintaining certain groups of people in states of precarity, nation-states are ensuring a cheap labor force in what Ishii (2020, 1) calls the 'new global labor regime. This study will provide insights on how this continuous precarity is reproduced and legitimized on the ground.

## **Methods and ethics**

The study will be conducted using qualitative methods including ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. It will primarily consist of observation of and conversations with Thai state officials in their occupation of assessing citizenship applications. As Hastrup (1992) argues, ethnographic fieldwork allows the ethnographer to distinguish between what an informant says they do, and what they actually do. By observing and interacting with Thai state officials over a longer period of time, it will be possible to obtain a sense of why they interpret individual citizenship applications as they do, and how they rationalize this. This will allow for the identification of underlying patterns and logics that the state officials might not be aware of themselves, which in turn could be used to point at systemic practices that might contribute to the continuous reproduction of statelessness.

### **Positionality and ethics**

As the researcher is not from Thailand, conducting the study will require a special sensitivity to cultural differences and power relations. Insights will therefore continuously be shared and discussed with participants to avoid misrepresentations stemming from language barriers, misunderstandings of social norms or similar. Participants will be fully compensated for their time and efforts and will be anonymous unless they wish otherwise.

I hereby confirm that this research proposal has been composed by me and is my own work, unless stated otherwise.

Word count: 800.

### **Literature**

Flaim, Amanda. 2017. Problems of Evidence, Evidence of Problems: Expanding Citizenship and Reproducing Statelessness among Highlanders in Northern Thailand. In *Citizenship in Question: Evidentiary Birthright and Statelessness*. Ed. Lawrence, Benjamin N. & Stevens, Jacqueline, 147-164. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

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UNHCRa. Thailand. *UNHCR #iBelong*. Link: <https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/imvisible-thailand/>. Downloaded 27/10/2023.

UNHCRb. Statelessness. *UNHCR Thailand*. Link: <https://www.unhcr.org/th/en/statelessness>. Downloaded 27/10/2023.