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Breaking the Chains of Statelessness: Addressing the Human Rights Challenges Facing Hill Tribes in Thailand

Memutus Rantai Statelessness: Mengatasi Tantangan Hak Asasi Manusia yang Dihadapi Suku Pegunungan di Thailand

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the issue of statelessness and its impact on the hill tribes of northern Thailand, a mix of ethnic groups populating the Thai, Myanmar, and Laos borderlands who are facing significant challenges in accessing basic human rights due to their lack of Thai citizenship. The paper explores the historical context of how the hill tribes came to be stateless, as well as the various obstacles they encounter in obtaining legal recognition as citizens of Thailand. Drawing on academic literature and Thai legislation, this paper argues that the denial of citizenship represents a fundamental violation of human rights. It also emphasizes the secondary rights violations due to various levels of discrimination and marginalization that these groups experience, such as restricted access to education, healthcare, and job possibilities. Finally, the paper considers potential policy solutions that could address the issue of statelessness among the hill tribes. These solutions include reforming citizenship laws to provide greater access to citizenship, as well as implementing programs to promote the inclusion of hill tribe communities in Thai society while also preserving their cultural heritage. Ultimately, the paper argues that addressing the issue of statelessness among the hill tribes is not only a matter of human rights, but also essential for building a more inclusive and equitable society.

ABSTRAK: *Tulisan ini mengkaji kondisi tanpa kewarganegaraan dan dampaknya terhadap suku pegunungan di Thailand Utara, campuran kelompok etnis yang mendiami wilayah perbatasan Thailand, Myanmar, dan Laos yang menghadapi tantangan signifikan dalam mengakses hak asasi manusia karena tidak adanya kewarganegaraan Thailand. Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi konteks historis tentang bagaimana suku pegunungan menjadi tidak memiliki kewarganegaraan, serta berbagai kendala yang mereka hadapi dalam memperoleh pengakuan sebagai warga negara Thailand. Mengacu pada literatur akademis dan Undang-Undang Thailand, tulisan ini berpendapat bahwa penolakan kewarganegaraan merupakan pelanggaran terhadap hak asasi manusia. Tulisan ini juga menekankan pelanggaran hak sekunder karena berbagai tingkat diskriminasi dan marginalisasi yang dialami kelompok-kelompok ini, seperti akses terbatas ke pendidikan, perawatan kesehatan, dan peluang kerja. Terakhir, tulisan ini mempertimbangkan solusi kebijakan potensial yang dapat mengatasi kondisi tanpa kewarganegaraan di antara suku pegunungan. Solusi ini meliputi reformasi undang-undang kewarganegaraan untuk menyediakan akses yang lebih besar terhadap kewarganegaraan, serta menerapkan program untuk mempromosikan inklusi komunitas suku pegunungan dalam masyarakat Thailand sambil melestarikan warisan budaya. Pada akhirnya, tulisan ini berpendapat bahwa menangani kondisi tanpa kewarganegaraan di antara suku-suku pegunungan bukan hanya masalah hak asasi manusia, tetapi juga penting untuk membangun masyarakat yang lebih inklusif dan adil.*

Keywords:
hill tribes; citizenship; statelessness; integration; advocacy

Kata Kunci:
suku pegunungan; kewarganegaraan; kondisi tanpa kewarganegaraan; integrasi; advokasi

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1. Introduction

In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly marked a milestone by adopting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), a pivotal international instrument aimed at addressing the historical injustices faced by indigenous communities and their right to nationality.[1] This comprehensive declaration intricately outlines the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples worldwide. It explores the multifaceted aspects of their existence, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding these rights for their well-being and cultural preservation. UNDRIP further affirms the right of indigenous peoples to maintain and preserve their distinct identities. For many indigenous communities, identity is closely tied to ancestral lands. However, the denial of this recognition by states, as exemplified by the statelessness of hill tribes in Thailand, highlights the complex challenges inherent in global human rights movements.

As highlighted in the June 2022 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the global estimate for stateless persons or individuals of undetermined nationality exceeded 4.3 million. Notably, Thailand is among the nations with one of the highest populations of stateless individuals.[2] According to the UNHCR's Annual Results Report,[3] the stateless population in Thailand increased by 13,000 individuals in 2022 following a surge in refugees from Myanmar after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, bringing the total to 574,000 stateless individuals. The report also notes that 6,000 individuals acquired Thai nationality, while 300 obtained permanent residency during the same period, indicating some progress. However, as observed by Rojo,[4] statelessness in Thailand is often inherited, making the path to citizenship an arduous challenge.

Examining the historical context, it is clear that throughout Thailand's nation-building era, national identity was closely intertwined with Thai Buddhism, language, and residence patterns.[5] Unfortunately, this nation-building process resulted in the exclusion of hill tribes, whose distinct way of life did not conform to these state-defined criteria. This exclusionary approach worsened social inequalities, further marginalizing these ethnic groups and labeling them as "outsiders" within Thai society.[6]

Recognizing the limited research on indigenous identity and statelessness, this paper analyzes the intricacies of legal and policy reforms. It is guided by the central research question: How do legal and policy reforms impact the hill tribes' ability to attain citizenship, safeguard human rights, and preserve their cultural identity? This study examines both the challenges and opportunities these reforms present, aiming to shed light on the identity struggles of hill tribe communities amid restrictive government policies and legal frameworks.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the research methodology, including legal analysis and fieldwork. Section 3 examines the historical evolution of Thai nationality laws, the legal and bureaucratic barriers to obtaining citizenship, and the political and economic implications of nationality policies. Finally, Section 4 presents policy recommendations and concludes the paper.

2. Method

The methodology employed in this study centers on the analysis of data collected from Thai government reports, legal documents, and websites that provide comprehensive information on legal frameworks, policies, and historical context. The primary focus of the research is on the legal frameworks that have shaped the citizenship status of hill tribe members in Thailand. Key sources include legislation such as the Nationality Act B.E. 2508

1 Anna Meijknecht, Bas Rombouts, and Willem Van Genugten, "Stateless Indigenous People(s): The Right to a Nationality, Including Their Own," *Tilburg Law Review* 19, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2014): 98–107, https://doi.org/10.1163/22112596-01902028.every indigenous individual has the right to a nationality. The present paper focuses on the right to a nationality as a 'gateway' to the recognition of a plurality of other rights. Doing so, two issues are given special attention: 1

2 Janepicha Cheva-Isarakul, "'Diagnosing' Statelessness and Everyday State Illegibility in Northern Thailand," *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 1, no. 2 (December 17, 2019): 214–38, https://doi.org/10.35715/SCR1002.112.

3 UNHCR, "Annual Results Report: Thailand Multi Country," 2022, https://reporting.unhcr.org/files/2023-06/Asia%20-%20Thailand%20Multi%20Country.pdf.

4 Magdalena Rojo, "Cause for Hope as Thailand Tackles Statelessness," FairPlanet, 2021, https://www.fairplanet.org/story/thailand-emerges-as-leader-in-eradicating-statelessness/.

5 Joy K Park, John E Tanagho, and Mary E Weicher Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children," *San Diego International Law Journal* 10, no. 2 (2009): 495–554; Daniel B. Ahlquist and Amanda Flaim, "Racialization and the Historical Production of Contemporary Land Rights Inequalities in Upland Northern Thailand," in *Race and Rurality in the Global Economy*, ed. Michaeline A. Crichlow, Patricia Northover, and Juan Giusti-Cordero (State University of New York Press, 2018), 69–91, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18473012.\\uc0\\u8221{} in {\\i{}Race and Rurality in the Global Economy}, ed. Michaeline A. Crichlow, Patricia Northover, and Juan Giusti-Cordero (State University of New York Press, 2018

6 Peter Vandergeest, "Racialization and Citizenship in Thai Forest Politics," *Society & Natural Resources* 16, no. 1 (January 2003): 19–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920309172.

(1965), Acts B.E. 2535 No. 2 and No. 3 (1992), Act B.E. 2551 No. 4 (2008), Act B.E. 2555 No. 5 (2012), and Revolutionary Council Announcement No. 337 (1972).

Additionally, the 1956 national census is a crucial element of this study, as it was part of the government's broader initiative to formalize citizenship through the Household Registration system. This system required individuals and families to register with the government, providing essential details such as names, birth dates, and places of residence. The national census played a pivotal role in collecting demographic data for national planning and development.

The collected data were analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and key insights related to the legal and policy frameworks affecting hill tribe communities. A comparative analysis of different legal acts and amendments was conducted to trace the evolution of citizenship regulations over time. This analysis focused on key elements such as the scope of citizenship criteria, the procedural changes in naturalization, the inclusion or exclusion of hill tribe communities, and the impact of each legal amendment on the recognition and rights of stateless individuals. By comparing these elements across various legal frameworks, the study highlights the shifting legal definitions and policies that have affected the citizenship status of hill tribe members. The findings were then synthesized to form a coherent narrative, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities of statelessness among hill tribes in Thailand. This approach ensures that the research is grounded in a thorough and well-informed analysis of the legal and historical factors influencing the issue.

While this article is primarily based on legal and historical sources, it also incorporates insights from fieldwork conducted in February 2024 with a non-profit organization in Northern Thailand. During this period, I engaged in two weeks of participant observation, working with an organization that supports hill tribe communities, women, and children through various social and economic initiatives. As part of this fieldwork, six individuals were interviewed. Although the primary focus was not nationality laws, certain findings are relevant to this study, particularly in relation to bureaucratic challenges and cultural preservation efforts.

Table 1. Timeline of Thai Nationality Laws and Their Impact

Year	Law	Key Provisions	Impact on Citizenship
1911	Naturalisation Act B.E. 2454	Allowed foreigners to naturalize and obtain dual citizenship.	Aimed to increase the number of Thai subjects, making nationality more inclusive.
1913	Nationality Act B.E. 2456	Established jus soli (citizenship by birth), meaning anyone born in Thailand could become a Thai citizen.	Strengthened birthright citizenship and broadened nationality rights.
1952	Nationality Act B.E. 2495	Restricted jus soli, limiting citizenship by birth. Made dual citizenship impossible for those who had to naturalize. Differentiated between ethnic Thais and non-ethnic Thais.	Marked a major shift towards exclusivity, favoring ethnic Thais and reinforcing nationality restrictions.
1965	Nationality Act B.E. 2508	Defined nationality categories, distinguishing between Thai citizens and "Aliens" (stateless individuals). Section 7bis required at least one parent to be Thai for a child to obtain citizenship.	Excluded many hill tribe members and stateless people from obtaining Thai nationality.
1972	Revolutionary Council Announcement No. 337	Further restricted jus soli, requiring both parents to be either Thai or permanent residents. Applied retroactively, revoking Thai nationality from some individuals.	Left many ethnic minorities stateless, including children born in Thailand to non-Thai parents.
1992	Nationality Act B.E. 2535	Retained the restrictions on jus soli (from 1972).	Continued to prevent children of undocumented migrants or stateless individuals from obtaining citizenship.
2008	Nationality Act B.E. 2551	Allowed individuals born in Thailand before 1992, whose citizenship was revoked or not granted, to apply for Thai nationality, provided they could prove their birth and domicile.	Attempted to restore nationality for some stateless individuals but imposed strict documentation requirements.

Year	Law	Key Provisions	Impact on Citizenship
2012	Nationality Act B.E. 2555	Further amendments to facilitate nationality applications for certain groups.	Minor refinements but did not fully resolve statelessness issues.

This timeline clearly illustrates how Thai nationality laws have evolved from an inclusive system (1911–1913) to more restrictive policies (1952 onward), particularly affecting ethnic minorities, migrants, and hill tribe communities. While recent amendments (2008–2012) attempted to reverse some past exclusions, challenges persist due to bureaucratic barriers and documentation requirements.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Cultural Richness of Thailand Hill Tribes

The hill tribe communities in Thailand represent a mosaic of ethnic groups, constituting the largest minority in the country. Predominantly residing in remote villages in northern Thailand, these communities are known for their cultural diversity and rich heritage.[7] Various linguistic and population groups, such as the Wa, Tibeto-Burman, and Yao-Meo-Pateng, contribute to Thailand's vibrant ethnic landscape.[8] Saihoo's[9] categorization highlights the interconnectedness of these communities. The Wa cluster consists of groups linguistically linked to the Wa population in Burma, the Tibeto-Burman cluster includes the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and potentially Karen communities, and the Yao-Meo-Pateng category comprises the Meo and Yao people. These classifications illustrate the diverse ancestral and kinship ties within the hill tribe communities, emphasizing the complexity and richness of their cultural heritage.

These communities have historically settled in the mountainous and hilly regions of northern Thailand. These areas, relatively isolated from the central plains dominated by the Thai population, have allowed them to maintain traditional lifestyles centered on a subsistence economy, slash-and-burn agriculture, and the harvesting of forest resources.[10] The hill tribes have developed unique cultures and traditions that often differ significantly from those of the dominant Thai population. Their languages, religions, traditional attire, and social structures reflect both their origins and interactions with other cultures in the region.

By the year 2000, hill tribe communities comprised approximately 2% of Thailand's population, totaling around 1.1 million individuals. Ten ethnic groups received official recognition, with ancestral and kinship connections extending to China, Laos, Tibet, and Myanmar.[11]

3.2 Nation Building: Ethnic and Territorial Consolidation

In the pre-modern era, Thailand lacked a centralized governance structure, and its territorial boundaries were not clearly defined, particularly in regions bordering Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. The populations within these territories were diverse, contributing to a decentralized and heterogeneous socio-political landscape.[12] However, during Western colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries, Thailand initiated a process of national unification to protect its sovereignty. This process integrated various ethnic groups and consolidated state control over newly defined borders.[13] It involved administrative reforms, the promotion of the Central Thai language, and the management of natural resources, particularly forests.[14] While these changes strengthened state power, they also created tensions with hill tribe communities by interfering with their traditional rights.

Additionally, the demarcation of borders, influenced by evolving geopolitical dynamics, inadvertently left many hill tribe members in a state of statelessness.[15] As Scott[16] explains, the concept of the nation-state and

7 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."
8 Patya Saihoo, "The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand and The Opium Problem," *Bulletin on Narcotics* 15, no. 2 (1963): 35–45.
9 Saihoo.
10 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."
11 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette; Marcelo Marques Miranda, "The Resurgence of the Heritage of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand in the Aftermath of Development," *Journal of Heritage Management* 4, no. 1 (June 2019): 73–84, https://doi.org/10.1177/2455929619864460.
12 Puangrat Patomsirirak, "Report on Citizenship Law: Thailand" (Global Citizenship Observatory, 2023), https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/75608/RSCAS_GLOBALCIT_CR_2023_01.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
13 Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, "The Thai State and Ethnic Minorities: From Assimilation to Selective Integration," in *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2005), 151–66.
14 Vaddhanaphuti.
15 Micah F. Morton and Ian G. Baird, "From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localisation of a Global Movement in Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (February 2019): 7–31, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463419000031.
16 James C. Scott, "Hills, Valleys, and States: An Introduction to Zomia," in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale Agrarian Studies Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1–39.

the introduction of borders confined many hill people within newly established states, complicating their legal status. Forced migration and the search for refuge in mountainous areas due to conflicts and repression further exacerbated the challenges faced by these ethnic groups.

For a long time, the Thai government paid little attention to these communities, which relied on subsistence farming for domestic consumption.[17] The mountains and forests were perceived as wild territories where the influence of city-based Tai Kingdoms was notably weaker.[18] Although hill tribe communities recognized the authority of lowland officials and the Thai monarchy, they operated autonomously, guided by local leaders, and maintained a degree of independence from government influence until the post-World War II era.[19]

In the mid-20th century, the Thai government began addressing national concerns related to hill tribe communities, driven by issues such as opium production, shifting cultivation practices leading to deforestation, and the influx of migrants escaping extreme poverty, statelessness, and insurgency threats from neighboring countries. However, these efforts often perpetuated derogatory stereotypes, limited hill tribe members' access to citizenship, and reinforced social inequalities.[20] The changing geopolitical landscape, marked by events such as the rise of communism in China and conflicts in Laos and Burma, led the Thai government to implement various policies to manage the presence of hill tribe communities along the border.[21] These policies significantly shaped the socio-political and economic conditions of hill tribe communities, influencing their integration into the broader Thai society while also posing challenges to their traditional ways of life.

3.3 Constructing Thai Identity: Thainess vs. Otherness

This era witnessed a heightened focus on hill tribes, with policies aimed at assimilating them into Thai identity and culture. The Thai government, striving for a homogenous Thai-Buddhist nation as part of broader nation-building efforts following World War II, sought national unity and stability in the face of external threats, particularly the rise of communism in neighboring countries and insurgencies along the borders. The government emphasized a Thai-Buddhist identity as central to political cohesion and security, viewing it as essential for fostering national stability. This vision of a unified Thai identity led to the implementation of policies targeting the cultural assimilation of hill tribes, often placing them under the supervision of the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP).[22] The BPP, responsible for security along extensive land frontiers, required individuals to possess passports or Thai IDs for cross-border movement.[23] Operating within these areas, the BPP gathered intelligence on various operations, contributing to overall border security.[24] Surveillance was employed to monitor cross-border activity, especially in regions with historical incursions, enhancing security efforts.[25]

The cultural disparities and ethnic diversity of hill tribe communities were perceived as potential threats to national stability.[26] Exclusion from broader Thai identity and derogatory stereotypes led to their absence from early state cadastral surveys, with official registration only becoming common in the 1960s.[27]

A significant turning point emerged in 1959 with the introduction of the term "Chao Khao," meaning "highlanders," and the establishment of the Central Hill Tribe Committee (CHTC). These developments signified the government's acknowledgment of hill tribe communities and its intent to address their concerns. However, these efforts were part of a broader societal initiative to assimilate these communities into Thai national identity, influencing perceptions of citizenship and belonging.[28] Over time, the term "Chao Khao" became associated with

17 John McKinnon and Bernard Vienne, *Hill Tribes Today: Problems in Change* (Bangkok: White Lotus Co., Ltd., 1989).

18 Katharine McKinnon, "(Im)Mobilization and Hegemony: 'Hill Tribe' Subjects and the 'Thai' State," *Social & Cultural Geography* 6, no. 1 (February 2005): 31–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/1464936052000335955.

19 Erik Cohen, "Primitive and Remote: Hill Tribe Trekking in Thailand," *Annals of Tourism Research* 16, no. 1 (1989): 30–61, https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(89)90029-7.

20 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."

21 Ueda Satoshi, "National Integrated Education and the Ethnic Identity of Hill Tribes: A Case of the Hmong Tribe in Thailand," *Journal of International Education* 24 (2018): 48–62; Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."

22 Satoshi, "National Integrated Education and the Ethnic Identity of Hill Tribes: A Case of the Hmong Tribe in Thailand"; Morton and Baird, "From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localisation of a Global Movement in Thailand"; McKinnon, "(Im)Mobilization and Hegemony: 'Hill Tribe' Subjects and the 'Thai' State."

23 Barbara Leitch LePoer, ed., *Thailand : A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1989).

24 LePoer.

25 LePoer.

26 Cheva-Isarakul, "'Diagnosing' Statelessness and Everyday State Illegibility in Northern Thailand"; Morton and Baird, "From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localisation of a Global Movement in Thailand."

27 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."

28 McKinnon and Vienne, *Hill Tribes Today: Problems in Change*.

notions of being "non-Thai" and underdeveloped.[29] This trend reflects the Thai state's broader effort to promote a singular, standardized Thai identity based on Central Thai cultural norms.[30] This approach has contributed to the erosion of unique cultural practices, languages, and identities of ethnic minorities.

These stereotypes, rooted in misconceptions, justified limiting access to citizenship and subjected hill tribe members to various "development" initiatives. Systemic challenges persist, with hill tribe members often experiencing discrimination due to their non-"ethnically Thai" status.[31] These derogatory attitudes have reinforced social inequality, relegating hill tribe communities to a "second-class citizen" status in the eyes of certain segments of the ethnic Thai population[32] and labeling them as "outsiders" or the "other within".[33]

3.4 The Legal Construction of Thai Citizenship

The subsequent period witnessed significant efforts to establish and fortify the foundations of a modern nation-state. Although Thailand was never colonized, it came under the influence of Western perspectives on defining nationality and citizenship. Under pressure from the Western world, the Bangkok elite decided to adopt a Thai mono-ethnicity and mono-culture to further emphasize Thainess.[34] To be a Thai citizen was to be ethnically Thai and speak the Thai language.[35] This approach led to a narrow understanding of Thai nationality, excluding certain groups, such as hill tribe communities, from both formal citizenship and national belonging.[36]

To grasp the significance of this transformation, it is crucial to delve more into the concept of nationality. Nationality refers to the legal relationship between an individual and a sovereign state. As stated in the 1997 European Convention on Nationality, nationality and citizenship are legally equivalent, with no distinction between the two terms. The Convention clarifies that nationality does not indicate a person's ethnic origin; rather, it signifies an individual's membership or affiliation with a specific nation, granting them rights and privileges while also subjecting them to the nation's laws and obligations. While nationality can act as a unifying force, bringing diverse populations under a common identity, it also has a dual nature, capable of creating divisions among people who share the same ethnic, religious, or cultural background.[37] A lack of nationality, in essence, results in statelessness, depriving individuals of legal recognition and protection.[38]

Between 1911 and 1952, Thailand underwent significant transformations in its nationality laws. The 1911 Naturalisation Act B.E. 2454 (1911) aimed to increase the number of Thai subjects by allowing foreigners to naturalize and obtain dual citizenship. This was followed by the Nationality Act B.E. 2456 (1913), which established jus soli (citizenship by birth), ensuring that anyone born in Thailand could acquire Thai nationality.[39] However, the Nationality Act B.E. 2495 (1952) marked a fundamental shift in Thailand's citizenship policy. Unlike its predecessors, which were more inclusive of jus soli and dual citizenship, the 1952 Act imposed restrictions, eliminating dual nationality for naturalized individuals while permitting it for those born abroad to Thai parents or children of mixed-nationality parents. Additionally, the Act curtailed the previous acceptance of jus soli, making it much harder for individuals born in Thailand to obtain citizenship solely based on birthplace. This represented a major departure from the previous laws, laying the foundation for more restrictive nationality policies in the decades that followed.[40]

In 1956, a landmark effort to formalize citizenship took shape with the introduction of legislation aimed at registering citizens through a nationwide Household Registration system.[41] However, this initiative unintentionally

29 Christian Erni, ed., *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, Informe IWGIA 3 (Copenhagen/Chiang Mai: IWGIA & AIPP, 2008), https://iwgia.org/images/publications/Concept_of_Indigenous_Peoples_in_Asia_-_Digital.pdf.

30 Ian G. Baird, Prasit Leepreecha, and Urai Yangcheepsutjarit, "Who Should Be Considered 'Indigenous'? A Survey of Ethnic Groups in Northern Thailand," *Asian Ethnicity* 18, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 543–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2016.1268044.

31 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."

32 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette.

33 Vandergeest, "Racialization and Citizenship in Thai Forest Politics."

34 David Streckfuss, "An 'Ethnic'Reading of 'Thai'History in the Twilight of the Century-Old Official 'Thai'National Model," *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 3 (2012): 305–27; Ahlquist and Flaim, "Racialization and the Historical Production of Contemporary Land Rights Inequalities in Upland Northern Thailand."

35 Streckfuss, "An 'Ethnic'Reading of 'Thai'History in the Twilight of the Century-Old Official 'Thai'National Model"; Ahlquist and Flaim, "Racialization and the Historical Production of Contemporary Land Rights Inequalities in Upland Northern Thailand."

36 Patomsirirak, "Report on Citizenship Law: Thailand."

37 Sompong Sucharitkul, "Thai Nationality in International Perspective," in *Nationality and International Law in Asian Perspective*, ed. Sik Ko Swan (Martinus Nijhoff, 1990), 453–91, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004640061_019.

38 Sucharitkul.

39 Patomsirirak, "Report on Citizenship Law: Thailand."

40 Patomsirirak; McKinnon, "(Im)Mobilization and Hegemony: 'Hill Tribe' Subjects and the 'Thai' State."

41 McKinnon, "(Im)Mobilization and Hegemony: 'Hill Tribe' Subjects and the 'Thai' State."

excluded a significant number of hill tribe people, leaving them without official documentation and unnoticed by the authorities.[42] The core of the matter lies in the Nationality Act B.E. 2508 (1965), which outlines the criteria for acquiring citizenship. Section 4 of the Act categorizes individuals into Thai or non-Thai, designating the latter as "Alien", thereby denying them Thai nationality. Section 7 bis further specifies that citizenship is exclusively granted to those with Thai parents, explicitly excluding individuals whose parents entered the country illegally or temporarily. This provision unequivocally ruled out refugees and stateless individuals residing in Thailand.

Moreover, the Revolutionary Council Announcement No. 337 (1972) introduced a limitation on the application of jus soli for acquiring nationality. Before 1972 Thailand's Nationality Act permitted anybody born in Thailand to become a Thai citizen. As a result, according to this national policy, all ethnic minority and Thai children born in Thailand were entitled for citizenship. However, the clause concerning "Alien" individuals persisted, meaning that even if one is born in Thailand, citizenship is denied if their parents lack Thai citizenship or if the parents hold citizenship from another country, then both parents need to hold permanent residency.[43] This policy not only rejected Thai nationality for children born after 1972 but also retroactively, leading to the revocation of nationality.[44] The eligibility for citizenship also varied by province, with many individuals being denied, citing the difficulty of distinguishing between local and foreign hill tribe members due to the continuous influx of ethnic immigrants across the border.[45] This persisted until 1992 when the new Nationality Act B.E. 2535 was enacted, retaining the restriction on jus soli in section 7 bis.[46]

In 2008, amendments to the Nationality Act sought to reverse the 1972 restrictions. Section 23 of the revised law granted individuals born in Thailand before 1992, who had either been denied nationality or had their citizenship revoked, the opportunity to apply for Thai nationality. However, this process required proof of birth and residency in Thailand, as well as a demonstration of good conduct.[47] The complexity of these requirements, compounded by the lack of official documentation among many affected individuals, prevented thousands from reclaiming their citizenship. The last amendments to the Nationality Act were introduced in 2012, continuing efforts to address statelessness while maintaining stringent legal criteria for citizenship acquisition.

3.5 The Role of ID Cards in Thai Society

The examination of citizenship issues extends to the realm of identification cards, a crucial policy with far-reaching implications. The transformation of Thailand's borders and geographical perception occurred in 1939, aligning with the adoption of the Thai racial concept and the renaming of Siam as Thailand.[48] This reshaping was intentional, catering exclusively to a single category of individuals, the Thai.[49] Over the years, highlanders were issued Temporary Household Registration and hill tribe identification cards, with the first identification card launched in 1943 in response to wartime governance demands.[50] In its historical context, the primary purpose of the card was to closely monitor and identify individuals during a period of global conflict.[51]

The identity card, designed with the necessity of security and order in mind, became a critical tool for the Thai government in navigating the problems of war. It was more than just a paper; it was a means for the state to track the movements and activities of its citizens, promoting a sense of security and control. This practice marked the initial steps in the establishment of an official system for documenting and identifying Thai citizens, but this also led to problems. Thailand's state-building process in the early twentieth century tied national identity to Thai Buddhism, language, and monarchy. Being Thai has been associated with a distinct pattern of livelihood and residency since the 1950s and as a result, hill tribes are excluded and marginalized from Thai society due to their lifestyle.[52] Over time, the identification card became a tool of state power, ensuring national loyalty to the

42 Conny Rijken et al., *The Nexus between Statelessness and Human Trafficking in Thailand* (Netherlands: Wolf Legal Publisher, 2015), https://files.institutesi.org/Stateless-Trafficking_Thailand.pdf.
43 Patomsirirak, "Report on Citizenship Law: Thailand."
44 Rijken et al., The Nexus between Statelessness and Human Trafficking in Thailand; Patomsirirak, "Report on Citizenship Law: Thailand."
45 Kesmanee, "Dubious Development Concepts in the Thai Highlands: The Chao Khao in Transition."
46 Rijken et al., The Nexus between Statelessness and Human Trafficking in Thailand; Patomsirirak, "Report on Citizenship Law: Thailand."
47 Rijken et al., *The Nexus between Statelessness and Human Trafficking in Thailand*.
48 McKinnon, "(Im)Mobilization and Hegemony: 'Hill Tribe' Subjects and the 'Thai' State."
49 McKinnon.
50 Janepicha Cheva-Isarakul, "Contextualising Statelessness: Contingent Citizenship and The Politics of (Non)Recognition in Thailand," *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 12, no. 1 (May 2024): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2023.7.
51 Cheva-Isarakul.
52 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,"; Reiner Buergin, "Contested Heritages: Disputes on People, Forests, and a World Heritage Site in Globalizing Thailand" (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, August 2001).

state.[53] These specialized cards imposed strict mobility limitations on highlanders within Thailand, prohibiting travel between provinces without special permission letters.[54] Additionally, the prospect of obtaining a passport or engaging in legal travel beyond the nation's boundaries became an impossibility.

The intricacies of the registration system and the diverse identification cards have further exacerbated the predicament. The imposition of at least 17 different types of ID cards on various immigrant groups since 1967, characterized by random criteria and ideology, has led to a perpetual state of apprehension for individuals holding temporary documents.[55] Over the years, this identification process underwent various changes and refinements. By 2007, the system had become quite intricate, with distinct types of identification and classification for individuals falling under the designation of "Aliens".[56] This multifaceted system aimed to categorize and document individuals based on various criteria related to their status and presence within the country, particularly in border regions.[57] This environment has left them feeling perpetually vulnerable to expulsion,[58] fostering a sense of not belonging anywhere.

3.6 Struggle for Citizenship: Identity and Integration

Both citizenship laws and ID cards have posed significant challenges to the integration and identity of these tribes. The absence of citizenship not only impedes their seamless incorporation into Thai society but also threatens the core of their cultural heritage and well-being.[59] A substantial hurdle in obtaining citizenship for many hill tribe people is the limited access to formal registration processes, stemming from factors such as a lack of knowledge, resources, and, in some cases, discrimination.[60] These people often do not have the documentation, such as birth certificates, that are required to prove their citizenship.[61] This impedes the process of giving citizenship and leaves many highland villages without administration and because of this situation, many are frequently expelled from the country. The issue is paradoxical: people's nationalities cannot be determined without citizenship, yet citizenship cannot be awarded without determining their nationality.[62] These people find themselves in a limbo where is difficult to come out and the cycle will continue to the next generation, affecting mostly children.

The absence of citizenship presents a significant hurdle in the hill tribes' quest for integration within Thai society. The nexus between their statelessness and the gradual loss of their cultural identity becomes apparent, influenced by policies promoting assimilation into mainstream Thai customs, language, and traditions.[63] Herberholz[64] in her study examines the mental health challenges encountered by stateless individuals. The author emphasizes that the respondents, stateless or nationality-less individuals from ethnic minority groups, believe that their lack of official recognition as Thai citizens, along with their ethnic identity, results in various forms of stigma and discrimination. This lack of citizenship leads to negative perceptions and treatment from others in society, manifesting in multiple ways such as social exclusion, derogatory remarks, and unequal access to services and opportunities.

The Thai government launched an integration campaign in 1976 with the objective of bridging cultural and ethnic divides by converting hill tribes into Thai citizens.[65] The policy aimed to raise their standard of living instill loyalty to the Thai nation, provide opportunities for self-improvement, discourage opium cultivation, encourage permanent farming or alternative livelihoods, prevent immigration, foster attachment to their homeland, and train

53 Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Contested Citizenship: Cards, Color, and the Culture of Identification," in *Ethnicity, Borders, and the Grassroots Interface with the State: Studies on Southeast Asia in Honor of Charles F. Keyes*, ed. John A. Marston (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 143–64.
54 McKinnon, "(Im)Mobilization and Hegemony: 'Hill Tribe' Subjects and the 'Thai' State."
55 Laungaramsri, "Contested Citizenship: Cards, Color, and the Culture of Identification."
56 Laungaramsri.
57 Cheva-Isarakul, "Contextualising Statelessness."
58 McKinnon, "(Im)Mobilization and Hegemony: 'Hill Tribe' Subjects and the 'Thai' State."
59 Chusak Wittayapak, "History and Geography of Identifications Related to Resource Conflicts and Ethnic Violence in Northern Thailand," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 49, no. 1 (April 2008): 111–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2008.00364.x.
60 Rojo, "Cause for Hope as Thailand Tackles Statelessness."
61 Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."
62 Kesmanee, "Dubious Development Concepts in the Thai Highlands: The Chao Khao in Transition."
63 Cheva-Isarakul, "'Diagnosing' Statelessness and Everyday State Illegibility in Northern Thailand."
64 Chantal Herberholz, "'We Are Inferior, We Have No Rights': Statelessness and Mental Health among Ethnic Minorities in Northern Thailand," *SSM - Population Health* 19 (September 2022): 101138, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101138.
65 Kesmanee, "Dubious Development Concepts in the Thai Highlands: The Chao Khao in Transition."

them to help with border security.[66] This may not seem too horrible, but it all undermines their distinctiveness and customs.

In 2006, the Ethnic Affairs Institute was founded to address ethnic concerns and attempted to reclassify and integrate hill tribes into Thai society for the purpose of fostering national cohesion.[67] However, the negative perception of hill tribes as potential national threats persists, exacerbating the erosion of traditional values, beliefs, and cultural identity. The confluence of economic changes, access to modern information, and diverse religious influences further compounds these challenges, accentuating the vulnerability of their heritage.

The imminent risk of generational shifts poses a precarious threat to the preservation of hill tribes traditions, artifacts, and culture. As they reside in closer proximity to the broader Thai population, the younger generation faces the risk of gradual assimilation, further distancing them from their ancestral roots. During the Cold War, numerous hill tribes found themselves compelled to undertake migration away from various forested areas, particularly those situated near state borders.[68] These communities took the initiative to relocate their own settlements, choosing both lowland and upland regions for resettlement.[69] This transition is made more difficult by the appeal of metropolitan places, which is motivated by economic prospect, access to modern technology, and the opportunity to attend school, and may erode their spiritual ties and indigenous skills.[70] However, with different initiatives by local organizations a change is being made.

It's also important to acknowledge that there have been significant changes in the concept of Thainess over time. As Tejapira[71] explains, Thainess has evolved from being a fixed and dominant concept in Thai political culture, controlled by the state, to becoming a more flexible and redefined idea. Thainess is no longer solely defined and regulated by the state but has become open to reinterpretation by various social, economic, and cultural groups. What was once considered essential for being recognized as Thai has undergone a transformation, signaling a departure from traditional norms. This shift represents a decentralization of established identity constructs, a reduction in cultural authority, a de-emphasis on national identity as an essential concept, and a liberation of national identity symbols.[72] These changes inevitably lead us to reconsider our perspectives on the evolving concept of the Thai identity and the further inclusion of hill tribes within it.

3.7 Advocating for Rights

Over the years, various movements have emerged in Thailand, advocating for the recognition of the fundamental human right to citizenship. This right encompasses freedom of movement, including the right to relocate and establish a connection to a specific land, enabling individuals to fully participate in the social, economic, and political life of the nation. These appeals for citizenship rights have consistently faced resistance and rejection from the Thai government in the past[73] but now it's starting to change.

A significant development in the early 1990s was the establishment of the "Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association" or IMPECT. IMPECT is a private organization founded in 1991 dedicated to the development of mountain communities, specifically indigenous tribes. The organization focuses on both policy and practical levels with the overarching aim of forming an association that empowers indigenous tribes to leverage the intrinsic value and diverse dimensions of their cultures. The organization has played a crucial role in representing the interests and rights of ethnic minorities, particularly hill tribes. It has been involved in advocating for the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights, education, and cultural preservation. It has also been instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by these communities, including issues related to citizenship, land tenure, and cultural identity. With this organization these communities began to deliberate on

66 Kesmanee.
67 Morton and Baird, "From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localisation of a Global Movement in Thailand."
68 Sakkarin Na Nan, "Resource Contestation between Hunter-Gatherer and Farmer Societies: Revisiting the Mlabri and the Hmong Communities in Northern Thailand," in *Interactions between Hunter-Gatherers and Farmers: From Prehistory to Present*, ed. Kazunobu Ikeya, Hidefumi Ogawa, and Peter Mitchell, Senri Ethnological Studies 73 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2009), 229–46.
69 Nan.
70 Nimonjiya Shu, "From Interaction to Accessing: On Relationship between the Mlabri and the Forest," *Journal of Social Research* 38, no. 1 (2015): 137–70.
71 Kasian Tejapira, "The Postmodernisation of Thainess 1," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, ed. Charles F. Keyes and Shigeharu Tanabe, 0 ed. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 202–27, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315027906.
72 Tejapira.
73 Morton and Baird, "From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localisation of a Global Movement in Thailand."

how to present themselves as both loyal members of the nation-state and active contributors to the international discourse on the rights of indigenous people.[74]

Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, these communities confronted various government initiatives, as I explained, that posed challenges to their traditional ways of life. These initiatives included resettlement programs, restrictions on upland farmlands, and the repatriation of hill tribes from Burma, often classified as illegal migrants.[75] In 1998, representatives from NGOs came together to form The Assembly of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Thailand (AITT).[76] The primary goal of AITT was to advocate for changes in government policies related to land tenure and citizenship status, aligning with the ongoing fight for the rights of indigenous and tribal communities.[77]

During the 2000s, these efforts, thanks to international and Thai based organizations expanded and became more robust, facilitating the acquisition of citizenship for millions of stateless individuals and concurrently recognizing their cultural heritage, traditions, and indigenous identity.[78] These movements persist and grow, driven by the determination of these communities to assert their rights and identity in the face of adversity. One example is the International Justice Mission (IJM), a global organization that, in 2014, helped over 900 hill tribe people obtain citizenship.[79] Moreover, in collaboration with UNHCR and UNICEF, Thailand is engaged in the #IBelong campaign, with a goal to end statelessness by 2024.[80] This initiative aims to provide proper documentation, freedom, services, and protection to stateless individuals, including children. Thailand's efforts to mitigate statelessness were reinforced with the Nationality Act. of 2008, resulting in more than 63,000 stateless individuals obtaining Thai nationality since 2015.[81] Although the set deadline for resolution passed, there are still thousands of stateless individuals in Thailand.

3.8 Cultural Preservation

The hill tribes are among the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in Thai society, living in isolated and difficult environments. Due to their remote location and restricted availability of basic services, these tribes, who mostly depend on farming and handicrafts, face acute poverty and a lack of prospects for both individual and financial development. In addition to being denied citizenship, the hill tribes are unable to demonstrate their ancestry, which keeps them stateless and further marginalizing them within the broader societal framework.[82]

These tribes have a rich background and a unique cultural heritage, that is at risk of being lost because of modernization and assimilation into mainstream Thai society. The Thai government sought to address the issues confronting the hill tribes through a variety of governmental measures. This, however, resulted in increased government intrusion in tribal life and the eventual absorption of tribes into the national society.[83] The hill tribes' practices, material culture, and attitudes gradually changed in settlements that were increasingly exposed to the outside world. Unfortunately, these changes were not always beneficial to the tribes and resulted in economic hardship and cultural loss.

However, there are also efforts underway to preserve the heritage and identity of the hill tribe people, by mostly organizations, and it is important for these efforts to continue in order to ensure that the hill tribe culture is not lost forever. During my fieldwork on the political participation of Indigenous women in Northern Thailand, I worked closely with a non-profit organization that actively supports women and children from different communities, including hill tribes, through various projects and activities. These initiatives support cultural preservation, provide education on domestic violence and gender equality, and create employment opportunities. For instance, they help community members create traditional clothing, which not only generates income but also

74 Morton and Baird.
75 Morton and Baird.
76 Morton and Baird.
77 Morton and Baird.
78 Morton and Baird.
79 IJM, "More Then 900 Hill Tribe People Are Now Thai Citizens-And That's Just the Beginning.," ijm.org, accessed April 16, 2025, https://www.ijm.org/news/more-than-900-hill-tribe-people-are-now-thai-citizens-and-thats-just-the-beginning.
80 United Nations, "The Royal Thai Government, UNHCR and UNICEF Join Forces to Accelerate Progress in Ending Childhood Statelessness," 2023, https://thailand.un.org/en/235857-royal-thai-government-unhcr-and-unicef-join-forces-accelerate-progress-ending-childhood; Cheva-Isarakul, "'Diagnosing' Statelessness and Everyday State Illegibility in Northern Thailand."
81 United Nations, "The Royal Thai Government, UNHCR and UNICEF Join Forces to Accelerate Progress in Ending Childhood Statelessness."
82 Morton and Baird, "From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localisation of a Global Movement in Thailand"; Park, Tanagho, and Gaudette, "Global Crisis Writ Large: The Effects of Being Stateless in Thailand on Hill-Tribe Children,."
83 McKinnon and Vienne, *Hill Tribes Today: Problems in Change*.

fosters cultural exchange and preservation. Such initiatives are crucial for the inclusion and preservation of these communities.

In addressing statelessness, the Thai government has implemented several initiatives to grant legal status and citizenship to marginalized groups, particularly through the Nationality Verification Program. This program aims to verify and confirm the nationality status of individuals who lack legal documentation, allowing those eligible to obtain Thai citizenship.[84] Complementing this effort is the National Strategy on Administration of Legal Status and Rights of Persons (2005), a comprehensive policy designed to identify, register, and provide legal recognition to undocumented individuals, including long-term migrants and hill tribe communities.[85] Under this strategy, those who can prove long-term residence in Thailand may obtain regular immigration status, and their children born in Thailand may be entitled to Thai nationality.

Another significant initiative is the Highland Birth and Citizenship Registration Promotion Project, which trains NGOs to assist hill tribe members in meeting nationality verification requirements. This project has successfully helped nearly half of Thailand's highland population gain recognition as Thai nationals by facilitating legal support and birth registration processes.[86]

Thailand's commitment to the #IBelong campaign, which aims to eradicate statelessness globally by 2024, reflects its dedication to resolving this issue. However, significant challenges remain. According to the UNHCR Report,[87] many hill tribe members still lack citizenship due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of birth records, and local-level discrimination. This situation has been further complicated by large-scale migration events, such as those triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup in Myanmar, which led to a surge in both documented and undocumented arrivals. With the influx of migrants, both legal and irregular, Thailand continues to face difficulties in maintaining accurate records of new arrivals and ensuring that those eligible for citizenship receive proper legal recognition.

As Thailand stands at the crossroads of its citizenship journey, the nation can redefine its approach to inclusivity and identity. By embracing the lessons from its past and leveraging the collective efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations, Thailand can pave the way toward a future where hill tribe communities are no longer burdened by the weight of statelessness.

4. Conclusion

To answer my question about how legal and policy reforms impact the hill tribes' ability to attain citizenship, safeguard human rights, and preserve their cultural identity, this article has argued that these reforms play a critical role in shaping the lives of hill tribe communities in Thailand. The legal sphere has deeply affected hill tribe communities, and historical events like colonization, border demarcation, migration, war, and even recent challenges like COVID-19 have only compounded their struggles to maintain their status. However, despite these significant challenges, there is hope on the horizon, and things are slowly changing for the better.

Various solutions can address the complex challenges faced by these communities. The first solution involves the reform of citizenship laws. Recognizing the intricacies of the existing legal framework, a promising strategy is to revise these regulations. Adopting birthright citizenship (jus soli) similar to the United States, without the concept of "Alien" described in the Nationality Act. (1965), rather than solely relying on family ties (jus sanguinis), might be an effective approach. This shift could be especially beneficial in a country like Thailand, where a significant proportion of individuals are stateless, despite having lived there for generations. Currently, Thailand does not fully utilize birthright citizenship, and its reliance on jus sanguinis, combined with administrative barriers, often leaves many people without legal recognition or access to rights. While Thailand has made efforts to address statelessness, including registration programs for stateless individuals, the system remains complicated, and many people continue to lack formal citizenship. Adopting a more inclusive framework would help ensure that no one remains in a state of "without identity", while also ensuring fair access to citizenship and fundamental rights. The intricacies of the current system underscore the need for substantial changes to address the issue of statelessness comprehensively.

84 Suchada Thaweesit and Bongkot Napaumporn, "Integration of Minorities in Thailand," in *Thailand Migration Report*, ed. Jerrold W Huguet and Aphichat Chamratrithirong (Thailand: International Organization for Migration, 2011), 131–44, https://reliefweb.int/attachments/6d38c502-daaa-3ae7-956f-634db07794a4/TMR-2011.pdf.

85 Thaweesit and Napaumporn.

86 Thaweesit and Napaumporn.

87 UNHCR, "Annual Results Report: Thailand Multi Country."

The second solution involves addressing statelessness. Despite the prevailing challenges, it is critical to recognize Thailand's progress in tackling this issue. Under Thai law, any child born in Thailand can be registered at birth and obtain a birth certificate, which enables them to access healthcare and education services, even in the absence of formal legal status (UN, 2023). However, as previously mentioned, the situation is more complex than it appears. Thailand is not a party to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which means the country is not legally bound by the international standards set to prevent and reduce statelessness. As a result, stateless individuals in Thailand may face prolonged uncertainty and lack of legal protections, as the country is not legally obligated to ensure they acquire nationality or take concrete steps to prevent statelessness. To make meaningful progress, Thailand must intensify its efforts, streamline bureaucratic processes, and ensure more consistent implementation of existing laws and policies. Additionally, greater outreach and support programs are essential to assist stateless individuals in navigating the legal system and securing their rights.

The third solution revolves around preserving cultural heritage and promoting inclusivity. The hill tribes' delicate interaction between identity and inclusion embodies the complex web of issues originating from their stateless status. Cultural identity loss, assimilation policies, shifting economic landscapes, and generational shift all contribute to their battle for recognition and preservation. Despite these challenges, many hill tribe people are working to preserve their identity. Some have established cultural and educational centers, where they can teach traditional customs and practices to the next generation. Additionally, there are also organizations and NGOs working to promote and protect the rights of hill tribe people, and to raise awareness about the importance of preserving their heritage and identity, for example the Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand (AFECT) and The Karen Hilltribes Trust (KHT).

In conclusion, the path to citizenship for the hill tribe communities of Thailand is paved with formidable obstacles and heartening progress. The complexity of citizenship eligibility, which is characterized by historical intricacy and bureaucratic classification, highlights the requirement for revised legislative frameworks. A future that is more inclusive and fairer is possible thanks to progress, which is reflected in legislation changes and cooperative campaigns. However, the relationship between citizenship, identity, and integration is still complex as communities work to preserve their cultural heritage in the face of changing surroundings. Ultimately, this article serves as a reminder that citizenship is not merely a legal status, but a cornerstone of human dignity, recognition, and belonging that must be extended to all members of a diverse society.

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