



## Language Situation of Tai Dam in the Northern Part of Thailand and an Approach in Building Cooperation with the Communities in Language Maintenance<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This research article aims to present the study of language situation of the Tai Dam ethnic group in the lower northern part of Thailand and an approach in building cooperation with the communities in language maintenance. Research data had been collected from all 9 provinces in the lower northern part by surveying, observing, participating and interviewing. The results show that there are at least 145 Tai Dam villages located in seven provinces. The Tai Dam people in this region still speak their own language and strongly maintain traditional practices. This ethnic group speaks Tai Dam and doing cultural practices in opportunities such as daily life, social events, social club meetings and social media. They have the positive attitude toward and even are proud of their own language & culture. Importantly, the Tai Dam people themselves have been efficiently preserving their language & culture with principles such as “performing to be watched”, “living to be seen” and “training to be able to”, including strategies such as “behaving”, “demonstrating”, “teaching & training”, “holding”, “building”, “campaigning”, “publicizing” and “studying”. Therefore, an approach in making cooperation with the Tai Dam communities in language & culture maintenance could be achieved by supporting and enhancing their current ways as such.

**Keywords:** Tai Dam ethnic group, language situation,  
language & culture maintenance.

## Introduction

Tai Dam (Black Tai) is a Tai ethnic group whose language is a member of the Tai-Tai language family which is closely related to Laotian and Standard Thai (Suwilai Premasri et al. 2004). In the (lower) northern part of Thailand, this ethnic group is also called “Tai Song Dam” (black-suit Tai) officially, “Song” by the Tai Dam people themselves, and “Lao Song” by the Thai people in this region.



Figure 1: Tai Dam ethnic group in the northern part

The northern Tai Dam people have migrated from the central part of Thailand for more than a hundred years ago (Aphinwat Phosan, 2009). Historically, Phichet Saiphan (2011) provides that the people have forcibly migrated from their home land, Thaeng or Điện Biên Phủ in the present, in the north of Vietnam for about 230 years. Later, with a strong desire to move back home, they then moved northward by feet and carts (Aphinwat Phosan, 2009). Many historical studies indicate that they could move as far as Phichit and Phitsanulok provinces. Phettabong Singlokham (2005) and Phettabong Phaisune (2010), as well as, the interviewing of Mr. Fang Sontoem, a Tai Dam, on 30/3/2015 show that some of them moved further and entered Laos. There, some settled down around Vientiane (the capital of Laos at the present time) and some were able to go further to their home land. Later on, this group moved back to Thailand again and settled down at Ban Na Pa Nad, Chiang Khan District, Loei province.

Nowadays, there are about 5.5 Tai Dam people around the world. About 3 millions are in Vietnam, 1.5 millions are in Thailand, 1 millions are in Laos, 20 thousand are in France, the United States, Canada and Australia and the rest (a little bit) are in the south of China, the original land before Tai Dam moved to Vietnam. They still contact and visit each other no matter where they are (Phettabong Phaisune, 2010).

Since Tai Dam is a minority group in Thailand whose traditional practices and belief are quite different from those of the majority such as the Thai people surrounding them, the language & culture are endangered and thus need to be preserved with the belief that the best way to carry on multi-culture communities is to make the minority right stronger and durable. In the last decade, a number of studies are devoted to linguistic aspects; for instant, Unchalee Singnoi et all (2003) on Thai-Song Dictionary, Supatra Jirananthanaporn et all (2004) on a grammatical system in Tai Dam, Supatra Jirananthanaporn (2007) on a comparison of simple clauses between Thai and Tai Song, Somsonge Burusphat (2013) on phonological variation and change in Tai Dam, Patama Phatphong (2013) on the textual data management of Tai Dam, and Burusphat (2014) on plant-based numeral classifiers in Tai Dam. However, there is no survey research directly conducted on language situation and approaches to language maintenance.

Methodologically, this research paper aims to find the language situation of the Tai Dam ethnic group in the northern part of Thailand and an approach in building cooperation with the community in language maintenance. The research design was of multi-methods such as survey, observation, participation, and in-dept interview. The setting was the lower northern part of Thailand locating 9 provinces such as Phitsanulok, Sukhothai, Kamphaeng Phet, Nakhon Sawan, Uthai Thani, Phicit, Phetchaboon, Uttaradit and Tak. A number of Tai Dam leaders such as village heads, folk philosophers, activists and other knowledgeable people constituted the study population. Data are facts and statistics collected together for reference or analysis.

## Language Situation

The Tai Dam language situation in the lower northern part can be

discussed in a number of aspects such as settlement, language & culture existence, language-use opportunities, attitude toward their own language, and the trend of language continuity.

### 1. Settlement

Having a trip from Phetchaburi and other nearby provinces by feet and carts (Aphinwat Phosan 2009), a group of Tai Dam people have settled down in the lower northern part of Thailand. The research survey reveals that, at least, there are 145 Tai Dam villages (not including villages in which there are Tai Dam people who have moved there for the reason of marriage) locating in 7 provinces; namely, Phitsanulok, Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, Kamphaeng Phet, Sukhothai, Phetchaboon and Uthai Thani. Most of the villages, about 38 %, are in Phitsanulok. A smaller number locate in Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, and Kamphaeng Phet respectively. Only a few villages are found in Sukhothai, Phetchaboon and Uthai Thani. The numbers of Tai Dam villages are shown in the following figure.

| Provinces      | Number of Tai Dam villages |            |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------|
|                | Frequency                  | Percentage |
| Phitsanulok    | 55                         | 37.93      |
| Phichit        | 36                         | 24.83      |
| Nakhon Sawan   | 24                         | 16.55      |
| Kamphaeng Phet | 22                         | 15.17      |
| Sukhothai      | 5                          | 3.45       |
| Phetchaboon    | 2                          | 1.38       |
| Uthai Thani    | 1                          | .69        |
| <b>total</b>   | <b>145</b>                 | <b>100</b> |

Figure 2: numbers of Tai Dam villages in the lower northern part

Most of the Tai Dam villages are lead by Tai Dam village heads. Only a number of villages where there are some Thai people living together are interchangeably governed by Thai village heads.

## 2. Language & Culture Existence

From the observation and in-dept interviews, the Tai Dam people in all the 145 villages, especially older people, still keep on speaking their own language, Tai Dam, as well as continue their traditional belief and practices. It is agreeably said by a number of Tai Dam village heads and other leaders that the reason why they are still able to maintain their own language & culture among Thai people who are Buddhists is that they strongly believe in and worship spirits. They usually worship and feed good spirits in every ceremonies. They then prefer to live among their own so that they might not look strange to the Thai people. Even though they have to live with Thai people in the same villages, they prefer performing their traditional activities separately from the Thai people.

### 2.1. Some Language Characteristics

Phonologically, there are twenty consonants, eighteen vowels and six tones in the Tai Dam language spoken in the lower northern part, as respectively shown in figure 3, 4 and 5 below.

| Manners    |                         | Places | Bilabial       | Labio-dental | Alveolar       | Palatal | Velar          | Glottal |
|------------|-------------------------|--------|----------------|--------------|----------------|---------|----------------|---------|
| Plosive    | Voiced                  |        | b              |              | d              |         |                |         |
|            | Voiceless, Un-aspirated |        | p              |              | t              |         | k              | ʔ       |
|            | Voiceless, Aspirated    |        | p <sup>h</sup> |              | t <sup>h</sup> |         | k <sup>h</sup> |         |
| Fricative  |                         |        |                | f            | s              |         |                | h       |
| Affricate  |                         |        |                |              |                | tc      |                |         |
| Nasal      |                         |        | m              |              | n              | ɲ       | ŋ              |         |
| Lateral    |                         |        |                |              | l              |         |                |         |
| Semi-vowel |                         |        | w              |              |                | j       |                |         |

Figure 3: Tai Dam consonants in the lower northern part

|      | Front (unrounded) |      | Central (unrounded) |      | Back (rounded) |      |
|------|-------------------|------|---------------------|------|----------------|------|
|      | Short             | Long | Short               | Long | Short          | Long |
| High | i                 | i:   | ɨ                   | ɨ:   | u              | u:   |
| Mid  | e                 | e:   | ə                   | ə:   | o              | o:   |
| Low  | ɛ                 | ɛ:   | a                   | a:   | ɔ              | ɔ:   |

Figure 4: Tai Dam vowels in the lower northern part

| Tonal Morphemes          | Symbols | Examples                  |
|--------------------------|---------|---------------------------|
| low level : 22           | ˉ       | /tèn/ 'to be short'       |
| mid level : 33           | ø       | /nok/ 'bird'              |
| low-rising : 23          | ˊ       | /təɔ̌:ŋ/ 'to be diligent' |
| mid-rising : 35          | ˊ       | /kʰá:t/ 'to be torn'      |
| high-falling : 42        | ˆ       | /pô:m/ 'to be ready'      |
| mid-rising-falling : 343 | ˊˆ      | /kʰūj/ 'to talk'          |

Figure 5: Tai Dam tones in the lower northern part

The Tai Dam ethnic group have their own alphabets whose letter shapes look similar to the Lao and/or Thai alphabets. However, the alphabet system is not widely used nowadays: it is available only in course books and taught in Tai Dam classes held in a number of Tai Dam culture centers in this region. The Tai Dam alphabet system is illustrated below.

1) Each consonant letter has high and low form, indicating high and low tones.

| Phonemes | Low Alphabets | High Alphabets | Phonemes | Low Alphabets | High Alphabets |
|----------|---------------|----------------|----------|---------------|----------------|
| b        | ✓             | w              | s        | x             | ร              |
| d        | ဂ             | ၣ              | h        | ဟ             | စ              |
| p        | ✓             | ၣ              | tə       | ၣ             | ၣ              |
| t        | ၣ             | ၣ              | m        | ၣ             | ၣ              |
| k        | ၣ             | ၣ              | n        | ၣ             | ၣ              |
| ʔ        | ၣ             | ၣ              | ŋ        | ၣ             | ၣ              |
| pʰ       | ၣ             | ၣ              | ŋ        | ၣ             | ၣ              |
| tʰ       | ၣ             | ၣ              | l        | ၣ             | ၣ              |
| kʰ       | ၣ             | ၣ              | w        | ၣ             | ၣ              |
| f        | ၣ             | ၣ              | j        | ✓             | ✓              |

Figure 6: Tai Dam consonant alphabets

2) Additional consonant symbols are customarily added for specific words such as ‘one’, ‘human’ and ‘repeat/ditto’.

| Symbols          | Examples          |
|------------------|-------------------|
| ๗ ‘one’          | ๗๖๖ ‘one hundred’ |
| ๗ ‘human’        | ๗๗๗ ‘stranger’    |
| ๗ ‘repeat/ditto’ | ๗๗ ๗ ‘lively’     |

Figure 7: Tai Dam additional consonant symbols

3) Vowels are indicated using diacritics appearing above, below or to the left and/or right of the consonant letters.

| Phonemes | Alphabets | Examples                     | Phonemes | Alphabets | Examples                 |
|----------|-----------|------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------------|
| i        | ˆ         | ๗๗ /wɪn/ ‘piece’             | a:       | ˉ         | ๗๗ /tāːŋ/ ‘rout’         |
| i:       | ˆ         | ๗ /sɪː/ ‘color’              | u        | ˘         | ๗๗ /lün/ ‘back’          |
| e        | ˙         | ๗๗ /ʔəm/ ‘mother’            | u:       | ˘         | ๗๗ /süː/ ‘you’           |
| e:       | ˙         | ๗๗ /tẽːŋ/ ‘time’             | o        | ˘         | ๗๗ /tók/ ‘to fall’       |
| ɛ        | ˙˙        | ๗๗ /mɛn/ ‘to be right’       | o:       | ˘         | ๗๗ /tõː/ ‘body’          |
| ɛ:       | ˙˙        | ๗๗ /kʰɛːn/ ‘reed mouthorgan’ | ɔ        | ˘         | ๗๗ /tɔj/ ‘to punch’      |
| ɨ        | ˘         | ๗๗ /kʰɨn/ ‘to go up’         | ɔ:       | ˘         | ๗๗ /tɔː/ ‘pipe’          |
| ɨ:       | ˘         | ๗๗ /kʰɨː/ ‘to resemble’      | ia       | ˘         | ๗๗ /kian/ ‘to be smooth’ |
| ə        | ˙         | ๗๗ /ŋən/ ‘money’             | ia       | ˙         | ๗๗ /hian/ ‘house’        |
| ə:       | ˙         | ๗๗ /tõːn/ ‘to remind’        | ua       | ˙         | ๗๗ /tʰua/ ‘bean’         |
| a        | aj        | ๗๗ /hāj/ ‘small jar’         | ai       | ˙         | ๗๗ /wāi/ ‘heart’         |
|          | aw        | ๗๗ /tāw/ ‘turtle’            |          |           |                          |
|          | am        | ๗๗ /wām/ ‘bruise’            |          |           |                          |
|          | an        | ๗๗ /kǎn/ ‘together’          |          |           |                          |
|          | aC        | ๗๗ /bǎŋ/ ‘shield’            |          |           |                          |

Figure 8: Tai Dam vowel alphabets

4) Tones are indicated by two symbols

|                | No Mark                | ˊ                     | ˋ                        |
|----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Low Alphabets  | ດິນ /din/ 'soil'       | ທົ່ນ /há:n/ 'goose'   | ໄຂ້ /sáj/ 'intestines'   |
| High Alphabets | ຈັ້ນ /jɛ:n/ 'to stand' | ຈົ່ນ /ja:n/ 'to walk' | ແຈ້ວ /hêw/ 'animal trap' |

Figure 9: Tai Dam tonal alphabets

As an isolating language like other Tai languages, including the central Thai, word compounding is the typical methodology that best displays Tai Dam morphological and lexical aspects (Unchalee Singnoi, 2005). It not only reveals how this ethnic group mainly creates new words for new things, actions or ideas but also well reflects the Tai Dam world view (how they see the world around them) and culture (what they traditionally do in living their lives and in their communities). Word compounding in Tai Dam is mainly performed within two main methods: syntactic and semi-syntactic. In general, compound words in the syntactic type display syntactic and semantic relations just like those of clause and phrase constructions, as shown below.<sup>3</sup>

- (1) *mǎ:-se:n-hīan* (subject/agent – verb/action – object/patient)  
expert-worship-house  
'house-spirit worshipping expert'
- (2) *dàj-jǐ:n* (verb/main – verb/complement)  
get-turn back  
'thank you'
- (3) *p<sup>h</sup>én-lái* (noun/head – noun/modifier)  
flat shape-shoulder  
'shoulder'

For the semi-syntactic compounding, it reveals a number of lexical relations such as, reduplication, synonym, similarity, membership and opposition, as shown below.

<sup>3</sup>See Wongwattana (2016) for detailed discussion.

- (4) *līaŋ-līaŋ* (reduplication)  
 set-set  
 ‘row, array’
- (5) *tɕi̯aŋ-kʰɔ̌:ŋ* (synonym)  
 thing-thing  
 ‘belonging’
- (6) *hɔ̌:-há:n* (similarity)  
 wrap-gather  
 ‘collect’
- (7) *lūŋ-tǎ:* (membership)  
 elder uncle-maternal grandpa  
 ‘relatives on the father side’
- (8) *wāŋ-waʔ* (opposition)  
 forth-back  
 ‘get around’

In generally, its syntactic structure is not that significantly different from other Tai languages. What is quite salient is that there are relatively more final particles marking for different speech acts such as representatives (REP), declarations (DEC), verdictives (VER), expressive (EXP), commissives (COM), directives (DIR) and interrogation (INT), as exemplified below.<sup>4</sup>

- (9) *sambǎ:j hē:ŋ kúaʔ*  
 happy very REP  
 ‘I’m very happy.’

- (10) *sǎ: hǎi pǎj huam ŋā:n kǎn*  
*tɕu: kōn nā:*  
 please give go join fair together every people DEC  
 ‘Everybody, please go to join the fair.’

<sup>4</sup>See Unchalee Wongwattana (2016) for detailed discussion.

(11) *tók mâ: ʔěw kʰot pǎj lêw bǎ: ʔân*  
 fall down horse waist bend go already not VER  
 ‘(He) might have fallen down from the horse and got crooked  
 at the waist.’

(12) *pʰù: dǐ: pʰù: tǎn kǎn nāi*  
 person good person pretty together EXP  
 ‘You all are good and pretty people.’

(13) *lêw tɕíʔ pǎj huam jíʔ-náʔ*  
 then will go join COM  
 ‘Then, (I) will join (you).’

(14) *lop ʔɔʔ pǎj kwá:*  
 delete out go DIR  
 ‘(You’d) better delete it.’

(15) *lêw pʰù: ʔi:n tɕíʔ fāŋ pʰā:sǎ: hāw hú:-liəŋ ʔi:jā:*  
 so person other will listen language our understand INT  
 ‘So, can other people understand our language?’

## 2.2. Cultural Practices

Beside their language which is distinctive from the other Tai languages, this ethnic group (including the one in the lower northern region) is well-known in cultural practices such as traditional-house symbol, dressing, spirit worship, annual festival, rice farming & handicrafts, and food, as discussed respectively below.

Tai Dam traditional houses with the turtle-like roof still are their villages’ land-marks even though they do not live in such houses nowadays. In quite a number of Tai Dam villages in this region, traditional houses have been built as the ethnic symbol. In certain villages, the symbolic houses are also used as culture and learning centers.



Figure 10: Tai Dam traditional house at Ban Wang Yuak, Mueng district, Nakhon Sawan

The next Tai Dam salient characteristic is woman dressing with black skirts in the melon- pattern and hair buns. They still keeps on wearing the traditional suit in annual festivals and important traditional practices such as wedding, spirit worship and so on.



Figure 11: Tai Dam dressing in the lower northern part

Spirit-worship practices or Sen of the Tai Dam culture are also well-known to other people surrounding them. The Tai Dam people here still believe in spirits which are of many types such as ancestor, heaven, village, house, animal...etc. They usually hold spirit-worship practices (for good spirits such as ancestors who have passed away) and whenever they have traditional ceremonies or activities such as housewarming, wedding, funeral, and destiny continuity. The worship ablation mainly includes sliced raw pork or a set of food and drink which often includes things like boiled chicken,

boiled eggs, steamed rice, sweet steamed flour, fruit, liqueur, chewing things, and a set of betel and palm fruit. After finishing a ceremony, they eat the food together.



Figure 12: Spirit worship practice held at Bang Rakam District, Phitsanulok, on 16 March 2016

This ethnic group is also well-known for their festival called under the name *In Kon-Fon Kaen*, which is held at least once a year. In the old days, this activity was held for young people to find their couples by performing a cloth-ball game called *In Kon* or throwing cloth balls between young men and women. In the present, they still play the game, but for maintaining the traditional practice. They also celebrate by dancing in the Tai Dam traditional style with mouth-organ blowing called *Fon Kaen*.



Figure 13: Tai Dam cloth ball game and traditional dance in the lower northern part

Rice farming and making handicrafts are their livelihood. Rice fields are always seen around the Tai Dam villages. Also, elders still make many kinds of handicrafts for sale and hobbies. One kind of bamboo haversack called *Kalep*, carried by women with traditional dressing, is relatively well-known. Other handicrafts like bamboo trays for carrying spirit-worship ablation and needlework are also known to other Thai people.



Figure 14: Rice field nearby a Tai Dam village and handicrafts in the lower northern part

Finally, Tai Dam food also displays their identity in this region. Typically, they make curry or fried dishes with salted bamboo-shoots called *No Som* and meat such as chicken or some kinds of hard-wing insects. Spicy mixed-vegetable called *Cup Pak* is also typically found as their favorite dish. Like other Tai ethnic groups, chili paste cooked with chopped preserved fish called *Pa Lae Fak* served with some boiled or fresh vegetable is the dish that must be included in every meal. Sometimes, they eat steamed bats with spicy-and-sour sauce. Moreover, steamed rice staffed with banana slices is a common kind of desert or break.



Figure 15: Tai Dam favorite dishes

### 3. Language-use Opportunities

In general, the Tai dam people in all ages in the lower northern region speak their own language among themselves nowadays. They use the central Thai with other people. There are many opportunities in using the Tai Dam language as well as performing cultural activities, as illustrated below.

#### 3.1. In Daily Life

In daily lives, they speak Tai Dam and usually perform traditional practices such as worshipping spirits. They speak the language with their families, relatives, friends and other Tai Dam people either in the same villages or others. Even though children or teenagers speak the central Thai at schools, they turn to speak Tai Dam with their families at home.

#### 3.2. In Social Events

They speak the Tai Dam language, worship spirits, sing traditional songs, perform traditional dances and eat their favorite dishes whenever they join together in social activities and festivals. Some also join activities

in other villages either in the same region or in the central part of Thailand such as Suphanburi, where they have migrated for more than a hundred years. Moreover, some of them even had trips to Tai Dam villages outside Thailand, such as in Laos (e.g., Luang Nam Tha) and Vietnam (e.g., Điện Biên Phủ). And so had the Tai Dam people outside Thailand.



Figure 16: Tai Dam festival held in 2015 at Phai Rob District, Phichit, where they gathered and had some visitors from Laos and Vietnam

### 3.3. In Social Club Meetings

They speak Tai Dam, demonstrate some performing arts, such as singing traditional songs, dancing or blowing mouth-organ, and enjoy eating Tai Dam dishes whenever they have a club meeting which is normally held 2-3 times a year in this region.



Figure 17: Tai Dam club meeting held at Wang Thong District, Phitsanulok, on 14 June 2015

### 3.4. In Social Media Websites

Furthermore, Tai Dam teenagers and adults also use the Tai Dam language with Thai alphabets in the social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Here, most of them use names that reflect their ethnicity; for instance, *North Tai Dam Club*, *Tai Dam*, *Luk Lan Tai Dam* ('Tai Dam children'), *Baw Tar Tai Dam Phitsanulok* ('Mr. Tar, Tai Dam Phitsanulok'), *Inside Tai Dam*, *Tai Dam Heritage*, *Tai Dam Phichit*, *Rungnapha Tai Song Dam*, etc. Besides, they have also published their traditional songs called *kap Tai Dam* or *kap sai paeng* in another website such as YouTube.



Figure 18: Usages of the Tai Dam language and traditional songs in Facebook and YouTube

## 4. Attitude toward Their Own Language

Interviewed and observed in the present research project, most Tai Dam village leaders in this region looked really proud of being Tai Dam and said that Tai Dam people, no matter in what age or gender they were, were really proud of their ancestry as well as their language & culture. They also have a strong desire to maintain their language & culture for their descendants.

Moreover, children are willing to be taught and keep on all traditional practices. Take, for instance, a post in Facebook by a male teenager, *Baw Tar Tai Dam Phitsanulok* on 20/4/2015:

*"I'm so proud of being a Tai Dam. I don't care to be looked down by others because Tai Dam is the tribe I love. Even though, in my village, traditional practices have changed, I'm the one who will retrieve them. Thanks Facebook for making me know everybody in our teamwork and their places. Please be strong, my friends."* (In Thai)



Figure 19: Being proud of Tai Dam ethnicity

## 5. Trend of Language Continuity

Even though the Tai Dam language & culture are still preserved as discussed above, there have existed some clues that they might lose their straight in the near future due to the fact that this ethnic group exists among stronger distinct social environments – both the Thai society where Buddhism is the most important religion and world status of globalization. Nowadays, most Tai Dam festivals or social activities associate with (or even are under) Buddhism.



Figure 20: Tai Dam festival and social activity and Buddhism

Moreover, not all children still speak Tai Dam nowadays, let alone they could use the traditional Tai Dam alphabets which is only known by a few Tai Dam older persons, according to a part of Phrakhru Adunsisangwon (n.d.) stating that,

*“... nowadays Tai Dam children do not know our own alphabets and even think that the cultural treasure is like a foreign language since they think that it is not necessary in this country because it cannot be used formally and widely with other Thai people. This is our cultural disaster since if any ethnic type has lost its own written language or alphabets, it will lose its own soul. Written languages represent the civilization of mankind that has existed over thousand years.” (In Thai)*

## Approach in Building Cooperation with Tai Dam Communities in Language Maintenance

Since the Tai Dam language & culture have been strongly preserved (even though there is some diminishing clues as mentioned above), the Tai Dam people have had their own effective ways in language & culture maintenance as discussed below.

### 1. Tai Dam Own Ways in Language & Culture Maintenance

Realizing that they might lose their language & culture someday in the near future, most of the Tai Dam people have a strong desire to pass on their language & culture to their descendants. So far they have successfully conducted many activities in such the vein even though there were no financial support from any governmental section in doing some activities. The maintenance missions have been done under three principles: *Tam Hai Do* (performing to be watched), *Yu Hai Hen* (living to be seen) and *Fuek Hai Pen* (training to be able to). These have been objectified as a number of strategies such as “behaving”, “demonstrating”, “teaching & training”, “holding”, “building”, “campaigning”, “publicizing” and “studying” as respectively discussed below.

#### 1.1. Behaving

Most Tai Dam leaders such as social club chairmen, villager heads, knowledgeable persons and some older people have behaved like models or examples of “being Tai Dam” and strongly lead activities in maintaining and inheriting their language & culture.



Figure 21: Leaders' behaving like Tai Dam models (Tai Dam chairmen in the lower northern part)

## 1.2. Demonstrating

Tai Dam elderly persons have tried to pass on the language & culture to their children by usually demonstrating them how to live and act like Tai Dam; namely, how to live their lives, how to eat, how to dress, how to do traditional practices, how to dance,...etc.



Figure 22: Demonstrating of Tai Dam language & culture in the lower northern part

## 1.3. Teaching & Training

There are a number of Tai Dam language experts who have held Tai Dam classes in which the Tai Dam language and traditional alphabets (as shown earlier) and some traditional handicrafts are taught and trained to children. For instance, Mr. Wichian Chuemchit (The Northern Tai Dam Club chairman) and Mr. Chamrong Thongchue (a village head) regularly teaches Tai Dam language and handicrafts every week at a number of Tai Dam language & culture centers in this region: two centers at Nakhon Sawan and one center at Sukhothai.



Figure 23: Teaching and training of Tai Dam language and handicrafts in the lower northern part

#### 1.4. Holding

The Tai Dam people have held and operated many Tai Dam social clubs – up to 27 clubs – in the northern part of Thailand. These clubs are led by Mr. Wichian Chuemchit as the chairman of the mother club, Northern Tai Dam Club. In principle, the clubs have missions in maintaining the Tai Dam language & culture.



Figure 24: Chairman of Northern Tai Dam Club

#### 1.5. Building

In most Tai Dam villages in this area, Tai Dam cultural and learning centers symbolized by turtle-roof houses have been built as Tai Dam villages' landmarks. Most of the centers are imbedded in either temples or local schools. A few are independently established. In such centers, information such as administrative committee, history, traditional language/alphabet system, traditional practices and even instruments or handicrafts have been exhibited.



Figure 25: Some Tai Dam cultural and learning centers in the lower northern part

Moreover, they have planed to develop some centers for cultural tourism where a variety of Tai Dam traditional staff such as instruments, utensils, dresses, and so on could be demonstrated on the one hand and their products such as dresses, soap, dried herb,...etc. could be sold on the other hand. In doing this, some leaders had study trips to visit the model, a Tai Dam museum locating at Ban Na Panat, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province.



Figure 26: Tai Dam museum at Ban Na Panat, Loei

## 1.6. Campaigning

Many Tai Dam people have been trying to make campaigns for their ethnicity on the one hand and language & culture maintenance on the other hand mostly in Facebook since this costs no money.



Figure 27: Campaign for Tai Dam identity in Facebook

### 1.7. Publicizing

So far, they have publicized their ethnicity in national media such as television and radio. Take the show “Chaeu Pha Thiau” (Traveling with Chaeu) on Thai TV 3 for an example.



Figure 28: Publicizing the Tai Dam culture

### 1.8. Studying

Moreover, there are a number of Tai Dam individuals and organizations that have conducted some studies, including documents or records, on the Tai Dam language & culture, either published or unpublished, in order to help preserve their language & culture. Certain studies are shown below.



Figure 29: Some studies on Tai Dam language & culture in the lower northern part

## 2. Approach in Building Cooperation with Tai Dam Communities in Language Maintenance

All Tai Dam communities in the lower northern region are open to any type of cooperation with either civic parts or other organizations in language & culture maintenance. In fact, the Tai Dam leaders, as well as other powerful persons, have been doing this mission seriously and successfully. Specifically speaking, some of them have revealed that, with small funds from the government, they have spent their own budget in holding cultural activities, building Tai Dam cultural and learning centers, and other activities in language & culture maintenance. However, they are afraid that they may not be able to go on supporting the action financially due to their economic depression.

In the present research paper, we then would suggest that the best effective approach to make the cooperation with Tai Dam communities in this area is supporting and straightening their missions. Either government or private sections could participate in such the task in two folds below.

- 1) Government organizations or authorities which carry duties in local development, cultural promotion, local education and tourism, either in the central or local part, are supposed to facilitate and fund the Tai Dam mission activities, at least, in the following manners.
  - Providing enough budget allocation for stronger Tai Dam villages to operate their own culture or learning centers since they are the symbol, identity or even soul of the Tai Dam people.
  - Providing enough funds for the Tai Dam clubs regularly each year so that they are able to operate the clubs throughout a year and carry on holding important traditional events and activities.
  - Participating and mentally supporting Tai Dam important events

and activities so that they do not feel negligent and, instead, are proud of themselves for them to be important to the government part too.

- Imbedding the Tai Dam language & culture in local school curriculums as selective subjects or extracurricular activities in prepared schools. In doing this, Tai Dam children can realize that their language & culture are also important and would not feel embarrassed when they speak Tai Dam or perform any Tai Dam practices.
  - Promoting stronger Tai Dam communities or villages such as Bang Rakam Subdistrict (Phitsanulok), Phai Rop Subdistrict (Phichit), Ban Huai Hang (Phichit), Ban Nam Rueng (Sukhothai), Ban Nong Noen (Nakhon Sawan), Ban Wang Yuak (Nakhon Sawan), and Ban Tha Chang (Kamphaeng Phet) to be tourist sites operated by Tai Dam people themselves in an appropriate way since their cultural activities (traditional songs and dances, games, clothing, bamboo waving and ceremony practices) are quite salient and attractive to either Thai or foreign tourists. Importantly, this might help improve their economy and then life quality.
- 2) Educational institutes, especially the ones that locate in the lower northern region, could promote and support research projects on Tai Dam problematic issues such as language & culture endanger, bi-cultural communities, implementation of local languages/dialects & culture in curriculums, ...etc. In doing this, the projects should be cooperated with the Tai Dam local people, not as informants but research participants, so that they have capacity in operating simple research work for problem solution themselves. There are

a number of Tai Dam leaders such as Tai Dam club chair persons, village heads, local knowledgeable persons, activists and even teenagers who wish to carry on their language & culture and ready to be trained, in a certain level, for this vain.

- 3) Private sections such as television and radio organizations are also supposed to support the publicizing of Tai Dam cultural events.

### Concluding Remark

This article presents the language & culture situation of the Tai Dam ethnic group in the lower northern part of Thailand and suggests an approach in building cooperation with the Tai Dam communities in language & culture maintenance. Data has been collected from all 9 provinces in this region by surveying, observing, participating and interviewing. The results show that, for the language & culture situation, there exist at least 145 Tai Dam villages settled in seven provinces; namely, Phitsanulok, Phicit, Nakhon Sawan, Kamphaeng Phet, Sukhothai, Phetchaboon and Uthai Thani. The Tai Dam people still speak their own language and maintain traditional practices. They have many opportunities in speaking Tai Dam and performing cultural practices in daily life, social events, social club meetings and social media. They have the positive attitude toward and even are proud of their own language & culture. However, the language & culture tends to be endangered among the different and changing society. They have preserved their language & culture in their own efficient ways; that is, “performing to be watched”, “living to be seen” and “training to be able to”, including strategies such as “behaving”, “demonstrating”, “teaching & training”, “holding”, “building”, “campaigning”, “publicizing” and “studying”. Therefore, it is suggestive that possible ways in making cooperation with the Tai Dam communities in language & culture

maintenance could be achieved by supporting and straightening this missions. In doing this, involving organizations such as relevant government authorities, local educational institutes, as well as private sectors are supposed to participate in the task.

Suggestively, to fulfill the task of language & culture maintenance, however, the life-long learning of the language & culture should be provoked too. This action could be accomplished by making cooperation with the Tai Dam leaders, especially younger ones, in building a new value and public mind in order to strengthen their existing missions. Supported by relevant government sections and local education institutes, they might be guided or trained in some simple methods of sciences concerning how to 1) seek for their own communities' problems (or desire) and the sources of problems, 2) find a solution to each problem together, and 3) estimate the state after the problem has been resolved. This process is hoped to provide them with thinking logically and experiences so that they are able to find their own ways in solving problems by themselves. This consequently would sustainably help develop the local communities and finally solve problems in equality and extinction of local/minority language & culture. We should be aware that every culture is equally prestigious in its value. Realizing this could be the best idea to carry on multi-culture countries, as stated by Wasi (2012) that:

*"Regarding culture as the concept, every community or country is equally prestigious. No one is more prestigious than others since cultures vary and local cultures are not centralized and are accepted in their own values. This is the best way to carry on multi-culture communities and make them stronger and durable."*

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