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# NEGOTIATING IDENTITY ACROSS BORDERS: CULTURAL RESILIENCE AND COMMUNITY WEALTH AMONG THE MORAKHA ETHNIC GROUP IN WESTERN THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

*This article investigates the negotiation of ethnic identity and cultural resilience among the Morakha ethnic group, a transborder community displaced from Myanmar to Western Thailand due to protracted political unrest and forced migration. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Sangkhla Buri District, the study examines how the Morakha sustain and adapt intangible cultural heritage and localized knowledge systems including foodways, embroidery, ritual ceremonies, and oral traditions amid structural marginalization and assimilationist state policies. Utilizing theoretical frameworks from border studies, cultural rights discourse, and community cultural wealth, the paper argues that the Morakha's symbolic resistance and the strategic deployment of localized social capital function as critical mechanisms for asserting identity and ensuring cultural continuity. By foregrounding the lived experiences of one of Thailand's most recently recognized ethnic minorities, this research contributes to broader global debates on border citizenship, the cultural rights of marginalized groups, and the resilience of transborder communities navigating complex geopolitical landscapes shaped by nationalism and globalization.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Border Migration, Cultural Resilience, Community Cultural Wealth, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Morakha, Social Capital, Traditional Knowledge Systems.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Southeast Asia, borderlands constitute dynamic sites where identities are continually negotiated amid migration, state sovereignty, and cultural continuity. Thailand's western frontier, particularly Sangkhla Buri District in Kanchanaburi Province, exemplifies such a liminal space, serving as a critical migratory corridor and cultural contact zone among diverse ethnic groups. Among these groups is the Morakha, a numerically small but culturally resilient ethnic minority displaced from Myanmar by decades of political unrest and militarized violence. Despite their marginal status, the Morakha exemplify the processes through which marginalized communities at the margins of nation-states actively negotiate cultural survival, ethnic subjectivity, and collective well-being within shifting socio-political and geopolitical contexts.

This article explores the Morakha community's efforts to preserve and transmit their cultural heritage including foodways, traditional dress, belief systems, and ritual practices against the backdrop of forced migration, state marginalization, and assimilationist policies promoting national homogeneity. Drawing on Hall's (1996) concept of identity-as-process, the study conceptualizes ethnic identity as a continuous and dynamic negotiation shaped by both internal agency and external pressures. While dominant state narratives privilege integration and homogenization, marginalized groups such as the Morakha sustain distinct identities through active community engagement and the strategic mobilization of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Engbers et al., 2017).

Thailand's borderlands are home to multiple ethnic communities including Karen, Mon, Akha, and Mien whose cultural endurance often remains invisible or overshadowed by developmentalist and securitized state discourses. However, as Rocha et al. (2019) and Purgason et al. (2020) argue, these communities maintain profound ecological knowledge and alternative epistemologies grounded in long-term relationships with their environment. For the Morakha, resettlement in Nong Lu village has not resulted in cultural erasure; rather, it has fostered strong intra-community cohesion and enabled the establishment of cultural learning centers aimed at intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and intercultural dialogue.

Employing a qualitative ethnographic methodology, this article analyzes how the Morakha construct and sustain community cultural wealth amidst globalization, technological encroachment,

and state developmental imperatives. While capitalist expansion has often disrupted traditional livelihoods and social relations (Prachuntasen et al., 2018; Muir et al., 2018), the Morakha demonstrate that indigenous knowledge and cultural practices can serve as vital resources for resilience and adaptation. Their use of embroidery, ritual sweets, ceremonies, and cooperative community engagement illustrates cultural resilience as an active, creative process rather than passive preservation.

Ultimately, this study situates the Morakha experience within broader academic and policy debates on cultural rights, border citizenship, and minority resilience in geopolitically contested spaces. By documenting the lived realities of this recently recognized ethnic group in Thailand, the article offers critical insights into how marginalized transborder communities negotiate identity and assert cultural continuity amid rising pressures of nationalism, assimilation, and globalization.

### 1.2. Research Objectives

- To examine the historical processes of migration and settlement among the Morakha ethnic group in Sangkhla Buri District, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand.
- To explore the cultural significance of food practices and traditional clothing within the Morakha community as expressions of identity and continuity.
- To investigate the rituals, traditions, and belief systems that sustain the Morakha's cultural resilience and social cohesion across generations.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Community Culture and Local Economies

Community culture encompasses the socio-economic, symbolic, and relational practices that govern daily life within localized groups. According to Ungsitipoonporn et al. (2021), community-based cultures function as units of both production and reproduction, emphasizing self-sufficiency and interdependence. In contrast to capitalist economic models that prioritize commodification and profit maximization, community economies are grounded in collective resource ownership and sustainability (Moayerian et al., 2022). This form of economy fosters not only material survival but also the symbolic continuity of traditions, norms, and values. As Leeka et al. (2021) argue, capitalist systems tend to reconfigure community relationships, especially

where resource control becomes an instrument of power and exclusion.

## 2.2. Migration and Border Governance in Thailand

Migration within Thailand, particularly in its border regions, is a historically embedded phenomenon shaped by geopolitics, state control, and ethnic displacement. While legal frameworks regulate migration through visa systems and immigration policies (Jampaklay, 2020), many ethnic groups especially those fleeing political unrest navigate migration through informal and historical cross-border networks. The experiences of ethnic minorities such as the Karen, Mon, and Morakha are shaped not only by displacement but by their efforts to reconstruct identity and belonging in new cultural terrains. Migration is thus not solely a physical movement but a socio-political process that entails negotiation of citizenship, identity, and cultural preservation.

## 2.3. Social Capital and Ethnic Resilience

Social capital defined as the networks, norms, and trust that enable collective action plays a critical role in the sustainability of marginalized communities. Gannon and Roberts (2020) conceptualize social capital as encompassing both structural and cognitive elements that promote cohesion, reciprocity, and resilience. In ethnic communities like the Morakha, social capital manifests through intergenerational knowledge transmission, communal labor, ritual cooperation, and shared moral values. Such relational assets are vital not only for survival in conditions of precarity but also for sustaining cultural identity in the face of assimilationist pressures.

Taken together, the conceptual frameworks of community culture, migration, and social capital provide a critical lens through which to examine the cultural resilience of the Morakha ethnic group in Thailand. These frameworks illuminate how marginalized borderland communities deploy everyday practices as strategies of survival, resistance, and identity reconstruction both within and beyond the nation-state

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**This research draws upon three interrelated theoretical frameworks to analyze the Morakha community's cultural resilience**

### Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Identity

Hall (1996) emphasizes that identity is not a fixed essence but a process shaped by historical, cultural,

and political contexts. Ethnic identity is constantly in flux, constructed through memory, narrative, and negotiation. This framework is key to understanding how the Morakha adapt and maintain their identity in the face of displacement and marginalization.

### 3.1. Bourdieu's Concept of Social Capital

Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes social capital as the sum of actual or potential resources linked to membership in a durable network. In the Morakha case, social capital manifests in kinship ties, religious practices, shared cultural values, and reciprocal exchange, all of which contribute to community resilience and sustainability.

### 3.2. Theories of Borderlands and Cultural Hybridity

Borderlands are not just geographic margins but also sites of hybridity, negotiation, and resistance (Anzaldúa, 1987). The Morakha, residing on the Thai-Myanmar border, navigate multiple cultural logics and sovereignties. Their identity is not confined to national boundaries but shaped by a complex interplay of local practices, state policies, and transnational flows see in Figure 1



**Figure 1: Interplay of Cultural Identity, Social Capital, and Borderland Hybridity in the Morakha Community.**

### 3.3. Research Methodology

This research article focuses on field research, using qualitative methods with Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach. According to Husserl's concept, this study does not focus on human history or background but instead seeks truth through the structure of an individual's perceptual process and their personal experiences (Husserl, 1997). The aim is to study the experiences of individuals within the Morakha community and how these experiences shape their cultural practices. The data collected will

be used to analyze the results clearly and comprehensively, covering the research objectives. The research methodology is detailed as follows:

### 3.3.1. Target Groups for Study

The target population for this study, "Negotiating Identity across Borders: Cultural Resilience and Community Wealth among the Morakha Ethnic Group in Western Thailand" consists of two groups:

**Government Officials:** Officials from key government agencies responsible for providing assistance, support, and overseeing the well-being of the Morakha community. This includes the Development Officer of Sangkhla Buri District and the Sub-district Administrative Organization (TAO) of Nong Lu. This group comprises a total of 10 individuals.

- **Community Leaders and Residents:** Leaders and residents within the Morakha community who provide support and assistance in terms of location and knowledge and actively participate in community activities. This group comprises a total of 13 individuals, including:
  - Sub-district headman of Nong Lu sub-district.
  - 3 village leaders.
  - 5 members of the TAO of Nong Lu sub-district.
  - 4 residents of Morakha village.

The researcher employed the Reference Person method to collect data from these target groups. This involved studying preliminary information about the Morakha community's migration, culture, traditions, and beliefs, as well as relevant information from involved agencies. This approach was chosen to ensure the completeness and credibility of data obtained from target groups that are key in addressing the research problems.

### 3.4. Data Collection Tools

This study employed a qualitative research design, where the researcher acts as the primary instrument for data collection. The methods employed were designed to ensure depth, richness, and contextual relevance of the data. Two main tools were used:

#### 3.4.1. Participant Observation

The researcher engaged in participant observation by immersing in the daily life of the Morakha community for a period of three months. This included participation in cultural and religious ceremonies such as wrist-binding rituals and the preparation of Kubebung (a traditional dessert), as well as other local practices. This immersion enabled the researcher to observe the cultural expressions,

social norms, and adaptive strategies employed by the Morakha people in response to external changes while maintaining their cultural identity. The goal of participant observation was to develop a nuanced understanding of how traditions, beliefs, and practices are enacted and negotiated in everyday life. The prolonged engagement in the field ensured credibility and contextual depth in the data collected.

#### 3.4.2. In-Depth Interviews

A total of 15 participants were selected using purposive sampling, including community elders, local leaders, youth, and cultural practitioners. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights (Guest et al., 2006). This number was sufficient to capture a diverse range of perspectives across gender, age, and roles within the community.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed flexibility in probing relevant topics such as reasons for migration, cultural practices, traditional knowledge, and community responses to displacement. Questions were adapted as needed to suit the background and experience of each informant, allowing the emergence of rich, detailed narratives. These methods ensured a comprehensive and culturally grounded understanding of the Morakha community's experience, values, and social transformation.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis approach grounded in the field data and supported by relevant literature. The process included the following steps:

#### 3.5.1. Data Organization and Coding

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and field notes from observations were compiled. The researcher employed manual coding using three stages of thematic analysis:

- **Open Coding:** identifying initial concepts and patterns from the raw data.
- **Axial Coding:** grouping related codes into broader thematic categories.
- **Selective Coding:** integrating core categories and connecting them to the main research questions.
- This approach allowed the researcher to develop themes that reflect the lived experiences, cultural identities, and resilience strategies of the Morakha people.

### 3.5.2. Data Triangulation

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, data triangulation was applied across three dimensions (Denzin, 2006):

- Method triangulation: combining data from interviews, observations, and document reviews.
- Investigator triangulation - three trained research assistants participated in reviewing and validating the coded data.
- Contextual triangulation: data were collected across different times, settings, and individuals to ensure consistency and reduce bias.

The iterative process of coding, theme development, and validation ensured that the findings were grounded in the participants' narratives and reflected the complexity of their socio-cultural realities.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Transborder Identity Formation: The Emergence of the Morakha Ethnic Group in Thailand

Morakha Village is situated in Moo 5, Nong Lu

Sub-district, Sangkhla Buri District, Kanchanaburi Province. It stands as the last village in Thailand, sharing a border with Myanmar. The inhabitants of Morakha Village are primarily Morakha people who migrated from Myanmar. The Morakha are a small ethnic group that originated in the Karen State of Myanmar. Although they have characteristics similar to the Karen people, they are a distinct group. The Morakha way of life and culture are notable, with unique traditions, food culture, and annual events. Therefore, this article analyzes and highlights aspects of Morakha community culture to preserve and continue the heritage of the Morakha people indefinitely.

The village currently houses around 600 residents, distributed among approximately 119 households. Some migrated together, while others relocated independently over the years. Despite their diverse origins, the community has fostered a shared culture, traditions, beliefs, and ceremonies. These aspects contribute to a distinct identity for Morakha Village, preserving the unique characteristics of the Morakha people. From the past to the present, the border area of Kanchanaburi Province has seen many ethnic groups migrating to settle, with some coming for work and others fleeing war.

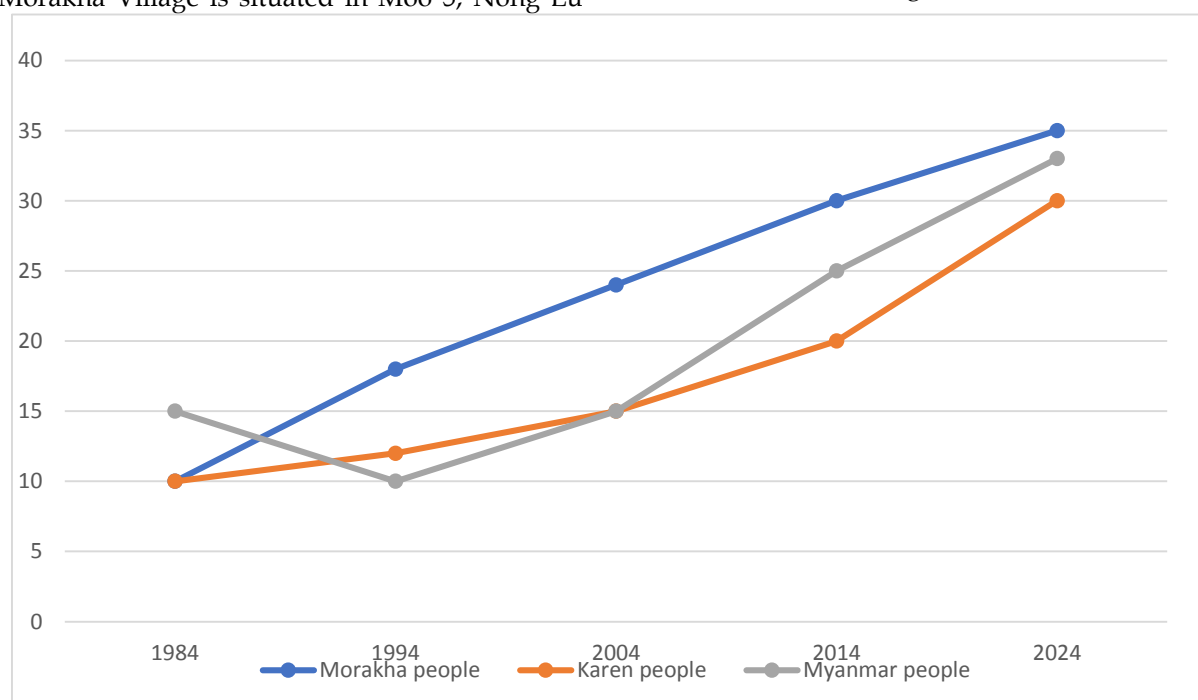


Figure 2: Migration of Ethnic Groups in Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand during 1984-2024.

From Figure 2, it is evident that numerous ethnic groups have migrated to Thailand. Specifically, the Morakha ethnic group migrated at a rate of 10% in 1984, as indicated by the graph. Over the course of 40 years, the Morakha ethnic group has increasingly

migrated and settled in the area of Ban Nong Lu, Sangkhla Buri District, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand. The Morakha villagers have been establishing their identity based on their cultural capital in their new land and homes. Despite the

migration and resettlement, the core Morakha culture has remained resilient. Villagers have established their settlements on the Thai border under the auspices of King Rama IX of Thailand. Over time, the Morakha community has become more established, leading to the creation of Morakha cultural learning centers. These centers provide opportunities for other ethnic groups to learn about Morakha culture and traditions, fostering strong and interdependent inter-ethnic coexistence.

The cultural elements, such as clothing, food, and traditions, have been shaped by the social support provided to the community. Morakha Village maintains its cultural distinctiveness, even though the residents primarily adhere to Buddhism, with a minority (10%) practicing Christianity. The residents coexist harmoniously, participating in community activities without religious divisions. Morakha Village's main occupations include agriculture, rubber tapping, and general labour. Initially, the community engaged in rotational farming, but due to government policies prohibiting the use of forested areas, residents transitioned to single-crop farming. Additionally, middle-aged individuals often seek employment in the district, sending remittances back to their families in the village.

In conclusion, Morakha Village remains a unique community worth preserving, characterized by its cultural richness, traditions, ceremonies, and the distinct identity of the Morakha people. The village's ability to maintain its cultural heritage despite challenges and changes in livelihoods highlights its significance as a community worth studying and conserving. This identity formation is not merely a reproduction of traditional customs but a negotiated process shaped by displacement, state policies, and inter-ethnic encounters in the borderland context.

#### ***4.2 Negotiating Belonging through Migration. Displacement and Resettlement:***

It began due to unrest in their original area under the Karen State of the Union of Myanmar during the 1970s. The residents were forcibly conscripted into labour and military service by the forces of the Myanmar central government, which lacked clear regulations. Consequently, when conflicts arose in the region, or villagers were forced into military service, people chose to migrate to more peaceful areas. They moved in various directions, both to the north and south. Some families decided to migrate deeper into areas not previously controlled by the Karen State in Myanmar. The selection of settlement locations was based on the possibility and suitability of the land for cultivation. This led to face-to-face

communication, encouraging others to follow suit and relocate. When categorizing the population in the Morakha village by religion, it can be divided into two groups: those practicing Buddhism, comprising about 90%, and those adhering to Christianity, making up around 10%. The total population in Morakha village is approximately 600 people from 190 households, with the majority engaged in general labour or sending some family members to work in cities to send money back home.

The residents of Morakha continue to adhere to traditional ways of life from before their migration. They have preserved their customs and traditions, passing down these practices from generation to generation. For example, there is a tradition of tying wristbands in the eighth month of the lunar calendar to invoke blessings and encouragement before starting work or the harvest season. Other traditions include rituals to ward off evil and enhance the well-being of family members. Although the early migrants have lived in the area for over 30 years, they still identify themselves as Karen rather than Thai. They take pride in their Karen identity. On the other hand, the younger generations born in Thailand have Thai citizenship, access to education, and various rights as Thai citizens. When it comes to civic duties like paying taxes or military service, they willingly comply with the clear regulations in Thailand, unlike the lack of clear criteria in Myanmar, which they find frustrating.

The Buddhist residents place great emphasis on their faith, showing reverence for Buddhist symbols and conducting specific rituals based on their beliefs. For example, during worship at sacred sites, everyone must remain within their respective village boundaries, and no one can go elsewhere. Even a part of the body should not extend beyond the village boundaries; otherwise, a new ritual must be initiated. While the residents predominantly adhere to Buddhism and do not believe in ghosts, there are instances where they may still hold beliefs in sacred forest spirits. However, the once strong beliefs and practices have diminished due to increasing development, such as the ability to call for rain or communicate with animals, as the forested areas have decreased over time. **The evidence about migration to Thailand of the Morakha people's notice as follows:**

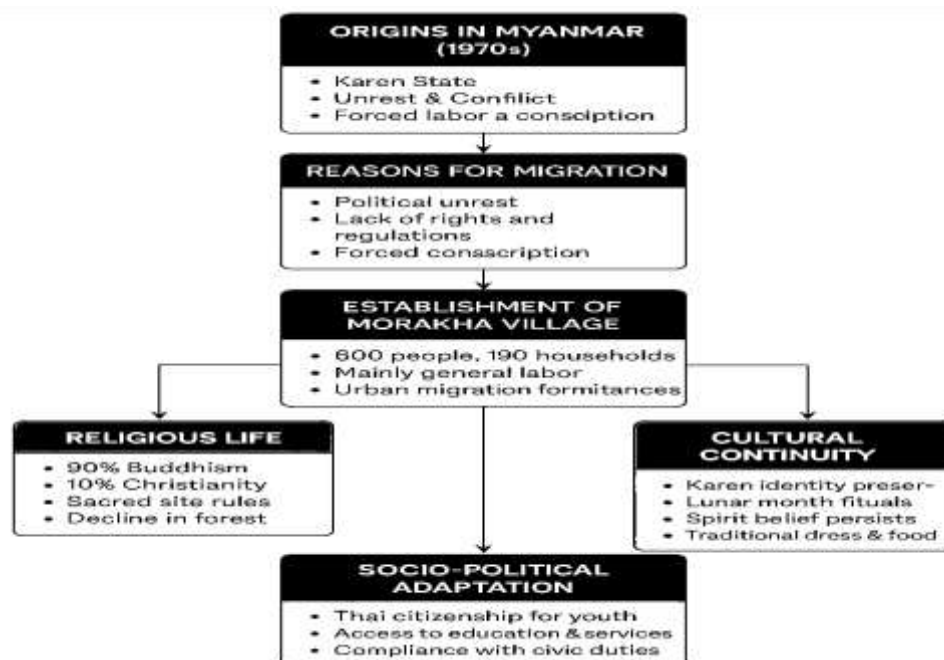
"Originally, both lived in Apol City of Karen State, Myanmar. They have one son together. Before deciding to immigrate here, Because of the unrest in the area 30 years ago, when I was there, I had a career in farming and growing rice. When moving to Morakha Village, he still took up a career in farming,

which is his main occupation. In the past, when facing the forest, we found arable land. You can grow rice and farm. But now I can't do it. Because of conflicts in reserved forest areas, those who became villagers invaded the forest area instead, resulting in needing more income to survive. Must face the city and send children. Go to work and earn money to send back to your home. For example, my daughter works as a caretaker for the elderly. When you have income, send it to help at home." **Mrs. A (pseudonym), wife of Mr. B (pseudonym).**

"Mr. Khao immigrated with his parents when he was a child and had no regular job. Living for general employment, He said that he believed in Christianity according to his parents and grandparents, who used to practice Buddhism in the past, which means that the customs are strict. It's too difficult to maintain. He gave an example of the tradition of eating chicken.

Some houses don't use chicken. It is an animal in a ceremony. For example, his family uses Aon. (Animals such as rats, similar to moles) Nowadays, it is difficult to go into the forest and dig for Aon to perform the ceremony." **Mr. Khao (pseudonym).**

Therefore, in figure 3, the migration of the Morakha occurred due to various factors, including political unrest in the country. Following ancestral or family paths in the migration of Morakha people and the establishment of new villages bearing the name of Morakha, the roots of Morakha people are still remembered in terms of culture, traditions, various rituals, as well as food and clothing that this group of Morakha people continues to preserve and maintain. Even though their place of residence has changed, the Morakha spirit and identity have not disappeared.



*Figure 3: Migration and Cultural Continuity of the Morakha People.*

#### **4.3. Culinary Practices and Clothing as Cultural Markers of Resilience**

It is a valuable resource due to the accumulation of ancestral wisdom in using local natural resources as raw materials for household and community consumption. The food culture is forged from the experiences and skills of generations to be passed on to children. Additionally, food culture is also intertwined with religious traditions. Food culture is rooted in each society's beliefs, values, lifestyles, and knowledge (Punchay et al., 2020). Like many communities, Morakha Village has transitioned from its traditional practices, such as shifting cultivation.

However, today, changes in the country's development, driven by bureaucracy and consumerist culture, are rapidly altering the community's way of life and causing numerous changes in various aspects of the community.

The traditional food of most Morakha communities comprises vegetables sourced from nature, animals hunted from the forest, or fish caught from creeks and streams. The rice consumed is typically served with chili and salt. The main curry consists of paprika, galangal, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and shrimp paste (fermented fish) pounded together. The meat commonly used in cooking is



easily accessible, with fish and wild game being the cheapest options. Pork, on the other hand, is relatively rare and expensive. It is common to enhance the flavor of dishes with okra leaves and orange poi. While some homes still utilize triangular stoves, others have transitioned to gas stoves for convenience, particularly where electricity is readily available.

In terms of food significance, the Morakha community places importance on certain dishes, such as sour papaya salad. If one feels tired or unwell during work, consuming dried fish soup with papaya salad can swiftly restore energy and freshness to the body. Herbs used in dishes like pork stew and dog stew also possess medicinal properties. Traditional rice porridge, made with glutinous rice, symbolizes community harmony, as the resilience of the rice reflects the unity of the people. This illustrates that the Morakha's food culture is rooted in purpose and tradition. Moreover, the food culture of the Morakha community is rich with various strategies and hidden meanings.

Food is not only one of the four fundamental necessities but also a cornerstone crucial to human existence. Food culture serves as a tangible manifestation of the distinct customs, knowledge, and lifestyle of each society. Seasonings and ingredients sourced from nature and food production play essential roles in cooking. Apart from fulfilling basic sustenance needs, indigenous ingredients are often utilized for medicinal purposes, reflecting the societal, cultural, and economic aspects of the community. To illustrate this, I'd like to introduce a Karen dessert called "Kubebung," which continues to uphold its uniqueness.



**Figure 4: *Paederia Foetida Roots and Kubebung Dessert, it is a Dessert Made from Raw Materials in the Community and is a Local Dessert of the Morakha People.***

The Morakha community remains dedicated to preserving plants native to the forest or local area. They cultivate and maintain these plants to prevent their extinction and impart diverse knowledge to community members, as well as willing visitors. This commitment ensures the continuity of the

## Ingredients

- Rice
- *Paederia foetida* roots (Picture 1)
- Grated coconut
- Salt

## Instructions

- Soak the rice for 20 minutes and drain dry.
- Take the root and slice it thinly.
- Pour the rice and root into a fine powder.
- Roast the dough to perfection.
- Mix cooked flour with water and knead well.
- Form the kneaded dough into strips or to your preferred pattern.
- Steam the molded dough to cook.
- When the dough is cooked, mix it with shredded coconut and salt.

Food culture, particularly the crafting of traditional Morakha desserts like Kubebung, has transmitted wisdom across generations. The techniques and ingredients employed in dessert-making are exclusive to local regions, such as the inclusion of *Paederia foetida* roots, renowned for their medicinal properties. These roots aid in cooling the body and alleviating inflammation, serving as a gentle laxative suitable for individuals of all ages and genders. The process involves not only the preparation of food but also encompasses nutritional and intellectual values, requiring collaborative efforts. Each step, from root excavation to the preparation and steaming of flour, embodies meticulous artistry, rendering Kubebung dessert distinctive. The Morakha people take pride in their dessert-making tradition, ensuring that their wisdom endures over time, as depicted in Figure 4.

community's food culture, passing it down as an inheritance to future generations of Morakha people

However, the food culture has evolved due to the globalization trend, altering the traditional culinary practices within the community. In the past, villagers would venture into the forest to gather ingredients,



but nowadays, due to territorial restrictions and resource scarcity, they must journey to the city to procure raw materials. Additionally, the introduction of convenience foods, such as pre-packaged vegetables, chili paste, and fish, has transformed cooking styles, with dishes like stir-fried basil and curry taking on a markedly different appearance. Even desserts sold in community stores have transitioned, with natural snacks like roasted bananas being replaced by snacks and soft drinks from more developed neighbouring communities. This shift has led to the gradual erosion of the old food culture, replaced by new culinary trends. Despite these changes, food culture remains both a science and an art in society, serving as a unique identifier for each community. It is regarded as a strength of social cohesion, embodying a distinct identity that cannot be replicated, but rather should be cherished and passed down to future generations with pride.

#### **4.3.1. Traditional Dress Culture**

In the past, ethnic shirts were predominantly worn, as hand weaving was a time-consuming process. Women exclusively wore sarongs and avoided pants altogether. However, with the evolving external influences on community culture, the introduction of T-shirts and pants streamlined clothing production, eliminating the need for laborious weaving or sewing. Despite these changes, the Morakha community remains committed to preserving its cultural identity. Ethnic shirts and traditional Morakha attire are still donned during significant traditional or ceremonial occasions. While weaving practices have shifted towards commercial production, it remains an integral part of the Morakha way of life, emphasizing self-sufficiency. Notably, women have embraced additional occupations, such as weaving and fulfilling orders for external customers, alongside their traditional roles. Through intergenerational learning and mutual support, particularly from the elders in the community, these skills are passed down freely to those interested. This communal exchange of knowledge serves as a testament to the strong bonds and relationships within the community.

The cultural capital, encompassing both culinary traditions and attire, within the Morakha community holds intrinsic value and reflects the societal ethos rooted in communal relationships. Leveraging this cultural capital and accumulated wisdom fosters a comprehensive cultural landscape, fostering equilibrium and longevity. The collective engagement of all stakeholders mitigates cultural

dilution, enabling communities to collaboratively preserve and enhance their heritage, enriching both the community and broader society. While it necessitates concerted efforts, with active participation from various sectors, cultivating awareness about the significance of cultural heritage ensures its sustained evolution. By harnessing the intellectual wealth embedded within the community, timeless principles and guiding tenets passed down through generations can be transformed into invaluable assets, perpetuating the Morakha way of life for generations to come.

#### **4.4. Rituals, Beliefs, and Oral Traditions: Sustaining Community Cultural Wealth**

In the past, the Morakha ethnic group migrated to Thailand. Some residents of this Morakha village have lived here for over 30 years, while others have settled with their parents and ancestors. This migration has led to the establishment of a new marginalized village in Thailand under the supervision of the Thai government. Despite the diverse cultural backgrounds, traditions, and beliefs of the residents, their Karen heritage remains steadfast. Even after decades in Thailand, many still maintain their Morakha roots, preserving their distinct culture, traditions, and beliefs. These aspects have not been assimilated into mainstream Thai culture, highlighting the resilience of the Morakha identity.

The Morakha live a simple lifestyle, encompassing their clothing, food, housing, and daily routines. Despite residing in Thailand for varying lengths of time, they steadfastly maintain their culture, traditions, and beliefs, always remembering their roots. Consequently, the daily life of the Morakha closely resembles that of their counterparts in Karen State, Myanmar. They continue to uphold their cultural practices and traditions to this day. Among these traditions are annual communal rituals, such as the merit-making ceremony, the rice tying ceremony, home worship of the Buddha, and the Lakapon ceremony. These traditions have been faithfully passed down from one generation to the next, preserving the rich heritage of the Morakha people as follows:

##### **4.4.1. Annual Philanthropy Tradition**

This tradition is a significant annual event in the village, where residents come together to cook and decorate the stage at the Morakha Monastery. Additionally, the tradition includes performances that define the identity of the Morakha people, such as Liqueur and Dantong. These performances

showcase the essence of Morakha culture, providing insight into their way of life. Villagers eagerly participate in this event, which occurs once a year, with the village committee setting the date. This long-standing tradition brings together the Morakha community across generations, emphasizing its importance and significance.

#### 4.4.2. Tradition of Beating Rice

This tradition highlights the occupations of community members, particularly farming, which is the primary occupation of the Morakha people. After the rice harvest, there is a tradition known as "astringent rice," where farmers gather the harvested rice and thresh it together at the village's rice threshing area, signifying the end of the season. This practice has been deeply ingrained in Morakha culture for generations, becoming a customary ritual after each harvest. The exact origin of this tradition is not precisely known, but it has been consistently observed for many years, occurring twice annually in most cases. Occasionally, unfavorable weather conditions may prevent its observance in certain years. After threshing the rice, villagers use the harvested rice as an offering for milling.

#### 4.4.3. Wrist Tie Tradition

The tradition of tying wristbands holds significant importance for the Morakha community as it instills morale among villagers. This tradition occurs annually during the 8th month of the year, often coinciding with the onset of the rainy season, further enhancing its symbolic significance. Regardless of religious or ethnic background, all villagers come together to participate in this tradition, fostering unity within the community. Prior to the ceremony, villagers gather to prepare a boiled snack made primarily from sticky rice. This snack serves as a metaphor for unity, mirroring the cohesion achieved when individuals come together, much like the sticky rice binds the ingredients in the snack. Additionally, the act of preparing and sharing this snack promotes a sense of charity and communal participation, contributing to harmony and reconciliation among community members.

Some villagers have remained in the same location for generations, while others attending the ceremony may come from different ethnic backgrounds. Some individuals may have a personal interest or admiration for Karen culture and choose to participate in the tradition. This ritual serves to maintain the unity and harmony of married couples within the village. The number of couples participating in the ceremony must be odd, such as

three, five, or seven, as per Morakha tradition. This practice symbolizes the unity and strength of the Morakha community. Despite changes in time, location, and circumstances, the essence of Morakha culture and tradition remains unchanged.

#### 4.4.4. Tradition of Worshipping Buddha at Home

This tradition has been practiced by the Morakha people since the time of their ancestors. The villagers believe that upon settling in a new area, it is essential to pay homage to the gods, spirits, nymphs, and household monks to seek protection and blessings. This ritual aims to ensure their safety, well-being, and happiness. Held annually, it is a deeply ingrained tradition in the Morakha village. The majority of villagers in Morakha village adhere to Buddhism, with most households having a designated Buddha shrine where the main Buddha image is placed Figure 5.



Figure 5: Buddha Shelf, it is the Mantel of the Buddhist Morakha to Worship.

From the picture above, it is evident that the villagers of Morakha village hold great respect for the Buddha, considering him to be significant and a refuge in times of mental distress. During the Buddha worship ceremony at home, a ritual is performed where all household members gather around the altar to light incense sticks and candles in reverence to the Triple Gem. This practice is unique to the Karen people, where it is customary for the lit candles to burn completely before anyone can leave the house. Leaving while the candles are still burning is believed to invite misfortune into the home. Therefore, individuals must wait for the candles to burn out entirely, or else they must restart the ritual if they descend prematurely. If any candles remain unburned or partially extinguished, the ritual is

considered incomplete. Such traditions are revered by the Morakha as sacred practices passed down from their ancestors. Another belief held by the villagers is that tying the wrists of married elders during ceremonies helps to sustain their marital union and prevent separation. These rituals were also practiced when they lived in Myanmar.

#### 4.4.5. *Lagapon Tradition*

The Lakapon tradition is revered by Morakha villagers as a ritual for releasing suffering and sorrow. Villagers come together to construct a boat using bamboo, its size depending on the available space for placing it. This boat serves as a vessel for food offerings made by the villagers, including flea porridge, boiled snacks, and various curries. Additionally, there is papaya salad juice containing papaya salad leaves, turmeric, and perfume, used to cleanse attendees by driving away negative influences. This papaya salad juice is considered holy water in the village, believed to alleviate sickness when applied to the face or sprinkled on the head. It holds significant spiritual value and is utilized in various ceremonies. Upon completion of the ritual, the villagers burn the boat along with the food offerings, symbolically releasing their suffering and dispelling malevolent forces. This tradition is observed annually and has been passed down through generations. While certain aspects may adapt to contemporary times, the essence of Morakha ethnicity remains steadfast amid modernization.

In addition to the enduring traditions and rituals in Morakha village, the beliefs of the villagers are integral to these customs. The majority of Morakha villagers adhere to Buddhism, while a minority practice Christianity, comprising a small portion of the village population. Despite technological advancements, superstitions still hold sway in the community. Originally, villagers adhered to strict beliefs, such as constructing house stairs solely from bamboo, with each step comprising alternating short and long wood. Despite lacking access to electricity, villagers have ingeniously installed solar panels to address this need. In terms of diet, children traditionally consumed wild fruits or whatever they could forage. Conversely, Christians in Morakha villages hold the Bible in highest regard, with Jesus revered above all. Consequently, Christian villagers reject animism, as it contradicts biblical teachings regarding fear of the unseen. These beliefs, stemming from the community's collective culture, serve to fortify the identity and faith of Morakha village. They underscore the preservation of rituals and traditions in the midst of evolving landscapes.

However, the culture, traditions, and rituals of the Morakha have endured and been transmitted over generations. Each step of these rituals holds profound significance, intertwined with the beliefs of the villagers, fostering communal engagement in village affairs. Given the collective nature of these activities, they necessitate the involvement of numerous individuals, prompting widespread participation. Villagers steadfastly maintain the belief that regardless of their whereabouts, their Morakha identity remains an indelible part of their being.

Furthermore, in Morakha village, there exist distinct cultural practices, traditions, and rituals that are uniquely Morakha, serving as pillars of community identity and safeguarding against the erosion of their heritage. These cultural elements not only uphold the essence of Morakha identity but also reinforce the principles of communal cohesion. The dissemination of Morakha community culture serves to raise awareness of the Morakha ethnic group and offers an avenue for other ethnicities to glean insights into the process of cultural preservation, thereby fostering its perpetuation within their own communities.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the dynamic nature of the Morakha community's cultural identity, which continues to flourish despite historical displacement, geographic marginality, and economic vulnerability. As Mahaarcha et al. (2023) assert, community-based economic systems are not isolated from capitalist structures but interact with them in complex ways. For the Morakha, traditional forms of production and exchange grounded in communal labor, kinship ties, and local knowledge offer a resilient alternative to profit-driven economic models. Their livelihoods are embedded in cultural systems that emphasize sustainability over accumulation, aligning with Rukumnuaykit et al. (2016), who argue that community culture constitutes a vital pillar of identity and survival.

Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, it became evident that cultural transmission among the Morakha is not passive but actively maintained through intergenerational practices involving food, clothing, rituals, and beliefs. These practices function as forms of cultural resilience, allowing the community to navigate environmental changes and socio-political marginalization without eroding their identity. In line with Owusu Ansah et al. (2019), the Morakha demonstrate that cultural preservation amid

migration is possible when rooted in strong community ties and self-organized learning spaces.

The community's culinary practices are particularly illustrative of cultural adaptation and continuity. Traditional dishes such as Kaeng Kari (curry) retain their cultural significance, even as ingredients are locally adapted. Plants such as som poi and kra chiao are cultivated for both practical and symbolic reasons, revealing how the Morakha blend local Thai elements with ancestral knowledge. Their housing architecture elevated, wooden structures also mirror ancestral design, providing physical and cultural shelter in the borderlands (Schensul, 2009). Moreover, belief systems including reverence for spirits such as Phee Sang (ghost monkey) coexist with Buddhist rituals and state religions. This cultural hybridity supports Anzaldúa's (1987) view of borderlands as spaces of negotiation, where cultural identities are not erased but reformulated. As Park et al. (2020) note, such religious and cultural pluralism enables communities to maintain cohesion despite internal diversity.

The Morakha's case affirms that social capital rooted in kinship, collective memory, and mutual aid remains the cornerstone of cultural sustainability. These relationships are evident in ceremonial collaboration, inter-household reciprocity, and the collective management of community knowledge. The community's ability to integrate new elements while retaining a sense of belonging underscores their agency in defining the terms of their identity within and beyond the nation-state.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Morakha community represents an enduring social institution, shaped by historical displacement yet sustained by cultural cohesion, social capital, and adaptive resilience. Despite a lack of rigid institutional structures, the community functions through deeply embedded kinship systems, communal labour, and shared values. These mechanisms support both material survival and cultural flourishing, allowing the Morakha to maintain their identity in the face of shifting state policies, economic pressures, and modern influences. Internally, the Morakha maintain social order through culturally grounded mechanisms that prioritize harmony, mutual respect, and non-discrimination across religious and generational lines. While they coexist with dominant Thai society, they do not fully assimilate. Instead, they negotiate their identity at the intersection of tradition and change, rooted in ancestral beliefs, rituals, and community-based norms.

Despite challenges limited resource access, peripheral location, and policy marginalization the Morakha continue to preserve and expand their cultural wealth. This includes not only tangible elements such as food, clothing, and architecture but also intangible aspects like ritual knowledge, storytelling, and spiritual beliefs. Their "cultural consciousness" ensures that community heritage remains a source of pride, solidarity, and social agency. Rather than viewing development as a process of modernization or assimilation, the Morakha demonstrate that community-driven development, anchored in ethnic identity and social capital, fosters self-reliance and dignity. Their story challenges dominant narratives of borderland marginalization, offering instead a powerful example of cultural endurance and transformation in the margins of the state.

### 6.1. Recommendations for Implementing Research Findings

1. Exploring Morakha Ethnicity Cultural Practices: Conduct ethnographic research to explore the cultural practices, traditions, rituals, and customs of the Morakha ethnic group in Thailand. This can include studying their language, food habits, traditional clothing, music, dances, and religious ceremonies.
2. Documenting Morakha Oral Histories: Document oral histories and narratives of the Morakha people, capturing their stories, legends, myths, and historical accounts. This can help preserve their cultural heritage and provide a deeper understanding of their identity and collective memory.
3. Investigating Morakha Cultural Transmission and Adaptation: Explore how Morakha cultural practices, knowledge, and traditions are transmitted across generations and how they adapt to changing socio-cultural contexts, including globalization, urbanization, and migration.

### 6.2. Recommendations for Future Research

1. Comparative Studies: Compare the cultural wealth of the Morakha ethnicity with other ethnic groups in Thailand or neighbouring countries. This comparative approach can highlight unique cultural features, intercultural exchanges, and cultural adaptations.
2. Community-Based Research: Collaborate with the Morakha community members in research

design, data collection, and interpretation of findings. Engaging the community as active participants can ensure culturally sensitive research practices and promote mutual learning and empowerment.

3. Policy and Advocacy Research: Advocate for policies and interventions that recognize and

support Morakha cultural rights, heritage protection, and community development. Research can inform policy recommendations to address cultural preservation, linguistic revitalization, and socio-economic inequalities faced by the Morakha community.

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