

Ethnic Identity through Textile: The Case Study of Tai Lue of Phayao Province, Thailand and Tai Aiton of Assam, India

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Abstract

“Tai” refers to people who speak Tai language, and share similarity on culture and beliefs, Tais settle down in Southern China, Southeast Asia, and Northeast India. In this paper tries to study the textile of Tai Lue and Tai Aiton. Tai Textile reflects the ethnic identity among both of Tai groups through its motif and its color. This study uses participant observation and group interview for collecting the data. The study shows that both Tai groups use their dresses as the ethnic identity. Gender role plays an important role in textile activities, while the women have to know the process of weaving and men have to help in making weaving instrument. Both Tai groups still maintain the norm that women have to know how to weave that defines as a good woman. Thus, Textile is not only the tool of showing ethnic identity, but it reflects the socialization and the division of labor in the community.

Index Terms—Tai, Tai Lue, Tai Aiton, Tai Textile, Ethnic Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Dress is one of the necessary things in one's life. Dress is used for covering the body and representing the aesthetic sense of human beings and identity. Tai people use their dresses for representing their identities as some of the Tai group usually mention the color of their dress in their last word of the Tai group names to identify their own ethnic identity for example, Tai Dam which means Tai who wears black (Dam), Tai Khao or the Tais who wear white etc.

Tai people live scattered in Southern part of China, Southeast Asia, and Northeast India. Tai people are the people who speak Tai language. Tai people may not share the same original place, but they have common culture such as belief system, *Khwan* belief, common Tai language, Wet- rice culture, *Muang* and *Ban* system, textile, food, house structure et [1][10]. This study selected Tai Lue of Phayao Province, Thailand and Tai Aiton of Assam, India as the case study of textile through the concept of ethnic identity.

Weaving culture among the Tais is almost found in every Tai village in Southern China, Southeast Asia, and Northeast India. Weaving process starts with the knowledge of planting cotton, sericulture, and the tradition of weaving. Therefore, the process of weaving is not only a woman work, but it's a division of labor. While the Tai women acquire their weaving skill, Tai men also acquire how to plant the cotton and sericulture or learning how to make a weaving equipment or making a handloom. The division of labor among the Tai people reflects that Tai people learn their gender role through the weaving activity. Moreover, the textile reflects how Tai people observe the environment around them until they can create their own group pattern of the textile. Later, the pattern of textile and the harmonious of color become one of ethnic identity to identify each of Tai groups.

Tai Lue people in Phayao province, Thailand, have colorful dress and the famous pattern of Tai Lue are “ลายน้ำไหล[Dribbling Water]”, “ลายผักแว่น[Water Fern]”, “ลายหางปลา [Fish Tail]”, “ลายผีเสื้อ [Butterfly]”, “ลายลูกเต๋า [Dice]”, “ลายดาว [Star]”, “ลายผ้าคำท้าว [Tam Khoaw]”. Tai Aiton people have the colorful dress. The famous pattern of Tai Aiton are “Flower” and “Leaves”.

II. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The researchers had selected two areas for the case study which are Tai Lue of Ban Sanphulei, Phayao province, Thailand and Tai Aitons of Banlung Mantai. Karbi Anglong District, Assam, India. This paper is based on field observation and group interviewing. Review literature is also read to understand the history of both Tai groups.

The researcher used participant observation and group interview for data collection. In the cast study of Tai Lue at Ban Sanphulei, Payao province, Thailand, the researchers collected data at Ban Sanphulei village, northern part of Thailand. The village is far from Muang District, Payao province 85 kilometers and 14 kilometers far from Chiang Kham district. The researchers found that not only Tai Lues who live here but also Tai Yuans and Thai Isan. Therefore, the diversity of the village can reflect the ethnic identification through Tai Lue's dress and Tai Lues can preserve their own culture through the Tai Lue women organization in the village. For, Tai Aiton at Banlung Mantai, Karbi Anglong District is far from the Golaghat-Saoupathar road at least kilometers and another way that can also reach to village is through Dhansiri river. The village is called as *Bargaon* in Assamese language and in Tai Aiton is called as “Banlung Mantai”. (Banlung means big village and Mantai means people who use Tai language) In Tai Aiton village,

there is 'Banlung Mahila' group or women organization of Banlung which takes care of all the functions and economic activities in the village including the textile. Thus, the group interview was conducted through the Banlung Mahila group.

III. BACKGROUND OF TAI LUES

Northern part of Thailand connects with Myanmar and China through Mekong River. Tai Lues have been living in Phayao province 200 years ago. They live in Chiang Kham District and Chiang Muan District. Tai Lue people migrated from *Xishuangbanna* in Southwestern China around two hundred years ago [11]. The story of Tai Lues mentioned in *Pongsawadarn Naan* that in 1812, *Chaoluang* Sumondhevaj defeated many towns such as La, Pong, Chiang Khweang and Luang Phuka. Later, he brought 6,000 people from those towns and later, in 1853 *Chao* Suriyapong Ritdej defeated some towns in Xishuangbanna and brought back the Dais people from there to Lanna kingdom [1][10][11][12].

Tai Lues in Phayao have been living in Phayao with Tai Yuan of Kon Muang for one hundred thirty-six years ago. Those day Tai Lues were settling down all over northern part of Thailand. As the researcher mentioned about the war in 1853 at Xishuangbanna. Tai Lues settled down nearby Yom River at first. Later, they shifted to many places in Chiang Rai and Phayao because the density of population. Basically, Tai people always settle down nearby the river and mountain because their lives attach with agriculture. In 1888 Tai Lues already lived in Chiang Kham district and Chiang Muan district, Phayao. The original land of Tai Lues at Phayao are in Pong, Yuan, Mang, Yang, Ngen and Chiang Kam, thus, Tai Lues use those origin home names as their village names such as Ban Yuan, Ban Mang etc [2].

IV. ETHNIC IDENTITY AND TAI TEXTILE

Ethnic identity concept will help the researcher to understand about ethnic maintenance and how the Tais maintain their ethnic identity through language, festival, wet-rice cultivation culture, dress, textile, etc. Ethnic identity refers to a person's social identity within a larger context based on membership in a cultural or social group [6]. Ethnic identity is the subset of identity. Ethnic identity development includes the identity formation in an individual's self-categorization in, and psychological attachment to, ethnic group. Ethnic identity is characterized as part of one's overarching self-concept and identification [7][13].

V. BACKGROUND OF TAI AITONS

Banlung Mantai village is established in the late of nineteenth century and there is no exact record of the first settlement of the village. As the oral history said, "Banlung was very big village during the year of 1920-1940". Tai Aitons from Banlung had to migrate from Banlung to Namsai in Arunachal Pradesh, Banhin, Ahomoni and Ban Sai, Balipartha because of the density of people. Nowadays, Tai Aitons from Banlung still have many relatives in those places. [2]

Edward Gait [8] mentioned that Tai Aitons came to Assam in the eighteen centuries in 1791. Jaya Buragohain [9] wrote that Tai Aiton village in Bargaon established in 1835. There are 8 villages of Tai Aiton in Assam; 1. Banlung Mantai or Bargaon 2. Ban Hin or Ahomani 3. Ban Sa or Balipartha 4. Chakihola 5. Kalioni 6. Barhola 7. Dubarani 8. Tengani and one village in Arunachal Pradesh, is called Jonapather.

Tai Aiton village in Assam settle down in the middle of Dhansiri valley. The migration of Tai Aitons were told in *Lik Khu Mung* (written accounts) that Aitons migrated from upper Chindwin valley in Burma when *Alungpaya* made war with many tribes for his conquer. The original homeland that mentioned in *Lik Khu Mung* was *Mong Hi Mong Ham* and then they migrated to *Mung Kwang* and migrated to Assam or *Mung Nun*. The name of Tai Aiton is from two words, Tai as they called themselves and Aiton comes from 2 words in Tai; Ai means the first, Ton or Don or Doi means higher place so the meaning of Aiton is 'Superior'. [8][9]

VI. WEAVING TRADITION AMONG THE TAIS

Most of the Tai groups is Maternal lineage. There is a proverb in Tai "Tai women weaves, Tai men are blacksmiths". This proverb reflects that Tai people have a clear-cut gender role in their societies. As Tai women are the cloth producers and the belief system and the matrilineage system that has the line of descent traced through the maternal side of the family that fixes women to have a weaving knowledge. Tai women are the cloth producer, she has to weave all the cloths for all family members for her husband, children and herself. The weaving process makes Tai women stick with the house. The concept of weaving for Tai women is more like fixing their status and duty with the role of mother. Therefore, her dresses and the knowledge of weaving reflect the ethnic identity [2] [3].

The knowledge of planting cotton is the first step of weaving process, especially Tai Lues. Tai Lues have the song that shares the yearly activity in the song which is called "KamKub 12 Doen", in the song says that the first month of the year, all Tai women would spin cotton thread together, the second month, Tai women would prepare for the loom, third month, they would prepare for the equipment, fourth month, elder people would prepare for coloring the thread, fifth month, prepare for the equipment, sixth month, it's the Songkran time, seventh month, the first time of the year for cultivation, eighth month, plowing time, ninth month is for the rice-cultivation, tenth month, all Tai women would be busy with the rice-cultivation, eleventh month, it's the good time for waiting the rice to grow and twelfth month, the cotton flowers are ready for harvesting [2][4][5].

(Thai Language) "คำขวัญ 12 เดือน
เดือนเจียงท่านว่าเป็นเดือนฮ้าย
สาวบั้นเคี้ยวอยู่กลางลานบ้านร่วมกัน
เดือนฮ้ายน้ำค้างพร่างพรอมยามเดือนมืด
สาวเจ้าก็ขึ้นถ้อยเตรียมลูกทอลายผ้า
เดือนสามไม่มีใครวางคำข้อดี
เดือนสี่เอยผู้เฒ่าเฝ้าหมอน้ำหมักไม่จับก็ผิวปาก
เดือนห้าเอยมีดพร้าคมกล้าที่เข้าครั้งกับด้ามไม้รัศมีกลอน
เดือนหกเอยท่านถึงยามส่งกรานตัดคอกแต่งเครื่องประดับ
เดือนเจ็ดเอยปลาหมอนขึ้นแม่น้ำออกไขที่คอนทราย
เดือนแปดเอยฟ้าฟ้ารวมวันร้องถึงเวลาโดนา
เดือนเก้ามาถึงแล้วท่านาคอเนื้อ
เดือนสิบสาวเจ้าจักถือมีดถือจอบไปยังไร่
เดือนสิบเอ็ดห้องฟ้าสกลสาวน้ำหยดบนใบคอง
เดือนสิบสองคอกฝ้ายผลิบานแตกช่อกลางไร่
นางเจ้าค้อยเอากระบุงกระกร้าไปบรวจรูหามมายังบ้าน
แสงสีห้าน้ำเจ้าอ้ายเกยจคร้าน จงหมั่นขยันเตรียมทอผ้าเถิด" [4][5]

According to the song, Tai women are busy with household activity. Weaving process and agriculture in every year. When Tai woman as a kid, she has to be socialised by the members in her family to learn how to cook and weave, especially her grandmother and mother. She would start learning be become as her mother's assistance and later on, she would do by herself. All the female members or relatives would love to guild her. For the weaving work, Tai girl would learn how to weave in a very small scale such as she would weave Tai bag or *Thung-Yaam* and then she would learn how to stitch. Tai women will start weaving with "*Pha Hum*" is the basic pattern and then they can move to another difficult patterns.

The cloths for religious activities have been taught for all Tai women such as *Tung* or flag, or monk robe also. The weaving is not just for Tai identity but also it shows the bonding between mother and son, because as a mother, she has to weave the monk robe for her own son.

The weaving process reflects the value of Tai women, in the past, if a woman did not know how to weave, she was not qualify for "a good woman" in Tai norm but nowadays, this norm has changed because of capitalism. Tai cloths and ready-made cloths are available in the market. On the other hand, if some women could weave neatly and beautifully, she would be admired by many men in the village. Her works would be shown by her own wrap skirt. Normally Tai women wear wrap skirt which she made it by herself to all festival[2].

Moreover, Tai men and Tai women also use cloths as the gift. If Tai woman falls in love with some man in the village, she would love to weave for him as a gift. *Pha-Toom* or scarf usually is a gift for Tai man from Tai woman. In the time of wedding, Tai women have to prepare mattress, pillows, bedsheets, mosquito net and curtain by herself for starting her own family or for the groom's family.

Weaving culture among the Tais is not only for using purpose but also it can show Tai identity through the pattern of the cloths and behind that weaving process innate all knowledge and gibe some value of Tai women[2].

VII. MOTIFS AND DESIGNS

Tai Lues

The motifs and designs of Tai Lues created from the techniques of weaving. The color of thread that is used in each cotton cloths creates meaning and motifs from the environment, mythology and imagination. There is a folktale among the Tai Lues told that long ago, one angel is born as a

dog, that dog is a powerful and dangerous dog. One day that dog killed all men in the village and get all women as his wives, if any women deliver baby as a boy he will kill them all. One day, one of his wives delivered a baby boy later on she hides the boy from the dog. Once the boy grows up, he killed the dog and finally that dog died. All the women in that village cried and used their own wrap skirt cleaned all the blood. That is why Tai Lue women have to wear the red wrap skirt and it has the dripping water motif on their wrap skirt [2].

1. Dribbling Water Motif



2. Water Fern motif



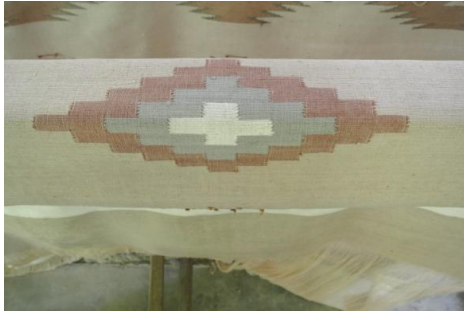
3. Fish Tail motif



4. Butterfly motif



5. Dice motif



6. Star motif



7. Tam Khaow motif

**Tai Aiton**

In Tai Aiton village, the researchers found only flower motif that Tai Aiton women usually use in their wrap skirt.

Flower motif

**CONCLUSION**

The colorful harmonious motifs from both of Tai groups are unique and it can identify obviously the Tai groups. The colors and motifs reflect cultural and ethnic identity for both Tai groups. For Tai Lue people in Payao province, Thailand, have colorful dress and the famous motifs of Tai Lue are “Dribbling Water”, “Water Fern”, “Fish Tail”, “Butterfly”, “Dice”, “Star”, “Tam Khoaw” and “flower”. Tai Aiton people have the colorful dress. The famous motif of Tai Aiton are “Flower” and “Leaves”

The weaving process from both groups also reflects the idea of gender role, division of labor and it can show the status of women in Tai society that women have her own value and status through her weaving activity.

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